

# The Minds of Boys

SAVING OUR SONS FROM FALLING BEHIND  
IN SCHOOL AND LIFE

Michael Gurian  
and  
Kathy Stevens

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## More Praise for *The Minds of Boys*

“*The Minds of Boys* is a wonderfully practical and enjoyable book to read and a great companion to *The Wonder of Boys*. The strategies presented help to empower parents to demand social justice for their boys in school. I highly recommend!”

—Stephen J. Bavolek, Ph.D., author, *Nurturing Parenting Programs*

“*The Minds of Boys* provides a valuable service not only to parents and teachers but also to policymakers. Boys today are languishing academically. Gurian and Stevens provide important analysis and practical solutions.”

—Christina Hoff Sommers, Ph.D., author, *The War Against Boys*

“Reading this book may be the greatest act of love you can do for your son.”

—Scott Haltzman, M.D., author, *The Secrets of Happily Married Men*  
and founder of [www.secretsofmarriedmen.com](http://www.secretsofmarriedmen.com)

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“Gender plays a significant role in how children think, develop, behave, and consequently learn. *The Minds of Boys* is a timely, practical approach to helping boys succeed in educational environments, extracurricular activities, and daily life. A must-read for parents trying to provide the best for their sons!”

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“This book provides invaluable information for parents and educators to help them improve boys’ academic and social success.”

—Michael Merrifield, Colorado House of Representatives,  
Chairman, House Education Committee

“As the mother of three sons, I’m grateful to Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens for their breakthrough contribution to helping us understand how a boy’s mind really works. We’ve always known that boys and girls learn differently, but Michael and Kathy have really shown us for the first time how we specifically can help our sons fulfill their potential. I highly recommend *The Minds of Boys* to all parents, teachers, and anyone who really cares about the future of our society. It is a must-read that is destined to become a classic.”

—Michele Borba, Ed.D., author, *Building Moral Intelligence: The Seven Essential Virtues That Teach Kids to Do the Right Thing*

“Michael Gurian had the courage to talk about boys before it was popular. This book takes his work further and articulates the issues from a brain-based approach with supporting research. He and Kathy Stevens then give very practical examples for interventions. I highly recommend this book to anyone who works with boys professionally or personally. I found the book to be extraordinarily helpful.”

—Ruby Payne, author, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*

“In *The Minds of Boys*, Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens provide a very readable description of the current academic dilemma affecting a large number of boys.”

—Sandra F. Witelson, Ph.D., Albert Einstein/  
Irving Zucker Chair in Neuroscience, McMaster University

“The crisis facing boys today is as damaging and dangerous as that which faced young women twenty years ago. With practical strategies, research-based suggestions, and a family-oriented support team, *The Minds of Boys* offers real help to restore boys’ confidence, culture, and capability.”

—Dr. Linda Karges-Bone, author, *More Than Pink or Blue: How Gender Shapes Your Curriculum*

# The Minds of Boys

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*Parenting*

The Wonder of Children  
(previously published as *The Soul of the Child*)  
The Wonder of Girls  
The Wonder of Boys  
A Fine Young Man  
The Good Son  
What Stories Does My Son Need?  
(with Terry Trueman)

*Psychology*

What Could He Be Thinking?  
Love's Journey  
Mothers, Sons and Lovers  
The Prince and the King

*Education*

Boys and Girls Learn Differently!  
(with Patricia Henley and Terry Trueman)  
The Boys and Girls Learn Differently Action Guide for Teachers  
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Understanding Guys  
From Boys to Men

*Fiction and Poetry*

The Miracle  
An American Mystic  
The Odyssey of Telemachus  
Emptying  
As the Swans Gather

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Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 www.josseybass.com

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### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Gurian, Michael.

The minds of boys : saving our sons from falling behind in school and life / Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens.— 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978-0-7879-7761-0 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10 0-7879-7761-6 (alk. paper)

1. Boys—Education. 2. Boys—Psychology. 3. Sex differences in education. 4. Academic achievement. I. Stevens, Kathy, date. II. Title.

