

The *Boy Crisis* as an Infant Mental Health Issue

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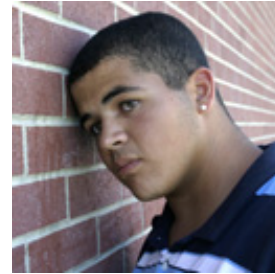
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The Boy Crisis as an Infant Mental Health Issue

Outline

- I. Boy crisis as usually presented
- II. Situating the boy crisis in attachment theory in infancy
- III. Boys' slower developmental timetable
- IV. Boys' unique relationship to mother
- V. Boys' predilection for externalizing behaviors
- VI. Concluding comments, suggestions for change

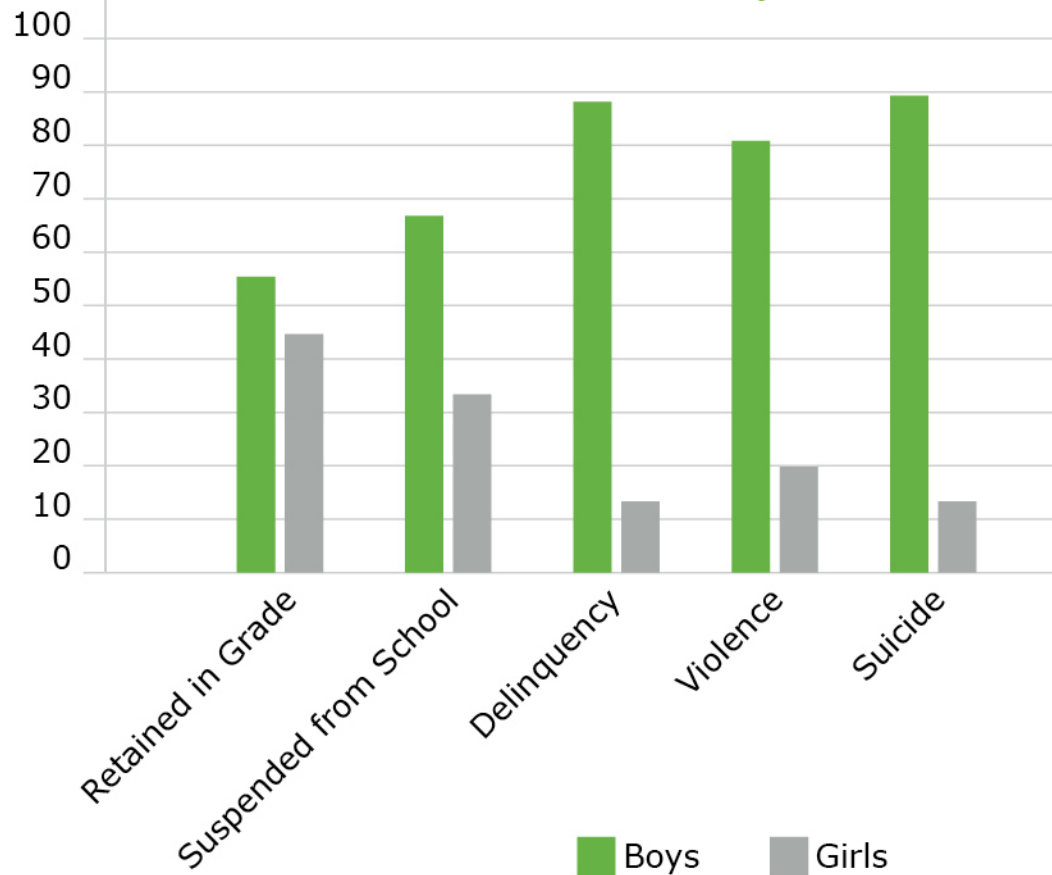




I. The Boy Crisis as Usually Presented



Adolescent Boys— School, Criminal Activity, & Suicide



Retained in Grade: For every 100 girls 15 to 17 years enrolled below modal grade there are 130 boys enrolled below modal grade. Mortenson (2011, March).

Suspended from School: For every 100 girls suspended from public elementary and secondary schools 215 boys are suspended. Mortenson (2011, March).

Delinquency: Sickmund, M., Sladky, T.J., Kang, W., and Puzzanchera, C. (2011).

Violence: Juvenile arrest rates for violent crime index offenses by sex, 2009. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (October 16, 2011). http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/crime/JAR_Display.asp?ID=qa05231.

