

Pollack and the Boy Code

A review by Pandora Hopkins of
Pollack, William S. (1999). *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*.
New York, NY: Henry Holt & Company

I would like to recommend William Pollack's book, *Real Boys*, which deals with the detrimental influence of societal stereotypes on masculinity--and how a steady process of humiliation serves to indoctrinate boys to an unhealthy mode of being. Pollack writes about the serious problems he has encountered in his practice as a clinical psychologist in Canada. He is in charge of an on-going research project at Harvard University called "Listening to Boys' Voices." In the beginning of the Introduction to his book, Pollack writes:

"Boys today are in serious trouble, including many who seem "normal" and to be doing just fine. Confused by society's mixed messages about what's expected of them as boys, and later as men, many feel a sadness and disconnectedness they cannot even name. New research shows that boys are doing less well in school than they did in the past and, in comparison to girls, that many boys have remarkably fragile self-esteem, and that the rates of both depression and suicide are frighteningly on the rise. Many of our sons are currently in a desperate crisis."

Pollack writes that psychological insights have recently helped girls find their voices upon entering their teens, especially through such projects as the Ophelia Project. The problem for girls was the result of "society's gender stereotypes about girls" and he calls for help along the same line for boys. As they grow up, he says, they experience steady indoctrination by well-meaning fathers, mothers, teachers and coaches who use shame and humiliation to force them into something he calls "the boy code" (defined as the belief that there is only one route to healthy masculinity that a boy should never "act like a girl"). Pollack feels that this "boy code" prevents boys from expressing their feelings in class or to other people in general; it makes them ashamed of interests they may have in almost anything outside of sports; it makes them feel that they should be as unlike girls as possible, therefore ashamed of having any friendships with members of the opposite sex; it makes them feel ashamed of confiding in their moms. Again--to quote Pollack:

(p.11) "The use of shame to control boys is pervasive; it is so corrosive I will devote a whole chapter to it in this book. Boys are made to feel shame over and over, in the midst of growing up, through what I call society's shame-hardening process....."

"As soon as a boy behaves in a way that is not considered manly, that falls outside the Boy Code, he is likely to meet resistance from society--he may merely be stared at or whispered about, he may be humiliated, he may get a punch in the gut, or he may just feel terribly ashamed."

On pp.58 ff and elsewhere, Pollack gives specific examples from the experiences of his young clients: an 8-yr-old shamed by his physical ed teacher because he expressed a

liking for rope jumping over basketball, a 13-yr-old teased for putting acne-lotion on his nose (“What dress are you going to wear to the prom?”), a 17-yr-old reading a poem with dramatic intensity in an English class mocked by his fellow students as a “Faggot.”

At the end of his book, Pollack summarizes: “In spite of all societies messages to the contrary, parents cannot love their boys too much or somehow spoil them with too much caring or affection....If we withhold our love and affection, our boy feels ashamed and then hardens himself....Real boys need people to be with who allow them to show all of their emotions including their most intense feelings of sadness, disappointment, and fear. Real boys need to hear that these feelings are normal, good, and ‘masculine.’”“