

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find a review of a recently published book *Boys Should Be Boys*.



## Raising boys: Your family, our culture

Meeker, M. (2008). *Boys Should Be Boys*, Washington DC, Regnery Publishing Inc.

By Rebecca Walberg, a Winnipeg-based writer and policy analyst

Meg Meeker, an American pediatrician, wife, and mother, has written a second book about parenting that will be very unpopular with those devoted to the premise that there are no natural differences between boys and girls. But for those who believe that mothers and fathers play different, complementary and essential roles in the raising of children, *Boys Should Be Boys* is an insightful and thought-provoking look at what sons need from their parents, and how families and our culture shortchange many young men.

Dr. Meeker's first parenting book, *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters*, published in 2006, discussed the importance of the father-daughter bond to young women. This time, she turns her attention to boys, from preschool until young adulthood. Parents who have raised both will already know some of the differences between sons and daughters. Meeker shows there is a medical basis for a lot of these differences, stemming from differences in physiology, brain activity and hormones. These differences can't be wished away – nor should they be.

For example, children and teens of both sexes are heavy users of electronic media these days, but they use technology differently. Where girls are more likely to enjoy internet chat rooms and music, boys generally prefer interactive videogames and visual content online. Boys are more drawn to violent movies and games than girls, but they are also more vulnerable to them. Many boys naturally become more aggressive after age two; at the same time they are less verbal than little girls, so teaching them not to resort to blows or tantrums when frustrated or angry is one of the major tasks of parenting. Dr. Meeker points out that when boys, who are already prone to acting out, are exposed to videogames and media that present violence as acceptable, even commendable, the results can be disastrous. [1]

More time in front of a screen means less time playing outside, traditionally a staple of childhood. Sports, whether in a formal, competitive league or a pick-up game with neighbourhood kids, are invaluable for boys. Besides improving fitness and health, they teach boys how to channel their physical and emotional strength, which can otherwise seem unmanageable, or even frightening, into something productive they can control. Organized sports teach boys how to be part of team, and recognize their strengths and weaknesses compared to teammates their own age.

Casual games on the playground give boys the chance to interact with older and younger children, to learn from the more advanced players, and to teach and mentor the younger ones. Both forms of activity are essential, and serve a far more important role than just providing exercise.

Perhaps the most valuable part is Dr. Meeker's discussion of healthy teenage behaviour. The physical and psychological changes of adolescence are exhausting for parents and teens alike, and conflict over boundaries and independence, periods of moodiness, and a strong preference for the company of friends instead of family are all normal. Often, though, stereotypes of hostile and defiant adolescents combine with parental reluctance to act as a disciplinarian, with the result that parents shrug off serious behaviour problems as a natural part of growing up. Uncontrollable anger, and prolonged and severe irritability, are two symptoms that can indicate major depression, or Oppositional Defiant Disorder.[2] Dr. Meeker's point is not to label teenage boys, but rather to emphasize parents need not accept worrisome behaviour as normal.

*Boys Should Be Boys* makes other common sense points—children don't simply need two parents, they need their own father and mother, because they learn different things from each. A father is a boy's first and most important teacher about what it means to be a man; and, pointing to the growing numbers of adult men who struggle to find happiness within marriage, Dr. Meeker reminds us that boys learn to love and be loved by a woman from their mothers. Men who have a poor relationship, or none at all, with either parent will find it much harder to become fulfilled husbands and fathers themselves, she says. Neither is religion an optional extra, when it comes to raising young men. Faith gives children a tremendous advantage when it comes to avoiding delinquency—things like dropping out of school, arrests, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, or joining gangs, but beyond that, boys respond well to the clear boundaries and moral guidance they find at church. [3]

Dr. Meeker's perspective has helped her to write a book brimming with love for boys and young men, and empathy for the mothers and fathers who raise them. *Boys Should Be Boys* is a helpful resource for parents and teachers. It's also an interesting read for anyone concerned with how our culture—ours schools, our government, our churches—treats those with an X and a Y chromosome—and why it matters.

## Endnotes

1] Dr. Meeker cites Patricia Greenfield, "Developmental Considerations for determining appropriate Internet use guidelines for children and adolescents," *Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 25 (2004).

[2] For more on this, see Dean X. Parmelee, ed. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, Mosby's Neurology Psychiatry Access, St. Louis (1996).

[3] She cites Jill W. Sinha, Ram A. Canaan, and Richard J. Gelles, "Adolescent Risk Behaviors and Religion: Findings from a National Study." *Journal of Adolescence*, vol. 30 (2007).