



From Boys to Men

BOOK REVIEW



By Ed Rudin, MD

Pediatrician Eli Newberger traces the stages of mental and physical development for young males and - contrary to an article in the last issue - opposes any form of corporal punishment.

THE MEN THEY WILL BECOME, Eli H. Newberger, MD, Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, MA. 1999 ISBN: 0-7382-0363-7. 372 pages

Does the world really need another book on rearing children? Yes, if it is subtitled "The Nature and Nurture of Male Character" and it is written by a male pediatrician known for his work with children of violent families - and for his artistry as a jazz tubist.

At first, it is hard to tell whether this book is for pediatricians and teachers, or for parents and other child care givers. The opening chapters define character and its roots in a way that is too bookish for lay readers, too elementary for sophisticated physicians and too ambiguous for anyone looking for answers.

But once Newberger gets to the stages of physical and mental development, he spins an interesting and informative yarn, correlating biology and social environment in male character development. He weaves in interviews with children, adolescents and their parents with illuminating studies and surveys, and discussions with teachers and fellow pediatricians, social scientists, police officers and a few administrators. He creates a tapestry for each of us to experience in our own way.

Newberger sees each event as a blip on the screen, not a forecast of the future. Although his children and families are not perfect, he is never judgmental and always respectful. From five-year-old Peter trying to deal with unprovoked attacks by five-year-old Larry to 14-year-old Mark, he listens well to children and parents to learn the values that motivate them, their care-givers and school administrators.

Nine-year-old Pascal is a well-chosen example of how a "sterling character" can develop out of a dangerously disruptive and violent family history. "The process of making character," concludes Newberger, "involves not only the outside world pushing on the boy but also his inner self working actively to integrate his own desires with these outside pressures."

He also focuses on abilities and character traits most prominent during each developmental period: how males connect with others, how they connect with their own emotions, "Word Magic," "Discipline and Punishment" and learning self-control, sharing, curiosity, honesty, "Teasing and Bullying," "Identity and Friendship," alcohol and drugs, "Enabling," "Cheating," "Play and Sports" and "Giving Back."

At first he names his chapters for the individuals (e.g., "Infants and Toddlers"; "Preschoolers", Schoolboys"), but in adolescence he names them for the stages (e.g., "Early Adolescence"). His greater distance from adolescent subjects is reflected in fewer and shorter interviews and more use of other peoples' case histories and study and survey results.

Newberger uses Chase and Thomas's 1980s work on temperament and Erikson's 1960s work on identity and intimacy well, as he does his data. He acknowledges that only half of the 36 million boys in the U.S. in 1998 lived with both biologic parents, while a fifth lived with one biologic and one step-parent, a third with a single parent (of whom 80 percent were with the mother) or no parent, and that 1-1.5 million boys lived with non-parent relatives and over half a million were in foster homes or other institutions. However, he reports almost no contacts with such families.

His comments on discipline and punishment are especially noteworthy. He contends that corporal punishment provokes a cycle of hostility: when parents hit children, children hit one another, fathers hit mothers, mothers hit fathers, and children hit parents.

By contrast, in 1979 Sweden adopted a national goal of eliminating corporal punishment. It mounted a large public education campaign, emphasizing such objectives of discipline as family harmony and a more civil society, but never criminalizing corporal punishment. After initial controversy, there has been wide public acceptance. Eight other countries have now followed that lead, and Newberger would like the U.S. to join them.

He offers "inductive discipline" as an alternative to spanking. It fosters self-discipline through internalizing a child's caring for others and assuming responsibility for how he affects others. That, he suggests, might go a long way toward deflecting children from later violence.

Given how many young adolescents seem to drift from social isolation and exclusion at school to lethal violence, his reference to teacher Vivian Paley's observations of social relationships in children's play is an eye-opener.

In discussing self-control, he tells the story of Louis Armstrong, who grew up in "The Battlefield" of New Orleans. On New Year's Eve of 1912 or 1913 Louis took a pistol out on the street to celebrate. When other boys fired blanks, he fired a real bullet. He was arrested and, after a short hearing the next day, was sent to The Colored Waifs' Home to begin an indeterminate sentence. The home had a band that performed around town to raise money. "Day after day, Louis sat quietly in the band room, listening and watching. Finally, he was offered a tambourine to play, then the bass drum, and still later an alto horn, on which Armstrong shone. The rest is history."

That paralleled Newberger's own introduction to the tuba in sixth grade. His passion for the tuba motivated him to the long hours of practice required to be a creative jazz artist.

There is also the story of a 15-year-old boy with borderline Attention Deficit Disorder who fell in love with the trumpet in fourth grade. Once thrown out of a concert orchestra for inserting some bars of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" into a performance of Brahms' First Symphony, he has become known as a trumpeter, not as an ADD.

We all need more than stimulants alone.

Newberger never comments on "The Hero" as a factor in the development of male character. My experience has shown that the ego-ideal is a major determinant of a boy's values, whether that is a religious icon, a family member or a teacher, or a sports or entertainment idol.

This is a valuable and readable book. Character development, although neglected in the pediatric literature, is of great importance to parents and society. For readers who have let their early curiosity grow, this book will be a find; for those who have developed a veneer of adult skepticism, there are 21 pages of bibliographic notes arranged by chapter, a five-page bibliography arranged alphabetically, and reference sources shown alphabetically in the index.

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