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## Struggling School-Age Boys

*A new study says parents are right to worry about their sons.*

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Every other week it seems a new study comes out that adds to our already-formidable arsenal of parental worries. But even by those escalating standards, the report issued last week by the federal government's National Center for Health Statistics contained a jaw-dropper: the parents of nearly one of every five boys in the United States were concerned enough about what they saw as their sons' emotional or behavioral problems that they consulted a doctor or a health-care professional. By comparison, about one out of 10 parents of girls reported these kinds of problems. (See the study [here](#).)

The report confirms what many of us have been observing for some time now: that lots of school-age boys are struggling. And, parents are intensely worried about them.

What is ailing our sons? Some experts suggest we are witnessing an epidemic of ADHD and say boys need more medication. Others say that environmental pollutants found in plastics, among other things, may be eroding their attention spans and their ability to regulate their emotions.

Those experts may be right but I have another suggestion. Let's examine the way our child rearing and our schools have evolved in the last 10 years. Then ask ourselves this challenging question: could some of those changes we have embraced in our families, our communities and our schools be driving our sons crazy?

Instead of unstructured free play, parents now schedule their kids' time from dawn till dusk (and sometimes beyond.) By age 4, an ever-increasing number of children are enrolled in preschool. There, instead of learning to get along with other kids, hold a crayon and play Duck, Duck, Goose, children barely out of diapers are asked to fill out work sheets, learn computation or study Mandarin. The drumbeat for early academics gets even louder when they enter "real" school. Veteran teachers will tell you that first graders are now routinely expected to master a curriculum that, only 15 years ago, would have been considered appropriate for second, even third graders. The way we teach children has changed, too. In many communities, elementary schools have become test-prep factories—where standardized testing begins in kindergarten and "teaching to the test" is considered a virtue. At the same time, recess is being pushed aside in order to provide extra time for reading and math drills. So is history and opportunities for hands-on activities—like science labs and art. Active play is increasingly frowned on—some schools have even banned recess and tag. In the wake of school shootings like the tragedy at Virginia Tech, kids who stretch out a pointer finger, bend their thumb and shout "pow!" are regarded with suspicion and not a little fear.

Our expectations for our children have been ramped up but the psychological and physical development of our children has remained about the same. Some kids are thriving in the changing world. But many aren't. What parents and teachers see—and what this government study now shows—is that the ones who can't handle it are disproportionately boys.

Some researchers responded to last weeks' study by calling for more resources for more mental-health services for children—especially males. That's an admirable goal. But when nearly one in five boys has such serious behavioral and emotional issues that their parents are talking it over with their pediatrician, you can bet we are facing a problem that requires a more fundamental change in our society than medication or weekly therapy. Let's take a moment, before the school year gets any farther underway, and ask ourselves whether we are raising and educating our boys in a way that respects their natural development. And if we are not, let's figure out how we can bring our family life and our schools back into line.

This is one study that we ignore at our peril.