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"A must-read for any parent of boys."—**DR. MEHMET OZ**, Professor and Vice Chairman,  
New York Presbyterian Hospital, Columbia University

# boys adrift

THE FIVE FACTORS DRIVING THE GROWING EPIDEMIC OF  
UNMOTIVATED BOYS AND UNDERACHIEVING YOUNG MEN

video games • teaching methods  
prescription drugs • environmental toxins  
devaluation of masculinity

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD FROM THE AUTHOR

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AFTERWORD TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

# *From Theory to Practice: Making the Change*

“I agree with what you say about video games, Dr. SAX,” one parent told me.

“I don’t want my son spending twenty hours a week playing video games.

I don’t want him to play violent video games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Halo* at all.

But how am I supposed to enforce that?

If I tell him he can’t play those games, he just goes over to Jason’s house and they play the game there.

I don’t have any control over what happens at Jason’s house.”

I hear that a lot.  
What to do?

One of the best solutions I’ve heard of comes from [Burlington, Wisconsin](#).

- Parents there, working with the local school district, have created a community of parents who agree to abide by some basic rules:
  - • No child or teenager will be allowed to consume drugs or alcohol in this house.
  - • A parent will always be present and involved whenever a party or other social gathering is taking place at this house.
  - • Parents will enforce a curfew of 10:30 p.m. on school nights and midnight on weekends.

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- The exact rules aren't so important.
- What's important is creating a community of parents who agree jointly to share responsibility for safeguarding their children.

*It takes a village to raise a child*

- And the category of "children" includes teenagers.

- Teenagers want to do fun stuff.
- These parents in Burlington understand that.
- These parents provide healthy alternatives to the teen culture.
- The parents sponsor

✓ ping-pong tournaments,

✓ Guitar Hero tournaments, even

✓ dodgeball tournaments.

If you don't appreciate the boy-friendly significance of a real dodgeball tournament, please re-read CHAPTER 2 of this book.

- Note that this parents' group does *not* sponsor Halo tournaments or Grand Theft Auto tournaments.
  - Guitar Hero is fine.
  - Halo is not.

If you don't understand the importance of that distinction, please re-read CHAPTER 3.

- It's "good, clean fun," as one parent said to me.
- If such opportunities sound unremarkable to you, then you don't realize how rare such opportunities have become throughout the United States today.

These activities are sponsored by the parents and chaperoned by the parents.

- One guideline the parents try to follow is to be in the party but not of the party.
- You should not try to be the "cool parent" who parties with the kids.
- But by the same token, you should not be in your study upstairs with the door closed while the kids are partying downstairs.
- You should be downstairs, making lots of excuses to walk through the room.
  - "Put out lots of bowls with potato chips, M&Ms, nuts, that sort of thing," one parent told me.
  - "But make sure the bowls are small," she added. "That gives you a good excuse to keep going in and out of the room, refilling each bowl."
  - One bowl at a time."

The mere existence of this community, which is called PARTNERS 2, has made a tangible difference in the lives of many young people in BURLINGTON.

I spoke at length with one of them, a young man named KYLE KRIEN.

KYLE told me that before PARTNERS 2 was launched, he had the general impression that all the kids at his high school drank alcohol.

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*It's easy for high school kids to get that impression, because kids who drink may often boast about their drinking, while kids who don't drink are more likely to stay silent.*

But PARTNERS 2 conducted a survey of the high school kids.

- They discovered that **one-third of kids at the high school didn't drink and didn't want to drink.**
- And *they made sure that all the kids knew it, too.*
- "That really made a difference," KYLE told me.
- It helped him to know that he wasn't the only teen who had chosen not to drink.

*Even more important is the online Facebook accounts of participating parents.*

- When parents sign up,
  - they enter their telephone numbers and
  - their e-mail addresses into Facebook.
  - So if your son announces that he's going over to Jason's house, you can ask "Jason who?"
- **Your son tells you his friend's**
  - **name and**
  - **address.**
- You can check to see whether Jason's parents are listed in Facebook.
  - They're listed.
  - The fact that they have chosen to be listed means that they want to hear from you.
  - They want to work with you to make sure that their child, and your child, is safe.
  - So you feel comfortable calling them, because they've given you permission to call, in fact have invited you to call.
  - You call up Jason's mom or dad and say, "My son is coming over to your son's house."
  - Will you be around?
  - Could you please make sure that my son is not playing any violent video games?
  - I've told him he's not allowed to play any violent video games."
- And that parent is likely to agree to enforce your rules, because that parent
  - —by virtue of signing up with PARTNERS 2—
  - has agreed to be part of the solution.
- **That parent understands that parenting is most effective when there is a community of parents working together.**

KYLE told me that **one of the biggest benefits** of PARTNERS 2 for him was realizing that **getting drunk, or using drugs, is not the only option.**

- **That's an important insight.**
- It reminds me of another parents' group, a group that was founded by a father named Bill Oliver after he discovered that his fifteen-year-old daughter was a drug addict.
- His group, which calls itself both "Parent to Parent" and "The Passage Group" (<http://www.thepassagegroup.com>), has identified three beliefs that they believe characterize the "toxic culture" in which today's teenagers live.
- They are:
  - 1. The belief that **getting drunk and using drugs is normal**
  - 2. The belief that **sex is sport**
  - 3. The belief that **violence and death are entertainment**<sup>1</sup>
- **You have to fight all three of these beliefs.**
- Joining a community of like minded parents is a good place to start.