LC1390.G87 2005

371.823—dc22

2005000229

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

*HB Printing*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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*To the special women in my life:  
Gail, Gabrielle, and Davita*

*To the special men in my life:  
Don, Kevin, Mike, Matthew, and Rodney,  
And to Aspen, a most glorious child.*

*To all the children and students  
we have met over the years.  
They are the greatest inspiration.*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Every book is an ensemble effort. We gratefully acknowledge the ensemble that made this book possible. Alan Rinzler, our editor, has shepherded this project from its inception to its final form. He is one of the finest editors in the business, and we thank him for his care, acumen, skill, and passion. At Jossey-Bass and John Wiley, Alan is surrounded by some of the finest publishing staff around. Our thanks to Jennifer Wenzel, Lesley Iura, Michele Jones, Sarah Miller, Nancy Rothschild, Carol Hartland, and all others who were involved in this project. Many thanks also to publishers Paul Foster and Debra Hunter, who believed from the beginning.

Our profound thanks also to Candice Fuhrman, our advocate and agent.

Many thanks also to Daniel Amen, M.D.; Howard Schubiner, M.D.; Scott Haltzman, M.D.; Catherine Craddock; Lori Seyde-Mehrtens; James Zull, M.D.; and Lauren E. Valdes, who read the manuscript for accuracy.

In our writing process, Don Stevens was of great assistance with research and support. Our thanks to him and also to Phil Gurian, whose Web and research talents provided us with magic from the Internet that every book ought to have.

It is with great appreciation that we also thank the teachers, administrators, and parents who have shared their stories with the Gurian Institute so that we could share them with you. Our training institute ([www.gurianinstitute.com](http://www.gurianinstitute.com)) has had the honor of working both in the

United States and abroad because individuals, professionals, and communities have helped us do so. Special thanks to Helene Paroff.

Our special thanks to the Gurian Institute certified trainers, whose individual efforts can be viewed on the Institute Web site. These trainers are working with us to educate schools and parents, and we could not do what we do if it were not for their support. Special thanks to Marilyn Altman.

Our profound thanks also to the universities that support professional development in brain sciences, so that teachers can enter classrooms armed with learning strategies that give all children—boys and girls—the best chance for success. Among these universities is the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs, home of our Summer Institute.

Finally, as always, our thanks to our families, who listen to the music created by our ensemble, and tirelessly support it with their ears, their comments, and their love.

May this book read as it is meant to read: as an act of profound affection for all the families and communities who support the healthy growth of children.



## INTRODUCTION

You can pull me all you want, and I'll stretch, but I won't break.

—FANTASTIC FOUR COMICS, CIRCA 1968

WHEN I WAS A BOY, I LIKED SUPERMAN, BATMAN, AND SPIDERMAN. MY SCHOOL friends and I traded our comic books on the playground, in our backyards, our homes. In fourth grade, I discovered the Fantastic Four. The special power of one of the Four mesmerized me: he could stretch his arms and legs elastically. Even when his enemies tried to kill him, he would not be torn apart, he could not be broken.

A lot was going on in our culture in 1968, the year I discovered the Fantastic Four. Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy were shot and killed. Every night my family watched TV, seeing soldiers with their faces mired in dirt and blood, the helicopters roiling great blasts of wind against the jungle grass. In 1968, I lived in Aina Haina, a neighborhood built at the leeward base of Oahu's mountains. My father, a junior professor at the University of Hawaii, came home very sad more than once because one of his former students had just been killed across the ocean. When I saw wheelchair-bound soldiers near Hickam Air Force Base rolling down the sidewalk, I felt my heart wince in fear and confusion.

I know now that I wanted to be a superhero, unbreakable and bold; I carried this longing, partly because I am human, but also because of

## 2 Introduction

those soldiers and the war that raged. I also know there were other reasons. At ten years old, I had problems at home and in school.

At home, my family struggled near poverty. My parents fought. Their discipline of their children was physical and brutal. Their marriage struggled, and I began running away from home at nine years old. In school I was called “incorrigible,” summoned many times to the principal’s office, a discipline problem. By fifth grade I had seen a psychiatrist and been put on Ritalin. Within a few months, my teacher, Mrs. Kono, suggested I be taken off the Ritalin. The drug had made me into something of a “zombie,” in her words. She told my parents she missed my “spark.” I was taken off Ritalin, but my troubles in school continued.

I didn’t focus well on what teachers wanted me to do.

