

# Life

Thoughts and inspiration for your daily life



FAMILY

## Raising Boys

We need to support and encourage what makes them different.

By Matthew Ruttan

**Boys are different from girls.** But how? And how can we help them thrive?

Aside from my experience as a boy, as the father of a boy, and as a friend of those with boys, a book by Dr. Gregory Jantz and Michael Gurian inspired this piece: *Raising Boys by Design: What the Bible and Brain Science Reveal About What Your Son Needs to Thrive*.

Why are boys falling behind in schools? Why, in the U.S., are one million boys being medicated for brain disorders? Why do they get two-thirds of the D's and F's? Why are the majority of drop-outs male? Why was autism once diagnosed to the tune of about one in 1,000 and now it's about one in 50, mostly in boys?

Today's culture creates high >

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anxiety in kids. I wonder what the impact is of fewer social safety nets (more broken families/divorce), or of abuse, or of other socializing factors, or of the loss of faith in many homes?

It's complicated. And this article is insufficient. But I've learned a lot from this book (and others) and there are some good things to share about helping our boys thrive.

First, what makes them different and what are some of the challenges?

### 1. HOW THEY PROCESS INFORMATION

Male brains use seven times more gray matter than female brains. They focus intently and spend time doing, feeling, thinking, working and playing. Girls use about 10 times more white matter. White matter is a networking grid that connects with other processing centres.

Notice how girls seem to transition more quickly between tasks? Or how boys seem to focus on something and it's hard to get their attention to transition to something else? These are processes to do with gray and white matter. We often interpret, Jantz and Gurian argue, boys' energy as being disruptive, or resilience as being uncaring. But this isn't always the case.

In many schools, physical activities have been cut back. Screen time has gone up. It seems there are fewer outlets for boys to release what's built up inside. The result is often acting out.

When boys can be active, they do better in school and pay attention with more success. It seems many of our learning environments are geared toward predispositions more naturally occurring in girls.

### 2. CHANGING FAMILY REALITIES

Both parents need to be actively involved. This can be tough, especially when a dad or mom isn't in the picture. In those situations, it helps to get another trusted male or female figure to be a

part of the child's caregiving. Men and women tend to nurture differently, and the child benefits differently from each.

As adolescent psychiatrist Mark Banschick wrote: "There is no substitute for being loved by parents who are fair and involved."

### 3. WE OVER-PROTECT FROM HARDSHIP

We stress games where "everyone wins" and of non-competition. That has some value. But the sense of competition and victory can be naturally (and healthily) present in boys. Plus, a non-competition mindset simply does not jive with the world we are preparing them for.

### 4. WE OVER-STIMULATE

We are over-stimulating our boys' (and girls') brains, mostly through scheduling or technology. Although there are some benefits to technology, screen time with the very young has become so prevalent that unhealthy media exposure is starting to affect brain development and impact grades. Plus, it seems boys are "skimming" for information more, especially via technology, resulting in more shallow thinking. There's nothing wrong with some TV and (appropriate) video games here and there, but kids need time to be bored—it's good for imagination and brain development.

So how else can we help? Well, we can help them be heroes.

Jantz and Gurian use the idea of a "H.E.R.O." as an overarching theme. H is for Honour (adhering to truth, values and compassion beyond self); E for Enterprise (doing big important things for others, himself and the world); R for Responsibility (having people and things to carry minute-by-minute); and O for Originality (being a dreamer, a thinker, an explorer). The H.E.R.O. idea works well for faith development, too.

These four traits are actually what many boys long for. Look at the superheroes they dream about! They're all

there—and also in godly men around them (if they have any around them).

Second, boys need healthy men in their lives. Men they can trust. And if there aren't any in the home, why not be intentional about connecting with trusted others? Growing up can be confusing. A boy's initial sense of sexuality takes shape over 10 years. Parents need to be continually open to discussion and to creating healthy models for love and relationships.

Third, we need to be aware of the differences between boys and girls and advocate for them. Ensure your son is getting the right amount of physical activity—healthy channels of release for energy. Is his learning environment sit-and-listen only, or are they more conducive to his God-given design?

Fourth, we need to create new rules around technology. This deserves a whole different piece, but here's the question Jantz and Gurian ask: Is technology a guest in your house, or a family member?

Fifth, we can help boys process their emotions. Sometimes talking about it ad nauseam is the only route we take with a problem. But what if that actually made boys retreat further within themselves, especially for introverts? We need to know the value of activity and play in helping boys "work it out."

### AWESOMELY SET APART

Hebrew language scholar Robert Alter translates Psalm 139:14 like this: "for awesomely I am set apart."

That's my boy. Probably yours, too.

I'm going to end with this thought from the book: "Boys have beautiful big hearts, constantly pumping with energy, pulsing with hope." Let's help our boys become the "heroes" they were God-designed to be. 🍀

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