

Failure to Launch

Confronting the male college student achievement gap

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A few years ago, Mathew McConaughey and Sarah Jessica Parker generated big laughs and big box office sales in *Failure to Launch*, an absurd comedy about a 26-year old man still living in his parents' basement, spending his days watching television and playing video games while the world passed him by. The film was closer to the truth than many of us have been willing to admit.

Young American men, including those across New England, are stopping out, dropping out and "failing to launch" in staggering numbers. Compared with young women, they are leaving high school at higher rates, attending college at lower rates, earning fewer degrees and swelling the ranks of the under- and unemployed.

Consider this:

- Beginning in elementary school, boys earn lower grades, receiving 70% of the D's and F's, while girls earn 60% of the A's.
- More than one million teens drop out of school every year and 80% of them are male.
- Nationwide, only 65% of males graduate from high school, compared with 72% of females.
- Only 43% of men are likely to graduate from college, compared with 60% of women.

In addition to these bleak educational statistics, almost nine out of ten alcohol and drug violations are perpetrated by males; 95% of juvenile homicides are committed by boys; and 56% of men ages 18 to 24 live at home with their parents.

The bottom line: Young men are becoming less educated, less employable, less appealing as potential husbands and a greater burden to themselves and others.

There are a great many possible reasons for this growing achievement gap between young men and young women. Leonard Sax, in his 2007 book *Boys Adrift*, suggests five factors that have been reinforced by other published reports: changing teaching methods, an over-reliance on prescription drugs, video game addiction, chemicals in the environment and changing images of manhood in popular culture.

Teaching methods

Today's typical public school and even college classroom favors girls' learning styles. Students are asked to come in, sit down, listen quietly, read and memorize routinely and write to narrowly prescribed standards.

This does not work well for most boys, who need hands-on learning and *movement*. According to Sax, "There is a fundamental belief running through all European pedagogy that both *wissenschaft* (knowledge from books) and *kennntnis* (knowledge from experience) are valuable, and that the two ways of knowing must be balanced."

Too often, U.S. schools lack the experiential component.

In their 2001 book *Boys and Girls Learn Differently! A Guide for Teachers and Parents*, Michael Gurian, Patricia Henley and Terry Trueman argue that the physical and chemical differences between male and female brains call for different teaching styles. Girls, for instance, use words and talking aloud to help them think and they enjoy problem-solving in a group where everyone is equal; while boys are typically better at decoding abstract symbols and tend to work silently. So collaborative learning, which has become common in classrooms at every level, may not give boys the best opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge. In contrast, boys thrive on challenge and competition, but many teachers avoid competition, fearing that some children will suffer a loss of self-esteem. Without it, however, we lose a powerful vehicle for keeping boys engaged in their learning.

Prescription drugs

The last two decades have seen an explosion in Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)—diagnosed in one of every 10 boys ages 3 to 17 and consequently, a 30-fold increase in the number of school age boys taking medications to address it.

Because children with ADHD are more impulsive and more easily distracted, they often encounter problems in schools that want them to sit still and focus. Some children are legitimately helped by the initial effects of prescription drugs like Ritalin and Adderall, which work by stimulating the brain chemicals responsible for inhibitory and controlling behavior. But it is possible that long-term effects of ADHD medication may condemn a boy to failure. A recent Harvard Medical School report found that giving ADHD medications to laboratory animals resulted in a loss of energy and drive as those animals grew up. The Harvard scientists suggested that children, like the experimental animals, might be similarly affected and suffer a loss of motivation as they grew into teenagers and young adults.

Video games

Sax and other researchers point to the prevalence of technology—and particularly video games—in the lives of young men as a further threat.

In a 2008 study published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, researchers at Stanford University found that playing video games stimulates the region of the brain in both genders that is associated with reward and addiction. Male brains, however, show significantly higher levels of stimulation. It is no surprise, then, that males get hooked on video games.

In his 2001 article "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," Marc Prensky observes that by the time they graduate from college, most students "have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV)." Since boys are far more likely than girls to play video games, the result, according to Sax, is that girls are "slightly less likely to read in their spare time today than they were in 1980. But roughly nine out of 10 boys have stopped reading altogether."

Chemicals in the environment

The use of pesticides, plastics and synthetic chemicals in all sorts of everyday products has increased dramatically in the past half century. Some of the most commonly used chemicals in plastic—such as those found in ever-present water bottles—actually mimic the hormone estrogen in the body. Scientists have found that male fish exposed to synthetic female hormones have their own hormone systems disrupted. In contaminated waterways, the sex organs of male fish were discovered to be making eggs instead of sperm.

In human beings, it seems, the results of exposure to these chemicals is that today's young girls may be physically maturing more quickly, and today's young boys may be suffering from an imbalance of hormones, an excess of estrogen that may be "feminizing" them. Startling research published by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences reports that since the mid-1930s, sperm counts in American, European and Australian men declined by an average of 50%; that is, 18-year-old males today produce half as much sperm as their grandfathers did at the same age. If males are getting enough estrogen from the environment to suppress the normal production of testosterone, then one main source of male competitiveness is eliminated, along with its accompanying drive toward achievement.

Images of manhood

The traditional male roles of protector, provider and dispenser of family wisdom, once reflected in popular television images like Ward Cleaver and Mike Brady, have all but vanished. Today's TV dad is a bumbling, barely competent, overgrown teenager who is outsmarted and outranked by his wife and his children. He is Ray Romano, George Lopez or television's most popular dad, Homer Simpson—not exactly role model material.

What can you do?

These factors illustrate how complicated and wide-ranging the possible causes are for the "failure to launch" of

young men today. Here are some ideas that can help both young men *and* young women with the educational challenges they face today:

1. Study the student success differences between males and females at your school. Success rates, and the reasons behind them, will be different for your school or college than the national statistics, but you won't be able to *do* anything about them until you *know* about them. In addition to looking at your school district's or college's own web site, you can compare results for K-12 schools on the National Assessment of Educational Progress by state and gender at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.

2. Support a college-prep curriculum for high schools. It is true that not everyone will attend college or want to, but 74% of high school seniors—both male and female—say they intend to complete a college degree, a statistic that has remained largely unchanged for the past 20 years. And some college experience is increasingly necessary for almost any career.

Generally, a college-prep curriculum today consists of four years of English; three years each of social science, math and laboratory science; two years of foreign language; and at least one semester of computer science. Of the New England states, only Delaware and Vermont require at least three years of math and science. Massachusetts recommends the complete college-prep curriculum, but actual requirements are decided by individual school districts.

For at least the past 15 years, boys nationally have lagged behind girls by about 4% in completing these courses prior to graduating. This may help explain why boys are more likely to need remedial coursework when they do go to college, less likely to complete their courses successfully, less likely to seek support (advising, counseling, tutoring) and more likely to drop out during the first year—and not return.

3. Send kids to college immediately after high school. Research has consistently shown that students who enroll in college immediately after high school have higher rates of retention and graduation than students who delay enrollment. Yet many still delay—particularly young men. Since 1987, many more males than females have chosen to put off college for two or more years after high school, and most have paid the price by not completing their degrees. Interestingly, research on dual enrollment and "early college" programs suggests that male students may find particular benefits through opportunities to start college even sooner.

4. Support classrooms and teaching strategies that appeal to both boys' and girls' learning styles. Since Howard Gardner first proposed his theory of "multiple intelligences" in 1983, educators have become far more adaptive to the presence of different learning styles among students; yet we still balk at planning for potential learning differences across genders.