

Build a Better Boy

What will inspire success and happiness in your son? **Give him a purpose.** Best-selling author **Michael Gurian** tells you how.

BY SEAN MITCHELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN R. FULTON JR.

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, social scientist and family therapist Michael Gurian has worked to raise the nation's consciousness about boys. His intent is for adults to better understand boys' inner lives, drives, and brain chemistry in order to help them reach healthy maturity.

Gurian is the author of *The Wonder of Boys*, about the social and emotional lives of boys, and *The Minds of Boys*, which examines why boys are not doing as well as girls in school and how to change that. Now he has published the third

book in this trilogy, *The Purpose of Boys* (Jossey-Bass, 2009, \$26.95), which addresses the ways in which parents, mentors, and teachers can help boys find a direction that will carry them to productive and honorable lives.

The father of two girls, Gurian argues that the importance of nurturing boys has been eclipsed in recent years by the legitimate attention given to better understanding girls. And he's trying to right this imbalance.

"Obama has started a President's council on girls and women," Gurian points out. "So did Bush and so did Clinton. There's no President's council on boys and men. We're still fighting the fight to get people to talk about boys. It's not an either-or."

WHY DO BOYS NEED A PURPOSE? Boys don't come into the world with an inner path of worth the way girls do. Girls know from a very early age that they can be mothers and have new life within them. Boys don't have that. So boys want to feel that they are needed in this world, and having a purpose fulfills that need.

IF YOU ASKED A LOT OF BOYS WHAT THEIR PURPOSE IN LIFE IS, THEY MIGHT ANSWER, "GETTING INTO A GOOD COLLEGE" OR "TO BE A GOOD PERSON" OR "TO MAKE A LOT OF MONEY." BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT YOU HAVE IN MIND, IS IT? I think that's OK. That's how purpose is initially interpreted. But we want that to be the beginning of a larger conversation that leads them to see how these goals are attached to their becoming a successful man who serves his family and community.

IS THIS THE SAME AS FINDING THEIR ROLE IN LIFE? I've done a lot of research on purpose development and hope I've found a way to talk about purpose and not get bogged down in negative connotations some people have about "male role." Purpose takes into account what we know from biology and the male brain to be crucial, which is that boys have to have a direction and a set of goals. "I'm going



'Boys need self-reflection because we don't spend as much of our time internally as girls do. We don't ruminate as much. We're more action oriented.'

to become that kind of man." That's what the word "role" used to do.

AT WHAT POINT IN A BOY'S DEVELOPMENT SHOULD HE BECOME AWARE THAT HE HAS A SENSE OF PURPOSE OR NEEDS A SENSE OF PURPOSE? By the time he's moving into adolescence, 10 to 12, he ought to be getting focused on his passions and the idea of service. These will form the bedrock of his future success as a man.

SOME OF YOUR ADVICE IS BASED ON SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH INTO BRAIN CHEMISTRY THAT IS PROVING DIFFERENCES IN THE WAY BOYS AND GIRLS THINK AND RELATE TO THE WORLD. WHAT SHOULD PARENTS AND MENTORS KNOW ABOUT THIS? It helps to know that girls produce more of a chemical called oxytocin than boys. This is a "tend and befriend" chemical that enhances bonding. It's different than testosterone, which is a "fight or flight" chemical fueling some of the physical aggression that is more pronounced in boys. Testosterone pushes boys into higher-risk situations, which is why they demand more directionality. Differences in brain chemistry have taught me that boys need to be on a quest during adolescence.

IN THE MEDIA, AGGRESSION OFTEN TRANSLATES TO SIMPLY KILLING BAD GUYS. HOW SHOULD WE BE EXPLAINING AGGRESSION TO BOYS? Well, aggression and violence are two different things. Aggression is natural to human beings and is a good thing. It's one system or one person seeking to control the other system or person. Women do it more verbally, more subtly. Men do it more physically.

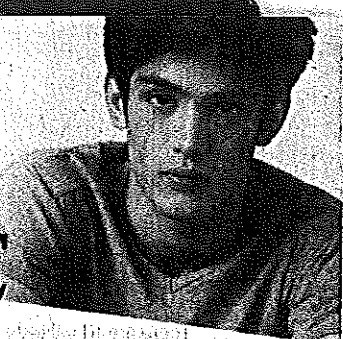
Violence, in the main, is a learned behavior—except for in self-defense. We know aggression has turned to violence when a person or system tries to destroy another person or system. A nation tries to destroy another nation, or I'm a boy

and, un-instigated, I try to beat the life out of this other kid. That's violence. What I'm arguing is that if we take this aggression that's natural and move it toward purpose, toward spiritual development and values-orientations, we're going to find less violence.