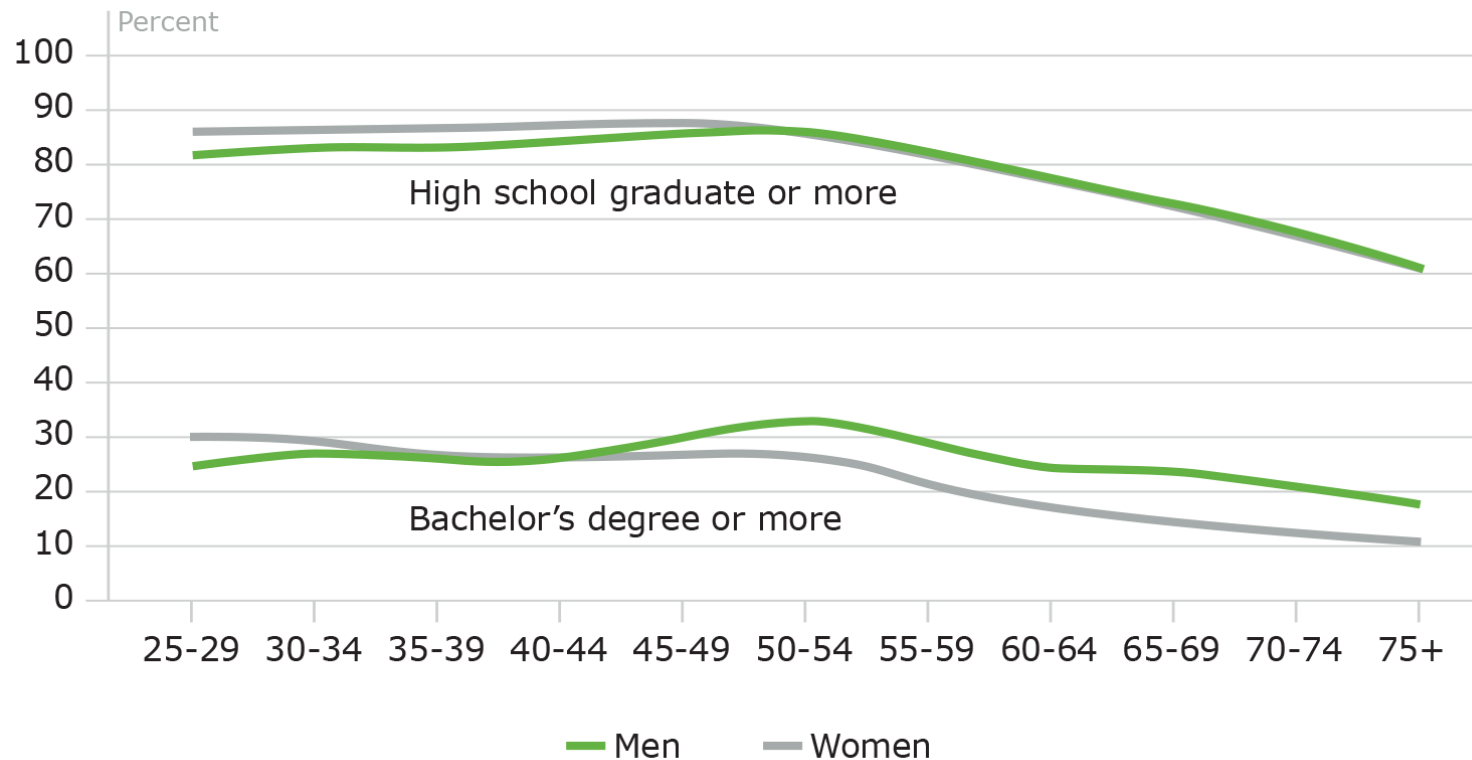
Suicide: CDC, Mental Health Surveillance Among Children-United States, 2005-2011, 9-18 years of age.



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Males Are Doing Worse Educationally Than Previous Cohorts of Males

Differences in Educational Attainment by Sex and Age: 2000
US Census Bureau, Census 2000



Mental Health Surveillance Among Children in the United States, 2005-2011, CDC

“Boys were more likely than girls to have most of the disorders”

Boy-predominant disorders

- ADHD
- Behavioral & Conduct Problems
- Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Anxiety
- Tourette Syndrome
- Cigarette Dependence
- Suicide

Girl-predominant disorders

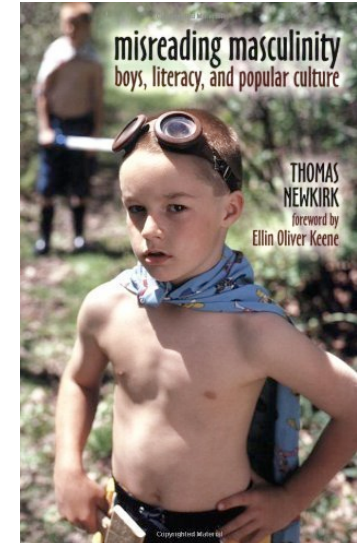
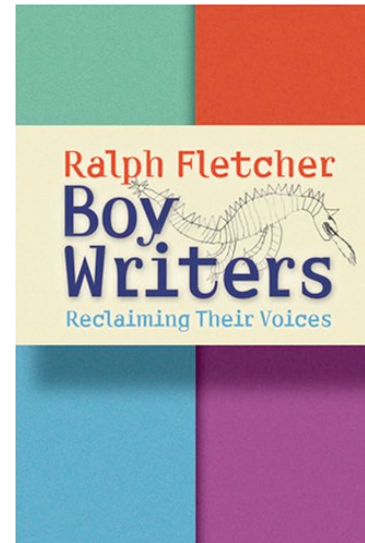
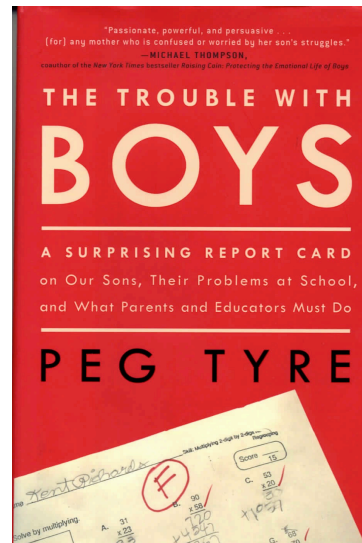
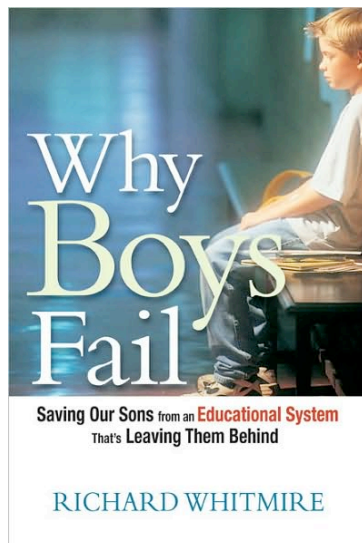
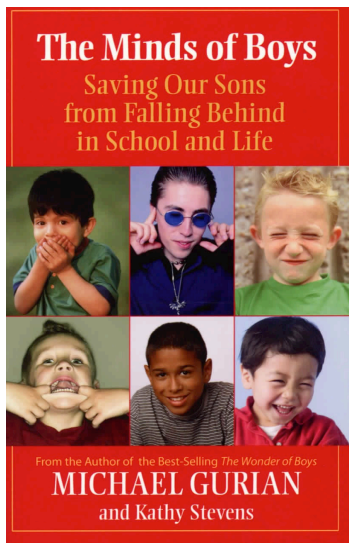
- Alcohol Use Disorder
- Depression in Adolescence