I had trouble sitting still for as long as was needed.

I wanted to learn one thing well rather than constantly move between tasks.

I didn’t want to read textbook after textbook.

I got bored easily.

I wanted to *do* my learning, not hear about it.

I was never sure I understood the directions I was given, nor did I succeed at accomplishing all of what my teachers demanded.

I often didn’t see why I had to be in school anyway.

By the time I was in seventh grade—we lived in Laramie, Wyoming, now, my father teaching at the University of Wyoming—I started skipping classes. By tenth grade, in Durango, Colorado, I worked twenty hours a week at a restaurant, paying rent back to my family in order to help financially. By the time I matriculated from twelfth grade (now back in Honolulu, at Kaiser High School), I got better grades and succeeded on the debate team.

But still my troubles in school continued. My behavior had improved, but I left high school a poor writer. My freshman year in college, my history professor gave me an F on my first paper. He wrote, “You have good ideas, but you can’t write. Did you sleep all the way through high school?”

The year was 1976. I remember discussing my ongoing educational failures with a counselor at the University of Hawaii. I told her how I'd been sent to a psychiatrist at ten years old and given Ritalin. I told her that our family was suffering internal distress. A middle-aged woman with three sons of her own, she asked for more information about my schools. After she heard more about my difficult and painful years in school, she said, "Isn't it possible that something was wrong with the schools, too, that caused problems for you? I've had some problems in school with two of my own boys."

This was a revelation to me, a first hint that the problem wasn't entirely my fault—that something might be wrong with the way our learning institutions educate our sons. I asked the counselor what she meant, what might be wrong with my schools, but she said no more about it, and in the end I had to look back at myself. I saw a boy who tried to be elastic, tried to stretch himself constantly toward educational goals and methods that often did not help him. I remembered how it hurt, and how I acted out against that system.

In graduate school, three years later, I made friends with a house full of roommates, all guys, all of whom had been, in their individual ways, "a disappointment in school," "a kid who didn't work to his potential," "unmotivated." This was eye opening. There were so many of us. One graduate school friend shared with me a comment his father had made: "You're not supposed to like school or care a lot about it. You gotta just survive it and get to college. If a kid can do that, he'll be okay."

That comment stopped me short. I had heard it before, from inside myself somewhere, during boyhood. Now an adult, I didn't like it. Something was wrong here. The "something" wasn't just something wrong with me or with my "dysfunctional family." The "something" was, perhaps, intrinsic to the way I was educated in school and in life.

Pursuing that "something" became a large part of my professional work.

Now, a quarter century later, I recall my school years with a lot more information, greater perspective, and I hope a little wisdom. I've devoted the last twenty years to studying the arc of boyhood, from birth through adulthood, both in and out of school. As a therapist, educator, philosopher, and author, I've focused on helping our culture revise its parenting

and schooling practices to bring out the best in our sons. Books I've written, such as *The Wonder of Boys*, *A Fine Young Man*, and *The Good Son*, asked parents, educators, and policymakers to take a very close look at just how much our boys today are struggling, emotionally, spiritually, and morally, at home and in society. *Boys and Girls Learn Differently!* began to discuss what new research in brain science, biochemistry, and child development was showing us about gender and education. *What Could He Be Thinking?* asked our culture to notice who men are, what they are striving for, and especially how they and their wives and partners can succeed in relationship and marriage. In *The Minds of Boys* I will plead, with my coauthor's help, that all parents, teachers, policymakers, and other concerned citizens look very closely at what is happening to boys in our educational institutions.

A system is in place today with which boys (and girls) are educated—but is it the system we all want? I have written this book with Kathy Stevens, a parent, an educator, and the training director of the Gurian Institute, in the hope that you can answer this question for yourself and, more important, so you can learn how to help your son and your students do their best in school. Kathy and I believe that we are losing too many boys today in our schools. More and more boys are doing poorly, dropping out, and beginning their lives handicapped without the education and skills they need to succeed in a world that is increasingly demanding and competitive. We believe this trend need not continue. Now is the time to change things for the better.

*The Minds of Boys* is our practical guide to helping boys learn, do better in school, and succeed in life. This book provides you with a kind of “operating system” that you can immediately “load into” your own life and your son's schooling.

