

Are Boys in Crisis?

By Dr Justin Coulson

Something is happening with boys. You can feel it in the conversations parents are having, in the questions teachers are raising, in the data that keeps arriving from researchers and health departments. The question is whether we're willing to look at it clearly... and do something about it.

A recent feature in [Nature](#) put the question plainly: are boys in crisis, and is the manosphere playing a part?

The data the author reviewed pointed to boys falling behind in education globally, higher rates of injury and death by suicide, and growing mental health pressures on young men. The article's conclusion was careful but honest: it's important to understand the challenges facing all young people, even when those conversations feel uncomfortable, but boys are facing some unique challenges that mean the world feels hard for them right now.

In researching my new book, [Boys: Building Strong Young Men From the Inside Out](#), I found just how challenging things are for our boys and young men today.

- Boys are suspended from primary school at roughly six times the rate of girls (57 boys for every 10 girls)
- For every ten girls who complete a university degree, only 6.4 boys do.
- In 2024, 240 boys and young men under 25 died by suicide - that's five families a week being torn apart by a pain that is indescribable.

My friend, Bec Sparrow, suggested to me that "boys are hurting girls, they're hurting each other, and they're hurting themselves." Former US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said: "The data is actually quite clear - young men and boys are falling behind on many metrics."

One of the biggest challenges for our boys today? Identity.

They hear awful things about themselves everywhere they look. And in the absence of a compelling, healthy picture of what it means to be a man, boys are searching for one online.

When boys are told that masculinity is a problem to be managed rather than a strength to be developed, some of them will find someone who tells them otherwise. That's not a defence of unhealthy manosphere influencers but it is an explanation for why he has an audience.

So what's actually going on? Four domains keep surfacing in the research.

Education:

Boys are disengaging earlier and in greater numbers, and the downstream effects on employment, purpose, and identity are significant. Boys score lower on most, if not all academic measures. By Grade 9 they're a full year behind the girls in reading. One in eight boys is functionally illiterate at age 15. One in 5 students (mostly boys) leave school before the end of Year 12. Of Australia's 44 universities, only two have more men than women. A lack of educational success - fairly or unfairly - can make boys appear economically unviable to potential mates. They earn less, have fewer career prospects, and may experience social stigma too.

Mental health:

Boys are struggling, but in ways that often go unnoticed because they don't ask for help in the same way girls do. ADHD is the most diagnosed psychological challenge in primary school. Boys outnumber girls with ADHD diagnosis by *at least* two to one. Autism, it's a ratio of six boys to every girl. This affects their school experience, their social success (and to some extent their later economic outcomes downstream of school). In high school, mental health challenges can take a darker turn. I've already outlined the worst of that above with Australian youth suicide statistics.

Crime:

Boys are disproportionately both perpetrators and victims of violence. In fact, crime of all kinds hits and hurts boys most (with the exception of intimate partner and sexual violence), and is also perpetrated by boys and men most.

Identity:

in a culture that has rightly challenged outdated masculinity but hasn't offered much to replace it, many boys are rudderless. They need to know what it means to be a healthy man. And they need healthy male role models.

None of this means boys are beyond help. It means they need help - the right kind, delivered by people who understand what's actually going on.

Here is what I mean:

Healthy Masculinity means helping the people around you feel - and be - safer and stronger. That's the message they need to hear. Not toxic masculinity. That challenges their identity unhelpfully. Healthy masculinity is about adding value, being the one who sees a need and uses his strength to offer support and help. If we could drip feed that into boys brains every day, they'd get the message.

But to be a healthy man a boy needs to see a healthy man. That's where great role models come in.

Boys don't need the Internet to find someone to look up to. Most boys will acknowledge that their dad is their exemplar. When I ask them why, they tell me that "he teaches me stuff" and "he listens to me". And if Dad isn't in the picture, other good men who coach, teach, support, and show up in their lives can be wonderful supports.

Healthy masculinity and good men are what my new book, *Boys*, is built around. Not panic, and not politics. Just a clear-eyed look at what boys are facing, and a practical framework for the parents, teachers, and mentors who want to raise them well.

We need to stop looking at boys and accusing them of being 'the problem'. Instead, we need to show them a vision of healthy masculinity and help them see that they are 'the solution'.

If you have a son, or a student, or a young man in your life — this book is for you. '[Boys](#)' is available now wherever you buy your books.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. Justin travels all around the country, speaking at schools to students, educators and parents about wellbeing and relationships. He is also the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. Justin has written 11 books about families and parenting - with the latest about [raising boys](#) out now! For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.