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. (2013). *Mental health surveillance among children—United States, 2005-2011*. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/su6202a1.htm?s_cid=su6202a1w

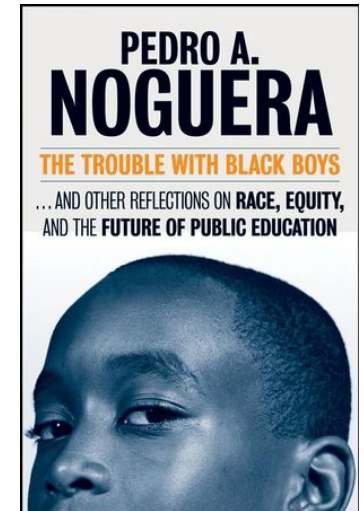
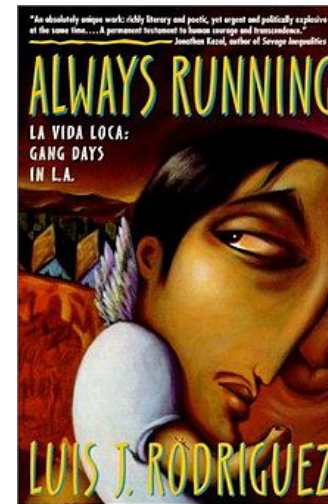
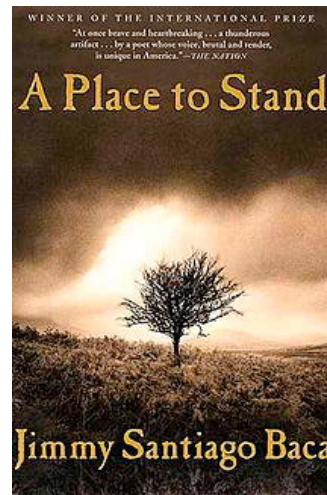
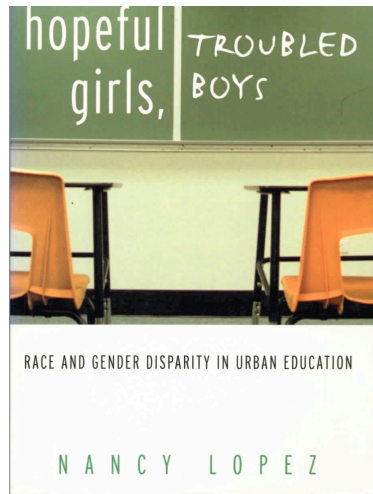
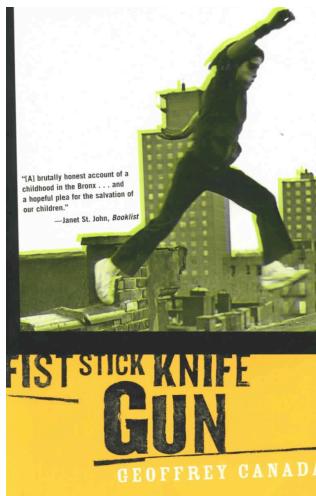


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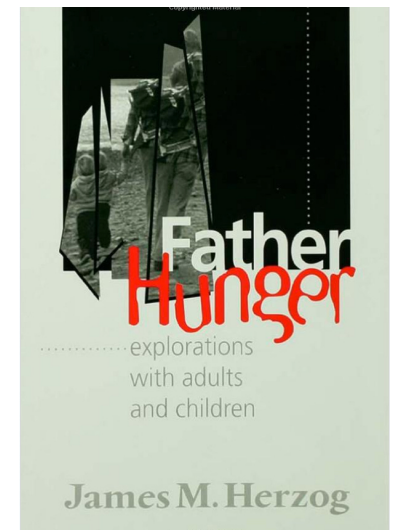
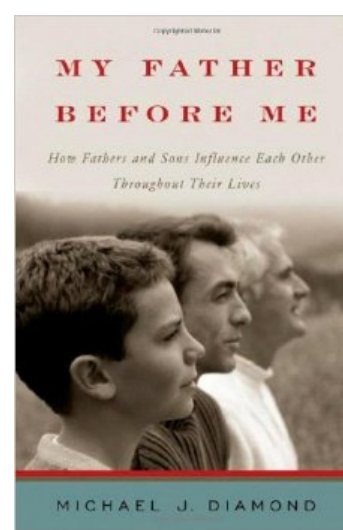
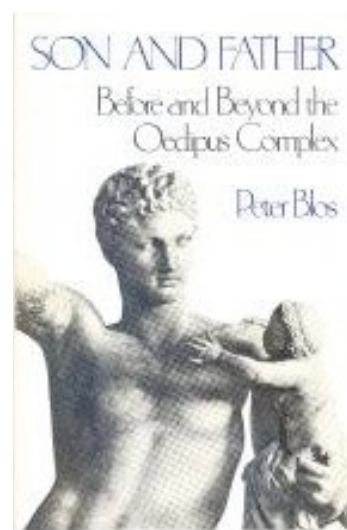
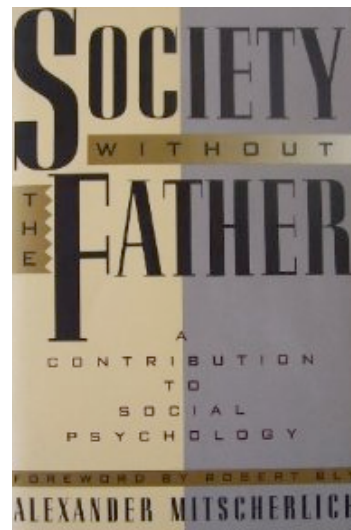
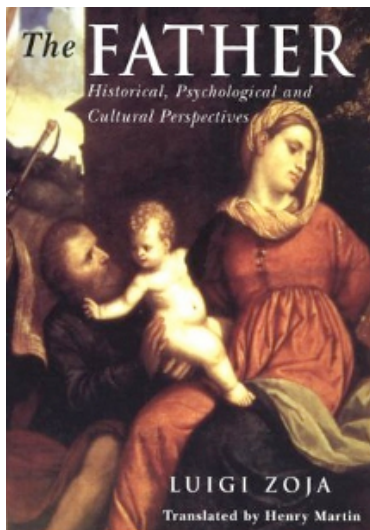
Education as the Problem