### Kathy Stevens

Kathy Stevens, like myself, is an advocate for both boys and girls. For thirty years, she worked in female development programming, most recently as executive director of the Women's Resource Agency in Col-

orado Springs. She ran the award-winning Intercept Mentoring program for teen girls.

After reading a book I wrote called *The Wonder of Girls*, Kathy contacted me, and we discovered a mutual interest in cross-cultural approaches to the lives of children. My work over the last two decades has combined neurobiology, anthropology, and psychology to understand how boys and girls develop along parallel but also different paths. Kathy had noticed in her work with girls that the struggles of girls and of boys were intersecting.

“To better care for our girls,” she told me, “we have to get real about what’s happening to our boys, too.” Kathy is one of those wise thinkers who see the whole picture. Coincidentally, Kathy and I met at the very time when the institute I had founded to study this field was looking for a new training director. Kathy not only took over its direction but also has now helped develop Gurian Institute programs throughout the United States and in Canada and Australia. Much of the practical material in this book has been created and developed by Kathy Stevens.

My coauthor is not only a professional but also a mother of two sons. When she told me the story of her son Karl’s education, I thought of how my own mother had struggled with me to get through school; I thought of all the parents and teachers who are struggling to help their sons do their best. Kathy’s story is both chilling and inspiring. It represents so well both the power of human perseverance against institutional failure and the will we all have to protect the minds of boys.

## Kathy’s Story

Karl Michael was a risk taker from the day he was born. He pulled and prodded about in my arms. He was ready and eager to take on the world. With beautiful blue eyes and a smile that lights up a room, he grew into a bubbly toddler—outgoing and curious. He explored, burned up energy, slept soundly. And he enjoyed school early on. His teachers in kindergarten and first, second, and third grade helped him care for himself so he could stay on task and grow. He talked a lot and wiggled around a lot, but he learned well.

Then Karl went to fourth grade. This experience changed his attitude about school forever. His teacher didn't understand his energy, his way of learning, his boyishness, his difficulty sitting still. I saw these as "who he was," but she saw them as significant problems. She was very hard on Karl; she made him believe she didn't like him and that he was "bad."

Karl's attitude toward school began to change. Many days at a time, he didn't want to go. I talked with his teacher but couldn't get through. She said Karl had "behavior issues."

Watching this playful, energetic, and intelligent boy come to hate school tore at my heart. When I listen today to other moms and dads talk about losing their own sons to the same kind of crisis at their school, I remember my family's nightmare. Within the year, Karl was diagnosed with ADHD, even though his intelligence tests showed him above average for academic potential. Within another year, his sixth-grade teacher asked that he be placed in a special education class. At the advice of the school principal, we consulted a psychologist, who recommended Ritalin, which Karl started taking regularly. Karl was labeled a problem in school and was now being treated by a doctor. Karl hated school, and we, his parents, were deeply confused. We didn't know where to turn. The professionals around us seemed to be doing their best, but we saw Karl slipping away from happiness and success.

Sixth, seventh, and eighth grades were some of the most painful years of Karl's and our lives. Karl became increasingly negative about school. His special ed class was a mixture of children with very mild to extremely serious problems. Karl cried and begged to stay home. He was entering puberty, and in trying to navigate the complicated new social world of his peer group, he felt like an outsider. Teased by peers for being stupid and a retard, he felt that he was, in his own words, "a complete loser."

Outside of school, Karl played basketball, climbed, rode his skateboard, enjoyed family camping trips where we lived in a tent for a week during the summer, and fished and canoed on lakes and rivers. During the summers he mowed and raked lawns around our neighborhood, cleaned gutters, and earned money, which he spent going to movies and buying his coveted Michael Jordan athletic shoes.

But back at school, he turned into a depressed adolescent boy. During ninth grade, he started skipping school, completing little of his work, and finally he failed that grade. His big brother, six years older, was away at college by now, and an opportunity arose for us to relocate from Virginia to Colorado. Karl voted to move—right now. We packed the car and headed west.

The first day of our three-day drive, we talked about what we wanted life to look like in Colorado. Karl said he wanted to change everything, including his name. He didn't want to be his "old school self." In his new school, he wanted to be known by his middle name, Mike. He begged me not to let his new school put him in special education. I told him I would try. Because I had felt so impotent for so many years now, I had no confidence that I could satisfy his wish.