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Some parents are uneasy when I tell them that parents must assert their authority, individually and collectively.

- Some parents respond that parents should be less anxious and more laid back.
- One parent told me that
  - "Kids have always done things that bother their parents."
  - "Today's kids are no different."
- I told that parent about the three beliefs of today's "toxic culture" as defined by Parent to Parent.
  - **Those three beliefs are pathological.**
  - **They're sick.**
  - **No healthy culture has ever endorsed such beliefs.**
  - Forty years ago, **teenagers who subscribed to even one of those notions might well have been sent to a psychiatrist.**
  - Today, teenagers who don't subscribe to all three notions are regarded by their peers as strange.

- We are facing a challenge.
  - Our boys and young men are growing up in a culture that increasingly regards academic achievement as unmasculine.
  - Our girls and young women have to deal with a culture that focuses relentlessly on their personal appearance, a culture in which what really counts (for girls) is not who you are but how you look.
- We must, for the sake of our children, rebel against that culture.

We must create a subversive counterculture that promotes such unfamiliar notions as:

- 1. Real men love to read.
- 2. What really counts is not how you look but who you are.
- 3. Achievement in the real world is more important than achievement in the virtual world.
- I realize that teaching our children these and similar ideas in the context of twenty-first-century cyberculture is a daunting task.
- But we must accomplish this task, for the sake of our children.
- When it's time for my daughter to choose her life partner, I want her to have a choice:
  - and I don't mean a choice between thugs like the personae projected by Akon or 50 Cent or a slacker dude like the Matthew McConaughey character in *Failure to Launch*.
- I want her to have a choice among young men who are strong, caring, responsible, hard-working, maybe even ambitious.
  - But most of all, young men who are loving, loyal, and true.
  - Is that too much for a father to ask?

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## America's Biggest Trade Deficit:

### A Lesson from Denmark

In October 1973, the Arab oil embargo strained oil supplies in North America and Western Europe.

I remember vividly the long fuel lines that formed.

But after the embargo ended in March 1974, here in the United States we soon went back to life as usual, more or less.

In Denmark, the response was different.

In 1973, 99 percent of Denmark's oil imports came from the Middle East.

The Arab EMBARGO came as a huge shock that galvanized the nation into action. Denmark urgently sought alternative sources of energy, such as wind power.

Today, Denmark is the world's largest manufacturer of wind turbines, and 20 percent of Denmark's energy now comes from wind power.

Denmark has also reduced to zero the percentage of its energy that is imported from the Middle East.

What I find most interesting about the Danish story is a recent comment from DITLEV ENGEL, president of VESTAS, the company that is now the world's largest manufacturer of wind turbines—headquartered in Denmark, of course.

Speaking in August 2008, ENGEL noted that the company “has had thirty-five new competitors coming out of China in the past eighteen months, and not one out of the U.S.A.”<sup>2</sup>

\*I am not suggesting that either AKON or 50 CENT actually are THUGS, merely that they want to be seen as thugs.

More precisely, these men want you to know about their criminal background

—a criminal background that Akon, at least, appears to have deliberately inflated, exaggerating both his crimes and his time in prison.

Please see CHAPTER 7 for more on this point.

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That comment caught my attention.

Why aren't there any new companies making wind turbines here in the United States?

- After all, the U.S. economy is still more than four times the size of the Chinese economy.<sup>3</sup>
- And didn't the conventional wisdom just a few years ago maintain that even while China was conquering the world's manufacturing sector, America still led in the development of new ideas and innovation?

There's growing evidence that America has lost that edge.

- In 1980, less than thirty years ago,
  - the United States was the world's greatest creditor nation.
- Today we are by far the world's largest debtor.
- The great crisis we are facing, according to many experts, is a crisis of capital.
  - We are too much in debt.
  - We have a huge and growing trade deficit, currently running about \$60 billion a month, or \$2 billion a day:
  - that's two thousand million dollars every twenty-four hours.<sup>4</sup>

But I think the most important trade deficit we now face may not be in capital, but in ambition.

- At a 2008 conference in Brazil,
- business leaders explained why they are investing so much in countries such as
  - China,
  - India,
  - Brazil, and
  - Russia.
- It's not merely that these emerging markets are ECLIPSING the "dinosaurs" in the United States in terms of economic growth rates and other objective parameters.
- There is something else going on as well, something harder to measure, but more fundamental.
- ROGER AGNELLI is a senior executive at COMPANHIA VALE DO RIO DOCE (CVRD), a BRAZILIAN mining enterprise that is now the world's second-largest mining company.
- AGNELLI put it this way:
  - his company is Keen on China because
  - "that's where the ambition is."<sup>5</sup>

*Ambition.*

*Drive.*

*Determination.*

- Call it what you will, it is this characteristic more than any other that now distinguishes the emerging nations from the United States.
- The young men in
  - China,
  - India,
  - and Brazil
- seem to have this quality in abundance.
- Our young men do not.
- My hope is that this book might help, in some small way, to turn things around.

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