

# Boys need challenges

*Robyn Pearce on educating boys*

A chance conversation about kayaking with my friend George opened my eyes to a distinction about males that, as a mother of five sons and grandmother of eight grandsons, you'd think I would have worked out years ago.

'Does your wife kayak with you, George?' I'd asked. (He's recently remarried.) 'No, and I've not encouraged her,' he replied, to my surprise.

'I've been teaching kayaking for many years,' he expanded. 'It's really made me appreciate the differences between male and female.'

'What I've learnt is that when you teach a group of girls or women to do something with a high risk factor, with few exceptions their underlying motivation is to learn how to manage it safely. For instance, most don't enjoy having to tip out under the water and wait 20 seconds before kicking loose from their kayak and rising to the surface. I've noticed that almost all females are motivated away from risk and toward safety and security.'

'The majority of males, on the other hand, are motivated towards challenge and away from comfort and security. It's an innate testosterone drive – not something that's educated into them.'

'Once a kayak class graduates from the beginner program and starts to paddle in open water the guys will almost always turn even a social paddle into a competition, either between each other or against their own performance. Almost all will also seek tough new challenges.'

A typical group of women don't seek



competition to anything like the same degree. Most of them will choose to paddle with others, enjoying the combination of socialising, exercise and scenery.

'Of course my wife and I could enjoy social kayaking. However, she's not that interested in the sport and definitely wouldn't enjoy the competitive and adventurous style of kayaking I most love. So I save that particular activity for when I can go hard out. We do other things together.'

I've thought a lot about George's comments since then. It seems to me that our job as both teachers and parents of boys is to grow responsible

mature young men. Perhaps if we are at least aware of the basic need of boys to push boundaries we'll enjoy the raising of them even more.

For women, it takes a different and special kind of courage to let go, to allow our boys the space to stumble and hurt themselves, to not restrict them unnecessarily. These days many women raise their sons without a full-time father figure in the home. For some years I was also in that category.

Most teachers of primary school children are women. Do we unconsciously try to restrict our boys in our desire to keep them safe? Do we unconsciously try to make them behave in ways that are comfortable and socially

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acceptable to women? Looking back I'm sure I did. The rough-house rumbles in the lounge, the farting, belching and peeing competitions... does any other woman join me in memories of bewildered frustration and thoughts of 'which planet did these kids come from?'

With the luxury of hindsight, perhaps my boys were lucky there were so many of them, and my ineffectual attempts to soften and civilise family activities were watered down. Adventurous lives are a signature tune in our family, including two army officers, one detective, and a high-achieving farmer who also keeps pushing boundaries. The fifth son is intellectually handicapped.

Two other recent things have added to my thinking about this area – one a book and the other an experience one of my families has just had.

### No losers allowed

*Boys Adrift: the five factors driving the growing epidemic of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men* by Leonard Sax MD PhD is a 'must read'. You'll find practical and useful insights into what current trends in education are doing to many boys; the impact of video games on their behaviour; reasons for the rapid increase in ADHD, and what can be done about it; how plastics are affecting male hormone levels, and much more.

Just one of the points Dr Sax develops is that many schools (at least in America) have all but eliminated opportunities for kids to experience true competition in their phys. ed. programs. The rationale seems to be that if a child doesn't win at whatever they're competing in, that his or her self-esteem might be damaged so therefore it's better that no-one be a loser (that would be a female perspective, wouldn't it?). But if we agree with George's comment, isn't it critical to provide healthy opportunities for our boys to flex their muscles, prove their manliness, and learn to handle competition and frustration? Certainly Dr Sax believes so as well.

We also see this 'softening of potential hurt' on an academic level. Look at the modern exam systems. Heaven forbid that a young adult might feel dumb when they don't get good enough grades. But here's the rub. In the adult world, you're a responsible worker, or you lose your job. If you're a commission agent you have to make sales, or you don't eat. If you're in finance, the accounts are either correct, or they're not. If you run your own business you either succeed, or you don't. Real life isn't one of half measures. If we don't give our kids the chance to learn that when we're there to support them, we do them great harm. The real world doesn't soft-soap failure and incompetence.

