
Summer Camps and “The Boy Problem”

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*All children respond to the authenticity and clarity of camp life,
but it may be even more important for boys
facing today’s particular challenges*

Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, in 1999, published *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. Psychologists at two all-male independent schools, they wrote “that boys suffer deeply as a result of the destructive emotional training our culture imposes upon them, that many of them are in crisis, and that all of them need help.” They highlighted the dangers of “the boy problem” with daunting statistics on the remarkably high incidence of criminal, suicidal, and addictive behaviors among boys relative to girls. The publishing of *Raising Cain* happened to intersect in time with the Columbine tragedy, which underscored the significance of the issue and the urgency of looking for answers.

The first decade of the 21st century has done nothing to reassure us about “the boy problem.” In fact, the statistics on the educational challenges of boys paint a pervasively bleak picture. Tom Chiarella, a visiting professor at DePauw University and an editor for *Esquire Magazine*, described the odds facing boys:

You’re twice as likely as a girl to be diagnosed with an attention-deficit or learning disorder. You’re more likely to score worse on standardized reading and writing tests. You’re more likely to be held back in school. You’re more likely to drop out of school. If you do graduate, you’re less likely to go to college. If you do go to college, you will get lower grades and, once again, you will be less likely to graduate. You’ll be twice as likely to abuse alcohol, and until you are twenty-four, you are five times as likely to kill yourself. You are more than sixteen times as likely to go to prison.

Not too many decades have passed since the statistics were as challenging for girls as they are today for

boys. One of America’s greatest 20th century stories was the feminist movement and actualization of the potential of girls and women in our country’s life. One of the pitfalls in addressing the challenges to boys is to somehow blame it on the success of girls. Instead, we should take hope from the past and the continuing story of girls to address the challenges and potential of boys.

So what to do? Families first and schools second carry the major burden (and joy) for what *Raising Cain* calls the “emotional education” of boys, but summer camps can play a disproportionately powerful role given their time limitations. Summer programs, especially ones with longer sessions and with more holistic philosophies, are well suited to support the “emotional education” of boys. *Raising Cain* concludes with a set of recommendations. I have taken the liberty of adapting

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several that seem especially relevant to summer programs.

Adults in the past excused the rowdy behavior of boys with the “boys will be boys” line. *Raising Cain* quotes Anne Roche Muggeridge when she turned that idea upside down: “Boys should be boys.” The energy of boys may complicate life in the classroom, but it enriches camp life. On the soccer field or in the water or on a backpack, the energy of boys is embraced. Rather than a challenge it is a resource. Rather than something to be criticized it is something to be praised. The activity is not only joyful, it is affirming.

Boys look for mentors, whether they admit it or not, but their choices are crucial. The choices schools make in their teachers, coaches, directors, and advisors have ramifications far past the classroom, the playing field, and the stage. Likewise, the hiring choices camps make play out not only in the activities and in the cabins, but also in the pauses in the day. School and camp staff must enjoy, truly enjoy, young people. When hiring teachers for schools I always perked up when a resume included summer program experience. They had shown through their commitment of that precious summer vacation time an appreciation for young people and a commitment to building camp communities to serve young people. At early ages, camp staff work 24/7 with young people; it is a telling and powerful measure of commitment. Mentoring boys is not a pas-

sive pursuit. It asks, even demands, that staff members know their charges and reach out to them. They must share, in the language of *Raising Cain*, their emotional lives in order to help their charges develop their own emotional language and intelligence. As parents we know when a teacher or coach has established that special mentoring relationship with our children. We know how powerful it is. We know less about camps because the time is brief and often the distance is great, but the mentoring for boys at camps can be powerful.

Summer programs can provide the “safe environment” for boys to share their “internal lives” and to learn emotional courage and empathy. One advantage most camps have over schools is that many of today’s measuring sticks for young people—grades, SATs, winning/losing—are irrelevant, and some are the very gauges that many boys have the most trouble with. Many camp activities instead stress group successes—completing a project or finishing a canoe trip or producing a play. The successes depend on cooperation and support. Each boy is important to the success of the group. The emphasis is on collaboration and problem solving rather than competition. It is worth noting that today’s boys are part of the emerging Millennial Generation that is revealing its own strong and refreshing bias toward community and collaboration. Camps are uniquely suited to build on those values.

