

THE PROBLEM WITH BOYS ...

We hear a lot of negative things about young people today, particularly boys. We worry about binge drinking, anti-social behaviour, gang culture, gun and knife crime. Does this mean that Britain is broken? Is the fabric of our society falling apart?

No. Britain is not broken, and to suggest otherwise is scaremongering. Today, most citizens are less likely to be the victims of crime than in the 1990s – unless, that is, they are young males who, regardless of era, are always most at risk.

The problem of young men behaving badly is as old as the hills: the Greeks and the Romans bemoaned the lack of respect of their young. There is nothing new about gang culture – sixteenth century Romeo and Juliet and 1950's West Side Story make that plain. Some may have fond memories of teddy boys, mods and rockers, and punks; but each was a cause of concern at the time.

So, the problem with boys is not unique to this time or this country. Nonetheless, it is worth exploring where we are, how we got here and what we can do about it.

Let's start with education.

Today, girls are outperforming boys at every stage in school. In the mid-1980s there was less than one percentage point between the numbers of boys and girls obtaining five GCSEs at grade C or above. By 2000 the gap had grown to 10%. The law of unintended consequences was in play: the drive for equal opportunities for girls, the introduction of the National Curriculum and the increase in coursework resulted in education that was less boy-friendly.

Add to this the equally well-intended introduction of SATS, league tables and OFSTED, and the pressure on teachers means that many choose the safe middle ground rather than risk being creative.

This dry educational diet has switched off many boys. Thankfully, schools have begun to address this issue, and the gap between boys and girls at GCSE is slowly narrowing: the latest figures for 2008 show it to be below eight per cent.

But, it is not only at school that characteristics such as physicality, risk-taking, humour and spontaneity are unwelcome. Outside of school adults seem to view boys as a problem: younger boys are often seen as a nuisance; teenage boys are seen as a threat. It is these kinds of attitudes that alienate boys and push them towards the very behaviours we fear.

When we ask both young and old what they want from each other, we find a mirror image: adults want to be treated with more respect; young people want to be treated with more respect. To escape a stalemate, adults have to make the first move. The best way to teach young people respect is to model it – adults who show respect to young people are usually treated respectfully in return, and are in a strong position to expect and demand a similar standard of behaviour from the young.

There are other things we can do to encourage boys to feel part of the community. We need to get to know the children in our neighbourhood, and their parents, so that we have a relationship with them as they grow up. We need to walk, rather than use the car, and engage with young people when we come across them on the street. We want young people to be courteous, so we need to model the behaviour we desire – acknowledging them by smiling or saying "Hello", using "Excuse me" if we need to pass and thanking them when they step aside.

Most men have little idea of the enormous effect they can have on boys. I have noticed that when a man stops and talks to boys – acknowledges them in the street, or stops to banter about sport – they lap up every word and value every minute. A man who is prepared to pass the time of day with boys becomes one of their models for manhood.

Most changes start with small steps. Everyone in their own community – the area they know and understand best – can apply these ideas. Make use of structures that are already there. Encourage people to set up a youth club in the local hall, gym or community centre. Make money available to support such initiatives. Extend the brief of Neighbourhood Watch coordinators to positively engage with the youngsters in their street.

By demonstrating to boys that they matter, we draw them into the community; by showing them respect, we encourage an attitude of respect in them. This is not just about making neighbourhoods safer: these young men are tomorrow's husbands and fathers – the more we affect boys positively today, the more stable and healthy our society will be tomorrow.

Britain is not broken; it just needs intelligent maintenance, designed for society as it is today and not some imaginary ideal of the past.

Lucinda Neall is the author of *About Our Boys: a practical guide to bringing out the best in boys*