

“A Father’s Place Is in the School.” in Parent School: Simple Lessons from the Leading Experts on Being a Mom and Dad. Eds., J & L Biderman, NY: M. Evans and Company, Inc. (2002).  
By Aaron Kipnis, Ph.D. Author of *Knights Without Armor*; and *Angry Young Men: How Parents, Teacher and Counselors Can Help “Bad Boys” Become Good Men*.

Extreme acts of school violence have become a disturbing and persistent feature of the cultural landscape of twenty-first century America. Once largely thought of as an urban street gang-related problem, one in five, adolescent boys now owns a gun; even more have been threatened with one according to the Justice Department. Many suburban boys today have something in common with inner-city gang boys--a profound feeling of alienation and a perceived lack of protection from others who corrode their emotional self-esteem or threaten their safety.

Contrary to the widespread image of American boys as tough, independent, and relatively advantaged, they actually suffer the highest rates of violent trauma for an industrialized nation. In 1999, males were the majority of abused, neglected, and abandoned children. They were three out of four assault victims, homeless youth, and drug addicts, and four out of every five suicide and homicide victims. We also have more young men incarcerated in juvenile halls, jails, psychiatric hospitals, youth corrections and adult prisons and prisons than any other nation. Homicide is now the second-leading cause of death for American youth; ten times the youth homicide rate of Canada, fifteen times Australia’s, and twenty-eight times Germany’s.

Handguns kill thirteen children a day in the United States and thirteen people a year in Sweden. But guns alone are not the problem. Drugs, the media, video games, and rap can’t carry all the blame; Tougher laws and more prisons won't solve the crisis nor will ten commandments posted in “zero tolerance” schools expelling record numbers of boys today. As Jesse Jackson puts it, the problem isn’t that we have failed to make young men afraid enough. “The real problem is that our young people are not hopeful enough,”

Today, most school safety guidelines list behaviors, that are typical for at least a third of adolescent boys as predictive of students most at risk for violent outbreaks. Expulsions and suspensions for boys have skyrocketed to over two million per year. Because “bad boys” are generally referred to programs in which the staff usually has the lowest level of training, the poorest tools, and the most dilapidated facilities, our highest-risk students tend to become the least well cared for. Few teachers are trained or equipped to deal with boys who act out. Boys sense this. Teachers legitimately fear both personal injury and lawsuits for using excessive force. Yet the small incidents that lead to most fights, such as pushing, scuffles, name calling, and “mad dogging” (stare-downs), tend to settle down when a serious and capable adult male shows up in the immediate vicinity.

Recent research in social psychology increasingly confirms that one thing the majority of boys at risk have in common is an absent or abusive father. In the late 1980s at Arlington High in Indianapolis, students were so out of control that the school could no longer hold large events like dances. For years this school, where one third of the students came from fatherless homes, was a troubled dangerous place. Things began to change however, when a new principal, Jacqueline Greenwood simply asked for help. She told the fathers, “Come to the school anytime that you can and be with your kids. We need you to get involved.”

In response to this call, one student's mother, Mrs. Linda Wallace, said to her husband, "Those are big kids and no mother can yell at them and make them behave. But maybe a father could." She printed a T-shirt emblazoned with "Security Dad." Her husband, Anthony, saw looks of surprise the first night he showed up at a football jamboree wearing the shirt students smiled and waived: "Hi Mr. Wallace -- how are you doing?" Whenever students started to get unruly and he moved in their direction other students would say, "Hey, that's Lena's Dad. Be quiet. Sit down." When he asked them to move out of the aisles, they did so without a fuss.

His wife recalls, "He talked to them with respect and they listened. He treated them like they were his own kids. It was fantastic." After more fathers joined the Security Dads, the school was able to reinstitute events previously canceled out of fear of violence. Also, about two dozen fathers got together to patrol the school during classes to increase security for all students.

"What works is that father image," said Ron Cheney, another father who joined the group. "So we don't need to say very much; just being there is what counts. With a [police] officer they think, 'Hey, I must be trouble.' With us, they smile and say, 'Hey, what's up?' And we love it."

One student said, "It's much happier to have fathers around, rather than guards. Our dads are like real people. They don't intimidate us. Where parents are involved, our lives are a lot easier. It's like a family."

In 1997, the U.S. Department of Education found that better grades and behavior both result when men are more involved in school activities. The power of a father's presence to lift his children's academic performance transcends class, race, ethnicity, and his level of education. The rate of suspension, expulsion, and repeating grade levels is also lower for father-involved students than those for whom only the mother is involved. The success rate declines much further when neither parent is involved.

Over the years, through many consultations with couples and families, I have noted that fathering often complements mothering with slightly different attributes. Frequently, mothers seem more concerned with the emotional life, safety, and health of their children. Fathers often appear more focused on encouraging achievement, discipline, motor skills, and independence. Neither approach is better or worse. Together, they are a balanced parenting "meal" that better nurtures children. Of course, not all couples fit these tendencies, and sometimes when these differences are present, they create conflict between women and men vying for the preeminent approach to parenting. But for single parents of either gender, it's often tougher to balance a boy's needs for consistent discipline and fierce direction with tenderness, nurturing, and protection.

Children from fatherless homes account for: 63 percent of youth suicides, 70 percent of juveniles in state-operated institutions, 71 percent of all pregnant teenagers and high school dropouts, 85 percent of all youths in prisons, and 90 percent of all homeless and runaway children. Children who live with both biological parents have the lowest reported rates of maltreatment (3 percent). Divorced fathers with custody show slightly higher rates, and children living with single mothers, particularly those with a nonbiological male in their home, suffer the highest abuse rates (19 percent). Why do single fathers show lower rates of abuse and neglect of boys than single mothers? The generally better economic welfare of single fathers may partially account for this, since child poverty is also highly correlated with abuse. Children from families with annual incomes of less than \$15,000 report maltreatment most seven times more frequently than children from higher-income families. Single mothers with young children living below the

poverty level, together with alcoholic and drug-addicted parents of both sexes, have the greatest statistical risk of abusing or neglecting boys.

Even though research continues to document the essential importance of father involvement in children's academic achievement and emotional well-being, approximately 50 percent of mothers see no value in the father's continued contact with his children after a divorce. One study of 500 women showed that only 11 percent of mothers value their husband's input when it comes to handling problems with their kids. By comparison, on the same survey, 45 percent of teachers and doctors rated the input of fathers as important and 16 percent of close friends and relatives agreed.

In the same way that women want men to open doors to arenas where women have historically been excluded, men need women to assist them in moving into women's traditionally held domains. For example, in the past, because most fathers felt unwelcome in the delivery rooms of maternity hospitals, they were seldom present at the birth of their children. The prevalent myth of past eras was that they just didn't care. But when obstetricians' attitudes toward fathers started to change in the 1980s and fathers were welcomed, they showed up droves. Now more than 80 percent of married fathers are present at the birth of their children.

In the same way, when fathers feel welcome and invited into the schools, they fill a personal need to play a role in their children's lives from which they have historically felt excluded. In the wake of more schools' recognizing the value of father involvement, their numbers are creasing. In California, the Dads Club and Dads in Action are getting rave reviews from school officials. Nationally, Mad Dads and other such groups have similar positive impacts. Some schools provide a parents' lounge and other supports to encourage sustained school involvement from fathers. The fathers in these programs often report that their school involvement also improves relationships with their own children. Even the busiest executives somehow find a few hours a week to do their stint at school, and many do more.