The media shouldn't be the ones that do it, though. The media have to simplify. They will tend to overplay violence. The good thing media do, I think, happens with heroes like Batman, Spider-Man, and

Superman. These stories are values oriented, and boys' ability to identify with these heroes surpasses their desire to go out and kill people. These stories help boys find their own sense of magic—through these movies, young boys try to figure out their own power.

But media have come a long way since I read "Superman" as a boy. Now there are video games like "Grand Theft Auto," which has no purpose development. To me, it's



The PURPOSE of boys

HELPING OUR SONS FIND MEANING, SIGNIFICANCE, AND DIRECTION IN THEIR LIVES



MICHAEL GURIAN



THE 10 VALUES

There are 10 values with discussion-starter questions and statements. Be creative when you think about three families teaching these crucial developmental values. Even if grandpa and grandma live far away, think about how the Internet and e-mail can be used to create more contact between them and your son. Think about schools, neighborhood groups, clubs, athletics, and individuals all around you whom you can enlist for help.

1 The Value of Legacy. What's in my name? What important legacy do I carry from my family's past into my own destiny?

2 The Value of Give and Take. Will my family teach me how to value giving as much as taking, so that I can always feel I am fairly earning my destiny in this world?

3 The Value of Failure. Will my family overprotect me, or will those who love me help me learn that failure is a crucial part of my destiny, for it is through challenge that I learn how to change and grow?

4 The Value of Independence. If I can do it myself, I hope people will let me—if I can't, I hope they'll teach me how to do so; my destiny will not fully grow in me unless I find my own power.

all about violence, misogyny, theft, breaking down the society. That stuff I'm begging parents to control.

They can't stop their kids from playing games at their friends' house, or maybe they have it in their own homes. But that must be a tiny part of their life because two hours of that a day, I think, has got to affect the brain of a 14-year-old.

So the media are a double-edged sword, and parents have got to take control. If the kid is living in your home, the PlayStation 3 is yours,

5 The Value of Identity. I was born with a certain core personality and set of assets, which I must "meet" and value in constantly new ways as I seek and grow—will my family and caregivers each help me understand who I am?

6 The Value of Self-Reflection. There are some crucial insights no one can give me, but I cannot gather them to myself either if I have not been taught by those who love me how to be silently engaged in thoughtful self-reflection.

7 The Value of Ethical Action. Everything that I do occurs within an ethical society; will my family help me learn how to advance my destiny through ethical actions that both fit and mold that society?

8 The Value of Self-Discipline. My anger, grief, sadness, and joy are all part

and parcel of who I am, but I need help managing and expressing them to the good, for my destiny can become stifled or even imprisoned if I cannot express and discipline my emotions.

9 The Value of Self-Doubt. I am human and imperfect—my destiny is not to be perfect; I need those who love me to love me unconditionally for who I am, but also teach me how to judge myself conditionally when I deserve critique.

10 The Value of Faith. Whatever higher power I have faith in, I must remember always that I cannot go it alone in this world—that to push myself toward freedom, goodness, and love, I need help learning trust, the humility of faith, and the importance of service in my destiny.
—M.G.

not his. So tell him how much he can play on it. And he has got to do his homework first and his chores—all the purpose development—first.

WHAT ABOUT THE MANY BOYS AND THEIR PARENTS WHO ARE UNAWARE OF THESE DANGERS? Ultimately, boys and girls need to be raised in a three-family system, which has to be run as much as possible by active, loving parents, but also includes protections for when parents aren't around.

A three-family system is 1) a

nuclear family unit that involves more than one caregiver, who, even if they're divorced, are united in helping this child. And 2) a second family that is some form of extended family and can include close friends, two or three mentors who are deeply committed to this boy's healthy development. Then 3) the third family could be a spiritual community, could be school, could be Scouting. It is the larger group in which the boy grows.

But into any of these three families can enter the negative influences we don't like. That's why we have to be sure the Internet only goes in the boy's room when the first and second families say the child is ready. Because remember, the people he meets on the Internet can become second or third family members. Do we want them that close? Parents have to decide.