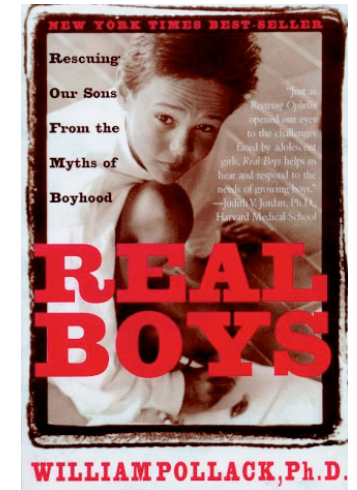
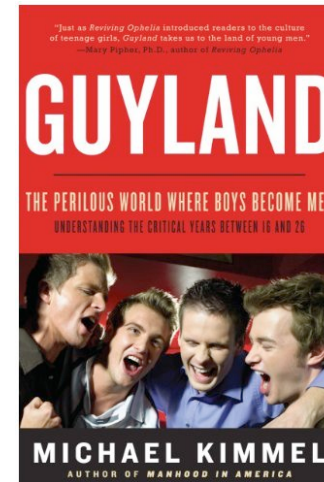
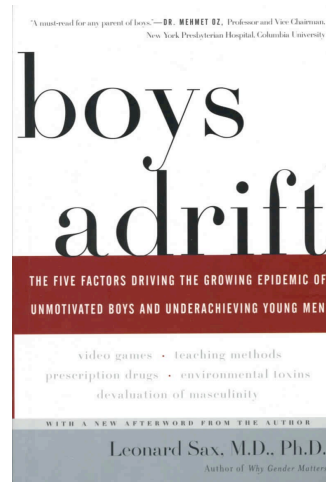
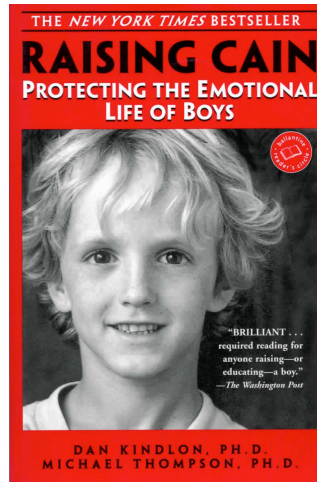
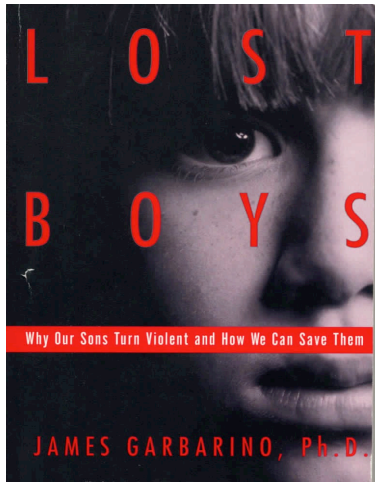
Racism as the Problem



Absent (and Present) Fathers as the Problem

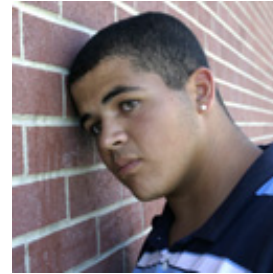
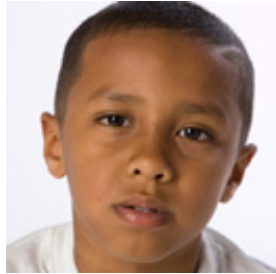


Boys' Socialization as the Problem



- *Problem:* Most of these diagnoses begin too late; problematic behaviors are already well established and hard to change.





II. Situating the Boy Crisis in Attachment Theory in Infancy





The Importance of the First Years

The quality of early attachment to the primary caregiver stood out, like the key in which an otherwise complicated piece of music is played, imbuing the personality of many children with a characteristic inflection that is present from movement to movement.

Karen, R. (1995). *Becoming attached*. P. 247

Past experience and former patterns of adaptation are never erased; They are always part of an increasingly elaborated structure.