Things did get better in Colorado. We found some help there. From that day on he's been Mike. We chose a home in Colorado based on what school district could best serve Mike. We sat down with a wonderful counselor at Holmes Junior High School, and Mike told her his story. She asked a lot of questions and listened a lot. In the end, she counseled my son that he was going to have a tough time academically, as he had allowed himself to get behind, but she agreed to let him try regular classes.

The counselor was right: Mike did struggle. But he never took another pill, and he did not go into special education classes. Many of his teachers were patient and supportive, and he started playing football, which helped immensely. In football, he found a reason to go to school—he got motivation and mentoring. Very quickly he became more popular with his peers. Many of his teachers liked him, even the ones who were frustrated by his suspicion of school and academics. He became active in the church youth group, finding new friends there.

Karl Michael is now a young man of twenty-eight, a veteran of five years in the army. He is taking college courses so that he can be a teacher someday. He says, "I know what went wrong and what went right when I was in school, and I want to help other boys who are struggling like I did."

Mike again has a smile that can light up a room. He is again outgoing and curious. He is a risk taker. He constantly fights the demons of

self-doubt that were planted so long ago, but every time he takes a step forward he is closer to achieving his dreams—and the dreams that I, his mother, have always had for him: to succeed in life as a man. In his case, to become a man who teaches children.

When Kathy told me her story, tears came to my eyes. The similarities to my own boyhood pulled at me. I was not as athletic as Mike, but still . . . so many of our issues resonated.

When I met Mike in 2002, I was impressed by a young man of intelligence and zeal. Though twenty years older than he, I could see how he too had survived what we have come to call “the institutional education of our boys.” Our learning style often didn’t fit the way we were taught. Our high energy was a minus, not a plus. Our need for movement, for less talk and more “doing,” for innovative ways of keeping us focused, and for male-friendly emotional support and direction did not generally fit the schools we went to. We were not the boys many of our teachers wanted in their classrooms.

If meeting Kathy for the first time created in me a vision of a book she and I could write together for boys, meeting her son clarified that vision completely. Kathy and I came to agree that it was time to write a book that helped parents and teachers understand not only boys and families who were struggling in the current educational culture but all boys who want to move through their school years doing the best they can.

### Our Method of Research

Every book that is needed by a culture grows first from some part of an individual heart that is stretched to its breaking point. Both Kathy and I had our hearts nearly broken by the institutional system of education that has been provided to boys in these last two generations. Our passion comes from our own life stories.

At the same time, a book that is needed can’t be based on two stories alone; it must be based on the finest research available. So we com-



mitted ourselves to research in service of this project. That research often points to boys in trouble in school, but often does not. We don't believe every boy and every parent suffers, nor do we blame any teacher or particular school. Many boys are doing quite well in school. Most teachers care deeply for the hearts and minds of boys. We have not completed our research and written this book in order to complain.

Instead, we have a theory to share with you, as well as a great deal of practical information you can use immediately. Both our theory and the practical information are offered in alliance with teachers, parents, and school staff who feel that although the educational system today is very fine in many ways, it is also breaking at the ribs just enough to leave the heart of education unprotected. That "heart" is *success for all children*.

## Our Theory

After studying, evaluating, synthesizing, and promulgating research in this field for twenty years, we believe that boys are being educated today in a system—comprising schools, homes, and communities—that is not well enough briefed on these four crucial elements of education:

- The male learning style
- The potential mismatch of that male learning style with many current educational practices
- The complete role parents and communities need to take, in any generation and in any culture, to ensure the education of sons
- New methods, strategies, and teaching techniques that have been proven to work in schools and classrooms that educate boys

## Our Book

As we explore this theory with you, we'll begin in Chapter One by fleshing out the crisis that many boys experience in our educational culture today: the kinds of crisis situations that Kathy's son Mike and I faced.

You may well be shocked by how many of us are out there. If you are living through the crisis right now, you'll find immediate support as you hear other voices like yours. If you are not living through the crisis, you'll be moved, we hope, to notice a boy around your home, school, or community whose distress resembles the crisis we describe and fits the theory that institutionalized educational systems today are often a mismatch with the way boys naturally learn.