BUT SETTING UP THIS THREE-FAMILY SYSTEM IS EASIER SAID THAN DONE, IS IT NOT? WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP IMPLEMENT IT? Some of it will happen naturally, and the rest we have to plan. A boy can come to a school and meet a mentor, but we can't always count on that. So we ask, "Can I put my son in a day care that is smaller, that allow for some real mentoring and not where he's one of 50 kids?" And I tell parents that soon after a child is born they should be thinking about a god-mother and godfather. That's a great old tradition. The first and second families make those decisions. Then, once a boy hits 6 or 7, they can put their son into Cub Scouts.

WHAT ARE SOME GOOD WAYS FOR ADULTS OR MENTORS TO COMMUNICATE THE DEEPER IDEAS OF PURPOSE TO BOYS? You can ask, "Do you have activities in your life that show that you're becoming a good and important man?" "What parts of yourself can you manage better so that you can

QUESTIONS OF PURPOSE ARE YOU A HERO, SON?

If your son would write down answers to the following questions over a month or so, and then share parts of those journal entries with you (or another trusted mentor), his own inner dialogue and struggle with issues of heroism and purpose could be engaged in powerful ways.

- ▶ What are your strengths as a young adult?
- ▶ When you think about the future, what excites you the most?
- ▶ When you think about the future, what scares you the most?
- ▶ What are the gifts you have inherited from your father? Your grandfathers?
- ▶ What are the gifts you have inherited from your mother? Your grandmothers?
- ▶ What are your core values? What beliefs are you most devoted to right now? Why?
- ▶ Who is helping you to master each talent you have? Who is helping you to move beyond each negative part of yourself?
- ▶ Do you need more help? What particular people do you wish you spent more time with?
- ▶ How are things going with girls, or with _____ (fill in the name of a friend here)? Do you need help from me or anyone else in understanding love? Do you have sexual questions to which you need answers? —M.G.

succeed?” “Who is relying on you now for help, and how are you helping them?” All the chapters in the book include 10 relevant questions parents and mentors can ask boys.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO BOYS NEED TO BE SELF-CONSCIOUSLY AWARE OF THE STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT YOU DISCUSS IN THE BOOK? I would say American boys don't get enough reflection time. They're often over-scheduled and don't

get much time for spiritual solitude. Boys need self-reflection time, even “boredom” time. What males have done since the beginning of time is spend a lot of time alone, thinking about things and reflecting on things. That's really missing in this generation. And that's scary because you develop purpose by reflecting on what has happened and saying, “How do I want to fit this last thing that happened into my identity as a young man?”

We should also provide adolescent males someone with whom they can speak about these reflections. In a religious community, it could be a priest, minister, rabbi. In a family, it could be dad and mom, or other mentors, or best friends.

Especially in the 10 to 15 age group, boys need to be alone sometimes, in the woods, unscheduled, just ruminating. And then they need to have trusted adults and friends to talk to about what they've been thinking. If they don't have these things, by the time they're 15 or before, some of our boys start to drift. They don't have an internal language for how to grow up.

WHAT HAPPENS TO BOYS WHO DON'T FIND A PURPOSE BY AGE 18 OR 21?

They may not succeed in their life's endeavor for a very long time. They may get into their 30s and not know what it is to be a man, to be a father, husband, and strong community member.

YOU TALK ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF A BOY UNDERSTANDING HIS LEGACY AND DESTINY BASED ON HIS FAMILY NAME AND HISTORY. The last two generations have thought, “Oh, I don't want to impose a destiny on my child. My child's a free spirit.” That's fine, but let the child become a free spirit, like, at 17, when it's developmentally appropriate. It's not developmentally appropriate for a younger boy to have no sense of where he came from and

where his loyalties might lie.

And at any age, we can start filling the minds of our sons with thoughts of destiny and thoughts of purpose, without abusively doing it. I'm not talking about saying: “You're the first-born. You're taking over the family business, even though you have no head for business.” I'm talking about at least filling the soul with these ideas so that when the kid is 17, he'll know that it's his right in the world to have a destiny and a purpose. And then he'll find whatever is his.

The urgency for boys is that they don't ruminate and reflect as much as girls do. They don't set up coherent bonding systems as much as girls do. We have to help them, in all three families.