Sroufe, et al (2005). *The Development of the person*. P.221

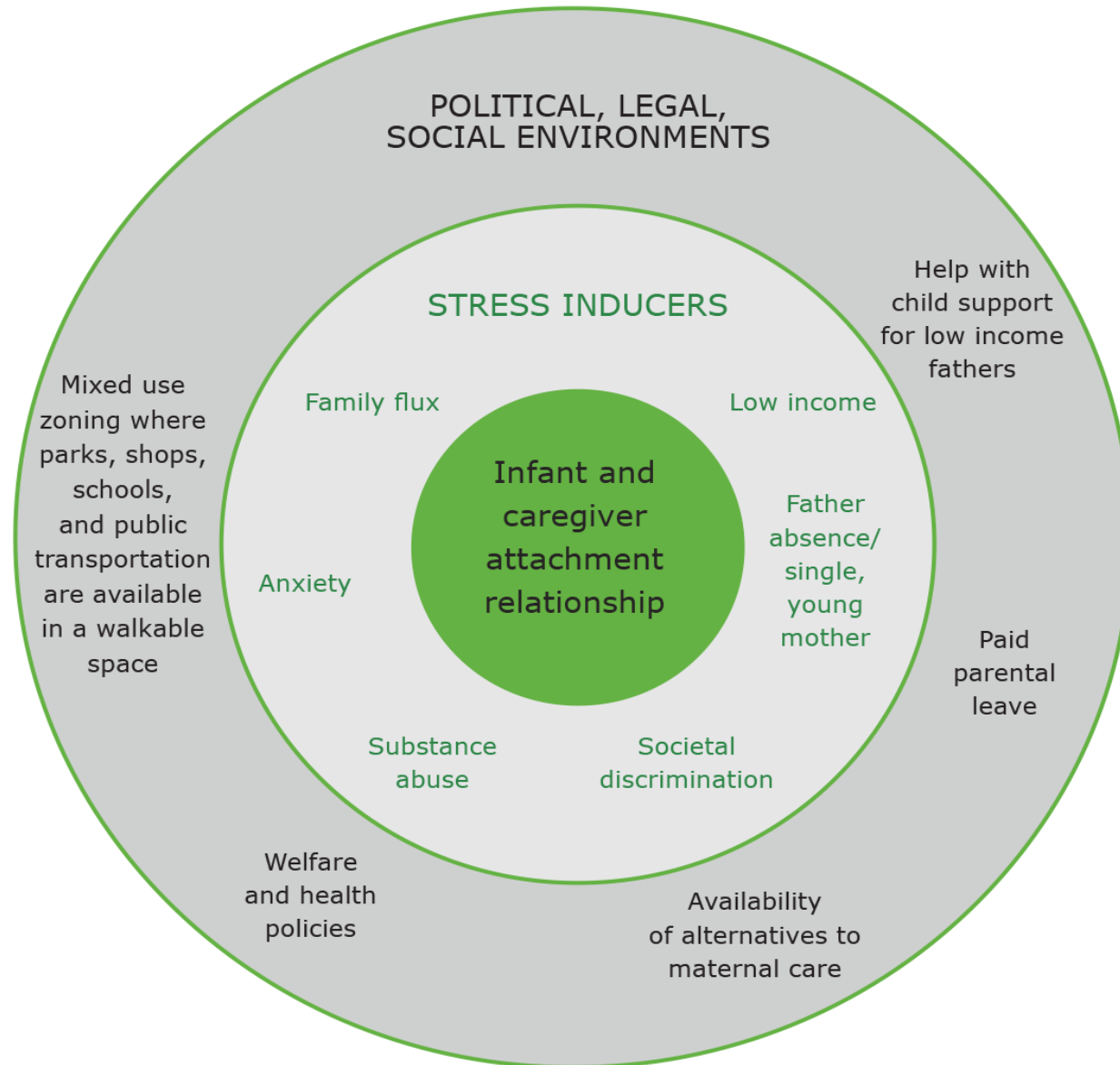
real relationships of the earliest stages of life indelibly shape our survival functions in basic ways, and . . . for the rest of the life span . . . lie at the center of the human experience.

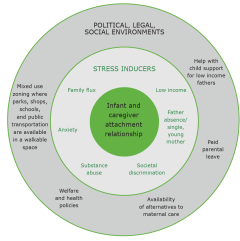
Schore & Schore, 2007, *Modern attachment theory*, p. 10



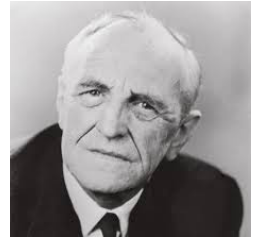
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The Psyche and The Social





What Happens in the Center: The Development of Self-Identity



Donald Winnicott

- A process of internalization
- A process of transmutation between child and mother
- With mirroring, psyche takes up residence as internal structure

Winnicott, D. W. (1971/2004). *Playing and Reality*. Norfolk, UK: Runner-Routledge, Ltd.

Peter Fonagy

- “This mirroring is necessary for infants to internalize the mother’s expression as a representation of their own experience of sadness and this assists in the organization of their emotional response.”

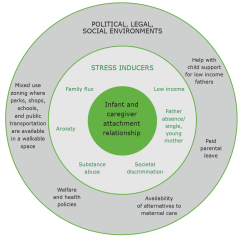
Fonagy, P., Luyten, P., and Strathearn, L. (2011). Borderline personality disorder, mentalization, and the neurobiology of attachment. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 32(2): 47-69.



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Little Known Fact About Primates





After 50 years of research, we know that the more secure children are, the more they are able to:

- Enjoy more happiness with parents
- Feel less anger at their parents
- Turn to their parents for help when in trouble
- Solve problems on their own
- Get along better with friends
- Have lasting friendships
- Solve problems with friends
- Have better relationships with brothers and sisters
- Have higher self-esteem
- Trust that good things will come their way
- Trust the people they love
- Know that most problems will have an answer

Source: Circle of Security



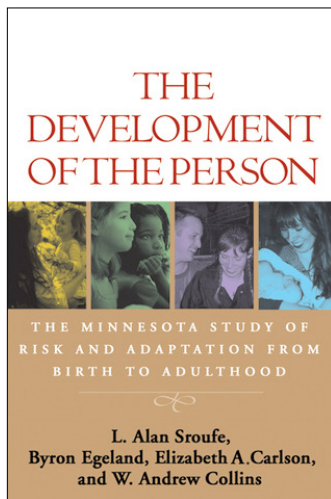
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The Development of the Person:

The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation

Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005

“We studied 180 children born into poverty in order to track the course of their lives.”