In Chapter Two we'll guide you on a journey inside boys' minds—their actual brain structure and how it works—so that you can see how boys in general learn, whether they are high or low performing. We'll bring you the results from scientific scans of male and female brains. You'll notice both similarities and key differences in the ways boys and girls learn math, science, reading, writing, and other subjects.

As we explore this with you, we'll look at how gender-different learning styles were nurtured in the past and how they must be nurtured in new ways in the future. Chapters One and Two represent the first two steps that you need to take before leaping into the practical strategies we offer.

Our theory and research—these two steps—grow in and from four combined disciplines: neurobiology, anthropology, sociology, and educational psychology. Both Kathy and I have had experience working in other countries; thus the information we use from these disciplines has been well researched both in the United States and on other continents.

It is our hope that because of the confluence of disciplines and sources in this book, you can gain a new vision of what works best for boys' minds wherever you find them, whether in a rural town or a big city, and whatever their educational status at this moment. The male learning style we'll explore with you is immensely diverse—nature does not stereotype, but instead thrives on diversity—yet as you explore male education, you will recognize how “boyish” a boy is. Understanding male energy from the inside out is very empowering to parents, teachers, and all of us who care for boys' minds. We believe that inside every boy there is an educational hero who is trying to flourish. We believe every boy can learn if his education is well cared for.

## How to Care for a Boy's Education

Recently I went with my wife, Gail, and my children and some of their friends to watch the movie *Spiderman 2*. I enjoyed it, and I know the kids did. We all walked out in a “heroic” frame of mind, aware of our own self-doubts and of the innate courage that waits inside each of us to be activated toward the good. Spiderman is comic book wisdom at its best—simple, primal, powerful.

My older daughter, Gabrielle, who knew that Kathy and I were writing a book on boys and education, pointed out to me, “Dad, did you notice? Peter Parker is doing badly in school.” This led to a discussion about how many contemporary films depict male heroes as “not good students.” Even in the highly popular Harry Potter series, the best student is a girl, whereas the boys struggle in classes. These fictional sons of our culture, like Peter Parker, have given up somewhat on gaining the academic education their institutions and communities can give them; they feel isolated, and they turn inward, toward magical powers. How lucky for them if they, like Peter Parker, find superhuman powers within them but what about all the boys who have no comic book magic? School has afforded them too little success, and within these boys as well, there is not much hidden power.

I felt a little sad about this that evening. But I also felt a stirring of comfort. During the days of our Spiderman venture, I was working on a section of this book that involved very practical information on how to teach language arts to boys. It struck me, very gently, that even at forty-seven, I did not need to give up on the sense of magic. The problems of the world are not actually solved by magical mutations, but they can be solved by practical application of science and a great deal of hard work. That, for me, is the magic I turn to. That is what allows me to bend without breaking. That “practical magic” can be available to any boy who is having trouble in school.

I hope that for you the sciences of neurobiology, anthropology, sociology, and psychology can be “magical.” I hope they can be heroic. I believe they have the power to help boys do well in school—even more, to help our boys love school. I hope in this book you’ll feel the sense of magic in science and in research.

Kathy's son Mike has told me, "Throughout the whole nightmare of my school years, it was weird—I really wanted to like school. I just really wanted to."

Bravo to him. So did I. Don't all of our sons, at some level, really want to like the way they spend six to eight hours of every weekday? Don't they wish the magic were there in those schools, in their homework, in their learning adventures?

Your sons and your students want to live the magic, *do* the magic with their minds and hands. They, like you, are practical people, looking for practical ways to spin their webs or stretch their limbs or fly.

Following the first two chapters, we'll move on with you to practical information: direct and immediate steps you can take to care for your sons' and your students' educational success. Much of the research, ideas, and specific techniques we'll present come from the work of the Gurian Institute.

The Gurian Institute has become, especially under Kathy Stevens's direction, a resource for *practical* information on how to educate boys and girls. The Institute has developed a method by which parents, teachers, school systems, and communities can care for the minds of boys, in practical measure. This method has been used successfully in classrooms and homes in most of the states of the United States, including Alabama, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Texas, and Washington, as well as in England, Canada, and Australia (for success data, please visit [www.gurianinstitute.com](http://www.gurianinstitute.com)).