THE MENTORS' RESPONSIBILITIES

As you mentor this boy, keep referring back to the list of rite-of-passage elements that I present in this book. See which of the following points you can and are helping with.

- ▶ Are you presenting the boy with challenges?
- ▶ Are you listening to him?
- ▶ Are you teaching him the tools of work and life that you know?
- ▶ Are you letting him feel, at times, that he's teaching you as much as you are teaching him?
- ▶ Are you helping him understand what real power is?
- ▶ Are you helping him face failure successfully?
- ▶ Are you doing fun activities with him and working substance and conversation into them?
- ▶ Are you asking him questions about who he is?
- ▶ Are you helping him understand how a man handles emotions?
- ▶ Are you helping him, by good example, understand how to treat girls and women? —M.G.

Boys want to feel that they are needed in this world, and having a purpose fulfills that need.

BUT WE'VE OFTEN HEARD THAT BOYS LEARN TO BOND AND WORK TOGETHER THROUGH SPORTS AND TEAMS IN WAYS THAT GIRLS HAVEN'T HAD ACCESS TO UNTIL RECENTLY. It's true that girls don't naturally gravitate to as many competitive activities. So when they get in the workplace, they may not be as well set up for the naked competition of a bank or stock brokerage. And it's true that males are more driven to competitiveness and develop more relationships through competition.

But that doesn't mean that boys and men have necessarily thought about why. And at some point sports are not enough. Most guys, at 18, are done with sports because most of them don't get sports scholarships to college. And that's the point in their lives where they should be asking, "Why am I competing?"

I should be competing so that I'm better at caring for my community and my family. From early on, we need to direct male competition toward service.

WE'VE HEARD A LOT ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM, BUT YOU WRITE THAT SELF-ESTEEM SHOULD NOT BE CONFERRED AUTOMATICALLY ON BOYS. It has to be earned. And studies show that boys, after a certain age, don't trust blanket praise. They want praise based on their achievement. It's a little different with girls. Girls are so verbal, and their oxytocin level is so high, that if you say to a girl, "You're great! Great job!" that has a different effect on the female brain than the male brain. It immediately stimulates oxytocin,



which is a bonding chemical.

With sons, that doesn't work as well, in general. They don't get the same surge. If we spend a lot of time praising boys for nothing, we can end up under-motivating them. They figure, "Why should I achieve? I'm going to get praised no matter what I do." My research shows that praise for achievement is one key to motivating boys.

MANY PARENTS FEAR THE ONSET OF ADOLESCENCE AS A DIFFICULT TIME, BUT YOU CHOOSE TO CELEBRATE IT. WHY? Adolescence is opportunity. It's not just about rebellion. It's about individuation. And it's our job to create a safety zone for a boy to move through, make his mistakes, and come out the other side. †

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A MICHAEL GURIAN LIBRARY

The Wonder of Boys (Tarcher/Putnam, 1997) This book compels parents, teachers, and mentors to encourage rather than stifle effective channeling of competition and aggression. To accomplish this, Gurian explains, a boy needs several support groups around him: a primary and extended family, effective mentors, and support from his school and community.



A Fine Young Man (Tarcher/Putnam, 1998) Gurian's *A Fine Young Man* focuses on the difficult ages of 10 to 20 to help parents, teachers, and mentors shepherd boys toward adulthood. This second decade of life, Gurian contends, is a "crucial passage" as a young man's body, morality, and integrity develop.

The Good Son (Tarcher/Putnam, 1999) If adolescence is a moral and emotional maze, *The Good Son* can be a parent or mentor's map. Gurian has divided this book into a section for each stage of a boy's life—from birth until age 18 and beyond. The result is a guide to helping young men express emotion, develop moral literacy, and respect structure and rules.



What Stories Does My Son Need? (Tarcher/Putnam, 2000) Rather than advocating total isolation from mass media, Gurian embraces it by providing parents with an annotated list of books and movies that have great stories for boys and young men. He also includes discussion points with each listing to coach

parents on making the book or movie a character-shaping experience.

The Minds of Boys (Jossey-Bass, 2005) Boys receive up to 70 percent of all the D's and F's given in school, and they represent 80 percent of all high-school dropouts. In spite of this trend, Gurian's *The Minds of Boys* contends that young men can learn very effectively if parents and teachers just take the time to better understand their brains.