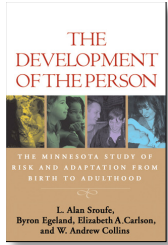
Assessments:

- Last Trimester
- Birth
- 3 months
- 6 months
- 9 months
- 12 months
- 18 months
- 24 months
- 30 months
- 40 months
- 48 months
- 54 months
- Preschool
- 64 months
- Kindergarten
- First grade
- Second grade
- Third grade
- Sixth grade
- Seventh grade
- 16 years
- 17 ½ years
- 19 years
- 23 years

Source: Circle of Security



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How the Infant's Past Might Affect the Present: A Continuum

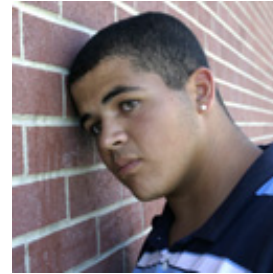
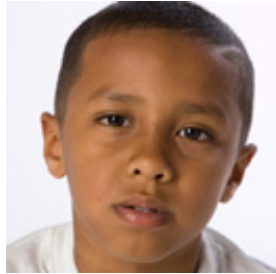
At One End: A Good Outcome

"If caregivers have been consistently responsive, then infants evolve expectations that caregivers (and, by generalization, others) will be so in the future" (36).

At Another End: A Bad Outcome

Disturbance is result of failures by significant adults to respond appropriately to a young child's normal needs for closeness to caregivers and fears of separation in threatening situations. Most psychopathology entails emotional dysregulation or distorted personal relationships.

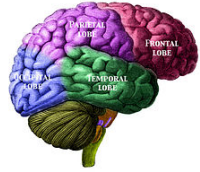




III. Boys' Slower Developmental Timetable

Under conditions of misattuned caregiving, boys will be more likely to suffer developmentally in ways that might manifest in childhood and adolescence as part of the boy crisis





I. The Slower Developmental Timetables of Boys



- Boys may be 20 months behind girls in frontal lobe development where control resides for decision-making, insight, judgment, and emotional inhibition

Zahn-Waxler, Shirtcliff, and Marceau. (2008). *Disorders of Childhood and Adolescence: Gender and Psychopathology*.

- Adolescent girls tend to reach biologically defined developmental milestones up to two years ahead of adolescent boys.

World Health Organization. (2014). *Health for the world's adolescents: A second chance in the second decade*.



The Slower Developmental Timetables of Boys



FAQs on the Brain:

- Sex differences in the brain are reflected in the somewhat different developmental timetables of girls and boys.
- By most measures of sensory and cognitive development, girls are slightly more advanced.
- Girl babies also tend to be somewhat more socially-attuned and they generally lead boys in the emergence of fine motor and language skills.”

<http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/brain-development/faqs-on-the-brain.html>



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Viability-Vulnerability Tradeoff

- The male fetus' larger size requires that more resources go into growth in males, leaving less available for other purposes. This may account for a limited male ability to adjust to adversity both before and after birth.
- A developmental/evolutionary strategy related to the fact that at conception and at birth, the number of males exceeds the number of females, but males exposed to early adversity suffer a much higher risk, than females, of fetal and infant morbidity and mortality. In contrast, female infants have been observed to have greater and more variable behavioral and biological repertoires that aid in their survival during the first years.
- Sandman, Glynn, and Davis (2013)



Boys' Early Physical Vulnerability

- Prenatal: Boys more likely to be born prematurely. Boys are larger and more resources go into their growth
- 105 boys to 100 girls are born
- Perinatal period: boys more vulnerable to birth trauma (intrauterine hypoxia, birth asphyxia, respiratory distress syndrome, neonatal tetanus)
- Infancy: boys more vulnerable to congenital anomalies, infectious diseases
- Childhood: Boys have higher mortality rates than girls during childhood
- In 2000s, the only countries where female mortality rates were higher than males were India and China—not naturally caused.
- Sawyer, C. C. (2012). Child mortality estimation: sex differences in childhood mortality rates since the 1970s. *PLOS/Medicine*, 9 DOI 101371/journal.pmed.1001287.



Boys' Early Physical Vulnerability

Greater Incidence for Boys

Mortality

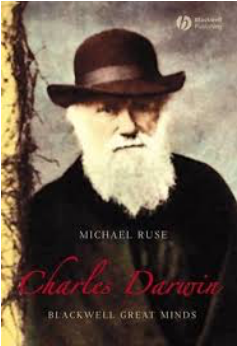
- Diarrheal diseases
- Measles
- Diphtheria
- Tuberculosis
- Pneumonia
- Syphilis
- Respiratory disease syndrome
- Hemorrhages
- Birth Injuries
- Sudden Infant Death Syndrome
- Infectious diseases
- Chronic lung disease
- Malnutrition
- Immunizations
- Accidents

Morbidity

- Rickets
- Meningitis
- Septicemia
- Enterovirus
- Acute lower respiratory disease
- Malnutrition
- Autism
- ADHD
- ADD
- Dyslexia
- High activity levels
- Higher irritability
- Self-regulatory problems

Sources: Wells, J. C. K. (2000). Natural selection and sex differences in morbidity and mortality in early life. *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 202, 65-76 & Fitzgerald, H. (2014). What is known about outcomes for boys in very early childhood. Presentation at Zero to Three NTI, December 13, 2015.





Evolutionary Psychology

- In their mating, males engage more in same-sex competition for which they require more developmental time and effort than females. This requires not only developing strength but also learning fighting ability, social competence, and courting displays.
- Del Giudice (2009)



Testosterone?