The practical measures you can take immediately in your home and school make up the bulk of the final ten chapters of *The Minds of Boys*. We've organized this practical information for you after listening to questions like these:

- What part does nutrition play in my son's education?
- What specific role does the nuclear family play in making school successful for him?
- Can parents be teachers too?

- At what age do I stop helping him with his homework?
- Are there certain classroom environments that work best for boys?
- How much television is good for learning? How much is bad?
- What role should computers play in a boy's development as a learner?
- Are there ways to fight the peer pressure some boys exert on others to stop them from liking school?
- What do teachers need in order to feel appropriately supported in teaching boys?
- How can single-gender education work for boys without hurting girls?
- What are boys themselves saying about the kinds of educational processes they need?

In Parts Two and Three of this book, you'll be coached on how to adapt home, school, and classroom environments to fit boys' learning styles and needs. These adaptations include changes to home and school schedules and policies, teacher-student ratios, classroom space and physical layout, and classroom procedures. Each innovation is tried and true—we have culled through twenty years' worth of successful strategies in order to present you with what works *best*.

As you read and apply the practical innovations in this book, you'll notice many stories and anecdotes from people like you. You'll meet teachers, parents, grandparents, and concerned citizens who are giving great care to boys' everyday education in homes, in schools, in parks, on streets. Their wisdom can guide us just as well as expert research can. You'll find testimonials from school principals, heads of schools, teachers, parents, and others who have instituted successful programs and experienced improved grades and test scores, as well as lowered numbers of discipline referrals.

There are some key academic areas of concern that many teachers and parents have reported. In Part Three, we specifically focus on the best home and classroom strategies for teaching the core curricula of reading, writing, language arts, math, and science. This focus includes

information on the importance of arts and athletics in boys' learning. We'll also look closely at how single-gender education is working in certain communities, and why. Kathy and I believe strongly in coeducation, but we also believe that for both boys and girls, single-gender classrooms need to be part of the educational palette. We'll show you why we believe this.

Part Four looks at boys who are struggling with emotional issues, underachievement, bullying, academic distress, and learning disabilities. We'll focus on practical help for these boys, so that truly, no child is left behind. As we provide practical information to you, you'll notice some chapters divided into two major sections: What Parents Can Do and What Teachers Can Do. We'll explore with you the kind of parent-led *team*—mother, father, grandparents, neighbors, mentors—a boy needs in order to achieve the best learning at home. We'll look at how parents and teachers can do their separate and different jobs, but in concert with each other. For teachers, our chapters will include information for your classroom that you can put to work immediately.

In different parts of many chapters, we've include two kinds of material in boxes. These are highlighted lists of data, titled "Did You Know?" and highlighted innovations called "Try This." Kathy and I hope you'll pass the information from the highlighted boxes to friends and family members, put them in school mailboxes, and share them in teacher-staff meetings. We hope they'll help you and the others around you who care about boys to open communication about the needs of boys in your cities, towns, and schools.

## The Minds of Boys

For Kathy and me, helping boys has become an essential purpose of our professional and personal work. It is at the core of our personal mission. We have experienced an unprotected male life in these last two generations. We have lived, from the viewpoints of son and mother, the pain and the passion of caring for boys.

*The Minds of Boys* is a joint venture, growing from our two visions and the combined efforts of the Gurian Institute's staff. We also know that it grows from all of your efforts. You care deeply about children's success, and we could not have written this book without the many stories and innovations that have come to us in person or via email from people like you—sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, coaches, and school staff.

Our profound thanks go out to everyone who has entrusted their story to us. We feel, in a way, as if we have met your sons, the boys in your schools, even the young men who at this point are wandering away from you, searching for any help or magic they can find. You, like us, know just what is at stake as, together, we help our civilization awaken to the duty we have, as adult women and men, to better protect the minds of boys.

Together now, let us study and serve this male population. These boys cannot bend, stretch, spin, or fly forever. We can't afford to lose or nearly lose any more of our young men. We cannot abide watching these boys go away from school unhappy and inwardly empty for another generation. We must do something complete, passionate, and well informed. Let's begin right here, right now.