Another area Sax discusses is the trend towards 'zero tolerance to violence' which in some schools means students are punished for writing violent stories and small children are penalised for turning sticks or pieces of paper into guns. I would have thought that was something

that could only happen in America, but our own family has just had a brush with the same kind of thinking.

### Puckapunyal entrepreneurs

Four of my grandchildren have just completed a two-year stint living on the army base at Puckapunyal, Victoria. Their dad made them a wooden toy gun each – after all, guns are part of their normal life, just as they are in many farming families. Out in the scrub, playing with their mates, their home-made wooden guns were the envy of all their buddies. This was reported back to Dad, the 'arms manufacturer'.

'Well,' said Mum and Dad, 'if you want to make a bit of pocket money we'll help you make some for sale. Ask your friends if they'll pay \$11.50 for a gun like yours. Teaching the boys responsibility and commitment was the real focus: the product was just a vehicle.'

And so began an entrepreneurial business for the eight and 10-year-olds (helped by Mum and Dad on the machine end of production – skill saws really were a tad dangerous). Orders came flooding in, different models were designed. The boys learned to sandpaper and paint; to manage orders, deliveries and money. Even the neighbourhood girls got in on the act – hot items were the made-to-order pink AK47s. Soldier Dad cringed but 'the customer is always right'.

The first stall at the local on-base market generated the lads \$147. Excited by their business success, the boys decided to apply for a stall at a nearby town's Saturday market. However, that plan was knocked back when the woman on the end of the phone said, very heatedly, 'No way can your children sell wooden guns at our market. We don't allow anything that encourages violence.'

I was telling the story to a very experienced kindergarten teacher. She gave a wry laugh.

'You can't stop boys playing with guns. They're hard-wired that way. Many times I've seen children brought up by pacifist parents, who've completely protected their children from any violent influences, pick up a stick and turn it into a gun. How on earth do we think we can change millennia of male protector/hunter/provider instincts?'

Let's work with nature, not against it. Our boys will be happy, well-adjusted, and resilient. And happy kids equal happy and effective teachers and happy parents. In my book, that's a successful outcome.



Robyn Pearce is a mother of six, grandmother of 10, and international author and speaker. Check out her website at [www.gettingagrip.com](http://www.gettingagrip.com) for heaps of tips.

### New Youth Program will promote respect for all living things



Sonny Clark Ashfield Boys High and JoJo Gatehau Australian Idol Finalist

RSPCA NSW Education Department is preparing to launch a Youth Program addressing animal cruelty issues by promoting respect, kindness and courage. Our Humane Education Programs go well beyond basic pet care and encourage students to respect all living things, including people and the environment.

Underpinning the work of the RSPCA is the Cycle of Violence. Current research highlights a link between animal cruelty, interpersonal violence and aggressive anti-social behaviour. Children and youths who hurt animals are at risk of becoming violent towards people. Research also shows that most serial killers had, as youths, killed or tortured animals.

The RSPCA plans to launch the Youth Program this year and many celebrities have lent a hand in helping to spread awareness to our youth. We have had active support from P!NK, Merrick and Rosso, Lote Tuqiri, Sydney City Roosters, Penrith Panthers, Shannan and Michelle from The Biggest Loser, Adam Goodes, Jade Macrae, JoJo Gatehau, Totally Wild and many more. We have also been lucky enough to involve acclaimed Sydney Hip Hop Artist – Israel, who has helped us immensely on the creative side of our youth work.

The RSPCA has been lucky enough to recruit education volunteers to assist with this project. Some of our education volunteers are high school students and they have been instrumental in the planning and decision making of the program, especially in terms of giving us insight into attitudes currently circulating in Australian high schools in regards to animal cruelty and violence.

The launch of the Youth Program, in conjunction with the Primary Programs which have already been established, we will be better equipped to prevent cruelty to animals and make our society a happy, safe place to be for everyone – paws and all!

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