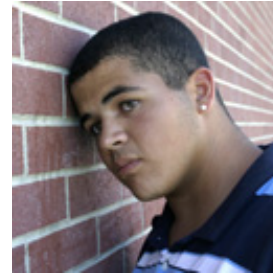
Several theorists of psychological development speculate that boy's slower emotional growth may be caused by pre-natal exposure to testosterone (Baron-Cohen, 2003; Geary, 2010, pp. 366-367).



Conclusions Thus Far

1. Boys are both emotionally and physically *differently* vulnerable to misattuned caregiving in the early years due to their slower developmental timetable
2. All else being equal, under misattuned caregiving boys will be less likely to develop a sense of self, an ability to self-regulate
3. Affected boys will likely enter preschool and later educational institutions behind their peers with greater non-cognitive and cognitive learning problems

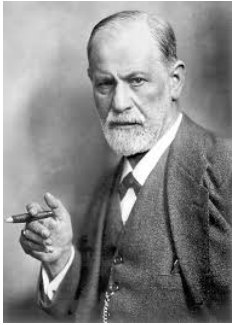




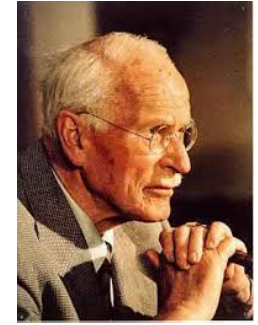
IV. Boys and Their Mothers

Is the mother-son relationship more susceptible, or at least differently susceptible, to attachment disorder than the mother-daughter relationship under conditions of maternal depression, unresponsive parenting, and deprived environments?





The Views from Psychoanalytic Practice



Findings around differentness for boys and men, positing a more complicated movement forward from earliest childhood.

- **Primordial Vulnerability of Boys**—Michael Diamond.

A boy's early pre-conscious awareness of his mother's otherness can lead to an alienation from her which is more disruptive for him than for his sister.

(2015). The Elusiveness of masculinity: Primordial vulnerability, lack, and the challenges of male development. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 84(1):47-102

- **Puer-Narcissus Bridge Built by Males**—Phil Goss.

“The male brain may have evolved a more rigid and therefore more fragile range of response to deep relational disruption, particularly with regard to the mother because of deep uncertainties set up the greater dependency for the little boy on the erotic bond . . . to her”

(2011). *Men, women and relationships: A post-Jungian approach*. New York, NY: Routledge



Empirical Research

Boys and Their Mothers: Several (of many) Views

Similarity Bias: Female infant is more predisposed to sensitive intersubjective communication, empathy, and caring behavior. An infant girl and mother may understand one another better than boy and mother

Hatzinikolaou, K. and Murray, Lynne. (2010). Infant sensitivity to negative maternal emotional shifts: Effects of infant sex, maternal postnatal depression, and interactive style. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 31(5): 591-610.

Maternal Depression and Boys: Mothers were more negative with their sons than with their daughters. Sons were less able to use self-comforting strategies to regulate affective states than female infants.

Tronick, E. and Reck, C. (2009). Infants of depressed mothers. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 17:1, 147-156.

Disorganization and Boys: Male infants were over-represented in future disorganized infants. Male infants showed more disorganized conflict behavior and avoidance when mothers showed high levels of frightening or withdrawing behavior in the strange situation.

Beebe, B. & Lachmann, F.N. (2014). *The origins of attachment: Infant research and adult treatment*.



“Boys are more vulnerable to the effects of maternal interaction difficulties”

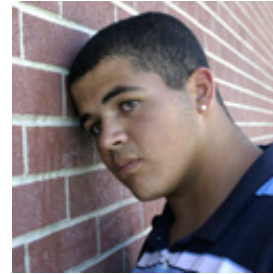
- In a study by Lynne Murray, Adriane Arteche, Pasco Fearon, Sarah Halligan, Tim Croudace, and Peter Cooper (2010) demonstrating the relationship between the experience of **maternal depression** in infancy and **low academic performance in adolescence**.
- Found a connection between postnatal maternal depression and poorer cognitive functioning **for boys, but not girls**, in infancy and early childhood.
- In adolescence, boys, who grew up with depressed mothers, did significantly worse on standardized testing for secondary students.
- The authors note that maternal depression in infancy appears to have adverse effects on male infants’ cognitive functioning that seems to persist through development, concluding that “boys are more vulnerable to the effects of maternal interaction difficulties” (p. 1157).



Conclusions Thus Far

1. There seems to be a qualitatively different relationship between boys and mothers than between girls and mothers
2. All else being equal, under misattuned caregiving boys will be less likely to develop a sense of self, an ability to self-regulate
3. Affected boys will likely enter preschool and later educational institutions behind their peers with greater non-cognitive and cognitive learning problems





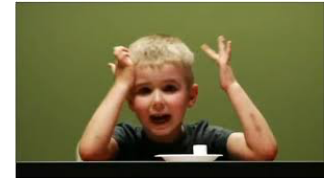
V. Boys' Predilection for Externalizing Behaviors

Are boys more likely to engage in aggressive, antisocial, rule-breaking behaviors when raised under conditions of misattuned caregiving?





Some Examples & Studies about Boys and Externalizing



- A study of 1,364 children in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development study found a significant relationship between insecure/disorganized attachment in early childhood and elementary school behavior problems for boys, but not girls. (Fearon & Belsky, 2011)
- In Dutch study, poor performance on tests of executive function at four years was more likely for boys, but not girls, when maternal sensitivity tested low 2-3 years earlier. Boys who most act out their frustration are those who often suffer from insensitive caregiving. (Mileva-Seitz, et al, 2015)
- Disorganized pattern of fight or flight is more likely to be seen in boys in the Strange Situation. (David & Lyons-Ruth, 2005)
- In *The Marshmallow Test* by Walter Mischel (2014), female preschoolers were able to wait significantly longer than boys before eating. The girls were more likely to receive the reward of an additional marshmallow.
- 25 year Minnesota Study concluded: psychosocial risks may push girls toward internalizing problems and boys toward externalizing problems. (Sroufe, et al, 2005)



Externalizing & Sexual Selection Theory

Males have evolved with less behavioral inhibition than females, perhaps because the consequences of indiscriminate pregnancy are much less severe for a man than a woman.