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PART

# Protecting the Minds of Boys





## The Current Crisis

Because of the risks boys naturally take, a mom is ready to face a lot of little daily crises. But the crisis in my son's education—that took me completely by surprise.

—KATHY STEVENS

THE SIGN OUTSIDE THE PRESCHOOL READS, “ALL CHILDREN WELCOME.” A mother, father, and three-year-old son drive into the small parking lot. The parents have chosen this preschool among many others available in their neighborhood. Now their hearts are pounding, for this is their son's first day of school. They step out of the car, unbuckle their son from the car seat, lift him out, and walk with him to the front door.

A young woman comes to them and greets her new student and his parents. For a second the boy trembles, realizing that his parents are going to leave him here. He hugs them, cries a little, but then goes off with his new teacher, a kind young woman who holds his hand and introduces him to other kids. The boy turns, waves to Mommy and Daddy. They wave back, and leave silently.

This little boy can't fully understand his parents' hopes and dreams. He can't know how much they want not only this school but also the other schools their son will attend to inspire him and enrich his mind. These parents trust their educational system to be filled with teachers and staff who are trained to teach boys. As they turn away from the

preschool, this mother and father already imagine the way their boy's mind will grow, the good grades their son will get, the teachers he'll have, and the knowledge, love of life, and wisdom he'll gain in twelve or more years of education. These parents have given their son to an educational system that they believe has shown, historically, great promise.

And for their son, it may fulfill that promise.

But it's just as likely that it will not. This may be the beginning of an educational crisis in this family. And this family will not be the only one experiencing such a crisis.

## Is There Really a Crisis?

Because the word *crisis* gets thrown around a great deal these days, it deserves to be treated with suspicion. In fact, Kathy and I have tried not to use it, thinking, "But so many boys are getting by just fine. Can we really call the situation a crisis?" We've said, "Yes, the Gurian and Stevens families endured, struggled, and overcame their problems, but is it really a national or international crisis?" We've looked back on the months after Columbine, during which the Gurian Institute staff, along with many professionals, were asked by the media to comment and to offer our analysis of what happened and why. We learned then how using the word *crisis* can generate unwarranted fear about children's lives, a sensationalism that can wound schools and families, that can spread hopelessness and *hinder* necessary changes and healing.

Yet after all this we have ended up using the term. Yes, we're sorry to say, there really is a crisis. And in this chapter we hope to convince you to use the word not just as a negative alarm, but rather as an inspiration for positive change. Here are some of the things parents and educators are saying about the situation boys face in education today.

Laurie Hoff, a mother of three from Neenah, Wisconsin, wrote us: "I have a 13 year old boy. The middle school he attends is what I can only call 'anti-boy.' The assignments, the discipline, the structure of the day make him flounder in a system that works against him."

Netty Cruscan, a professional from Marion, Kentucky, wrote, "I'm a Developmental Interventionist, assessing and working on developmental delays. I'm noticing that the majority of the children on my client list are boys."

Linda Sullivan, a mother of two from Virginia, wrote, "I am becoming increasingly alarmed at the amount of boys being told they have processing problems, ADHD, LD, adjustment disorder, anxiety, and focus problems. By chance I happened to uncover today a new parochial school in our area in which 8 out of 20 in a third grade class are on Ritalin."

## The Awful Truth

These parents and professionals are frightened. They have reason to be. Their communities are living out some painful statistics, as shown in the Did You Know? box.<sup>1</sup>

The issues boys face in school cross economic and ethnic groups. Although it might be politically tempting to say that upper-income white males must be doing well, that is in fact not a given. The Gurian Institute was just asked to assist a prestigious private boys' high school, populated by a majority of white males of high economic status, in which 50 percent of the boys in the school, across all grade levels, are receiving a D or an F in at least one subject. Even among white males there is a problem.

African American males are another group in which crisis is distinguishable. African American boys are more likely than other males (1) to be identified as learning-disabled and to end up in special education classes, (2) not to participate in advanced placement courses, (3) not to perform as well as other boys in math and science, and (4) to perform below grade level on standardized tests.

Pedro Noguera, professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, has studied the academic performance of African American males and has reported that whereas 90 percent of black males surveyed "strongly agree" that they would like to succeed in school, only 22 percent responded that they "work hard to achieve good grades," and 42