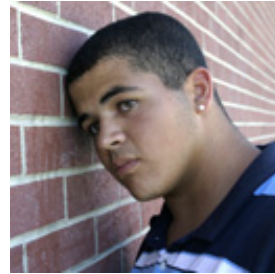
By way of concluding . . .

“We know from the literature on juvenile delinquency that boys commit many more crimes than girls, but there is no persuasive explanation for this phenomenon. Our research indicates that gender differences in infancy may already set the stage for this differential rate. The explanation, however, is not simply that boys are more aggressive than girls. Rather, boys have greater difficulty controlling their emotional reactions, and because of this difficulty they are more likely than girls to fail to accomplish their goals.”

Tronick, E. and Reck, C. (2009). Infants of depressed mothers. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, 17:1, (p. 154).



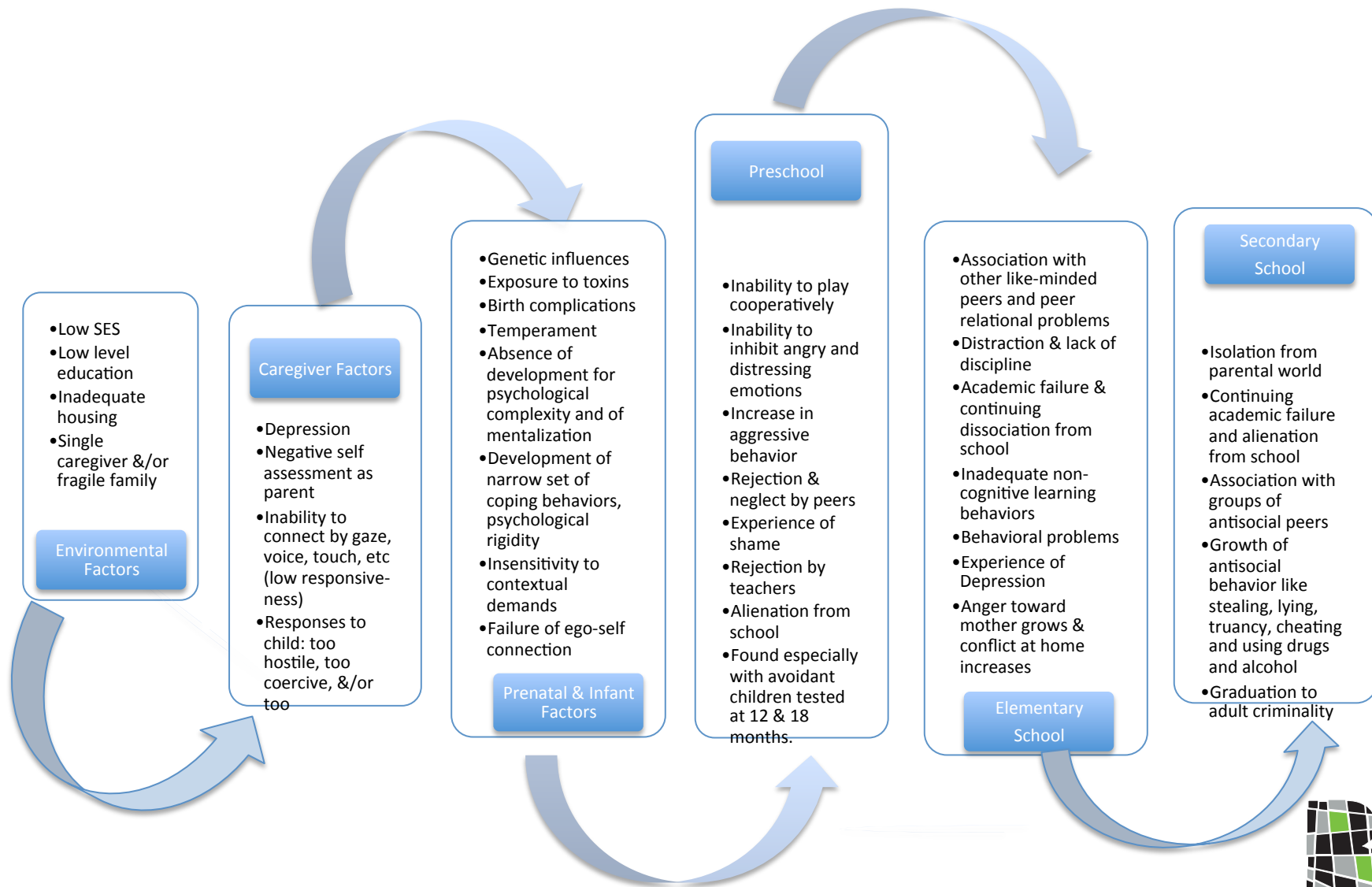
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VI. Concluding Comments



Hypothetical Pathways



What Are the Implications for Future Work of Infant Boys' Greater Vulnerability?

Greater efforts, like this conference, focused on the early years to understand why so many boys are having these *boy crisis* problems—more research, more attention to the 0-3 basis of boys' uniqueness so that changes may follow in:

- Educating personnel (home visitors, nurses) on the unique problems that caregivers and boys may encounter related to boys' different developmental timetable, relationship with mother, and externalization.
- Small classes in parenting with strong hands-on component (like Circle of Security) specifically for parents of boys.
- Single sex preschools for boys dismissed from regular preschools, including assistance for parents of troubled preschool boys.



Thank you



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