Introduction

Even before our son Xander turned five, my husband and I fretted about finding a good school for him. Our concerns extended beyond the fact that good schools are few and hard to get into in San Francisco, where we live. Our main concern was about whether we would be able to find a school that was a good fit for him, given that he is both particularly sensitive and exceptionally bright.

In pre-school, because he preferred calm, quiet activities and could feel shy at times, Xander tended to play alone. As he generally kept to himself and was rarely if ever disruptive, he was easily overlooked by his teachers, who needed to focus on kids who required more attention. But it wasn’t until our “sensitive boy” was ready for elementary school that our troubles really began.

We tried a public school for one year, starting when Xander turned five. Although he had a good teacher and the school did the best it could with what resources it had, the curriculum was not challenging enough for Xander, who was an early reader and excels in math and science.

Next, we tried a private school for one year, when Xander turned six. After three months, we were asked to leave the school upon completing the school year. We were informed that our son was “not a good fit” for this school. When we inquired further, we were told that his shyness was problematic. Offering an example, the teacher remarked that Xander rarely played with the other boys during recess. Instead, he often chose to sit and watch as the other boys ran around and chased each other (and occasionally he played with girls). When we asked Xander whether he wanted to join in the boys’ activities but felt like he couldn’t, he said he just preferred to sit and watch, and explained that, “some of the kids play too rough.”
My husband and I could understand our son's decision. He had never been interested in boys' (or girls') rowdy and rambunctious play. Although he liked his classmates and was less reserved when interacting with them one on one, he tended to be cautious in social situations, especially with the more aggressive kids, and he generally preferred (and could be quite active and gregarious in) the company of adults, to whom he could relate more easily. Moreover, Xander was comfortable playing on his own and didn't feel compelled to do whatever the other kids were doing. One time when a boy from his class approached Xander on the playground at school, punched him playfully on the arm, and invited him to “chase me,” Xander responded by smiling and saying simply, “Uh, no.”

When we relayed Xander's preference to the teacher, she indicated that this was precisely the reason for her concern: He didn't want to join in the boys' activities. And so it seemed our son's “problem” was not merely his shyness but that he didn't behave like a typical boy or conform to the teacher's notions about how boys ought to act. When we told the teacher that we were fine with Xander's decision to opt out of the boys' rough-and-tumble play, his teacher seemed exasperated: “Well, I just don't know what to do with him.”

Sadly, Xander knew that this teacher didn't like him. Her disapproval was evident in the way she looked at and spoke to him (and us). As Xander observed, “She never smiles.” And it was heartbreaking to take him to school every day knowing that he was misunderstood, devalued, and even resented there.

At times, we felt as though this teacher would have preferred for Xander to misbehave or act out. Then, at least, she would have a ready response or some ideas about how she should deal with him. But Xander's mild manner did not match her expectations for boys, and this seemed to make her uncomfortable. Rather than question her own assumptions about what boys could and should be like, this teacher decided there was something wrong with Xander. Her negative assessment was especially apparent when, later in the year, she reported to us that Xander had “gotten better,” citing, for example, how she had caught him and another boy peeking into the lost-and-found box (something the students are forbidden to do). With a nudge and a wink, she added proudly that she had allowed this trespass because she was so happy to see Xander “branching out.”
As we did not want simply to ignore or dismiss this teacher’s view, my husband and I consulted a range of specialists—including a pediatrician, a pediatric neurologist, a developmental psychologist, and an occupational therapist—over the course of the school year. Each of these specialists concluded that Xander is a “fully normal child” who is “very bright and cooperative” and “very sensitive” with no symptoms of pathology, either social or psychological. And so we had to reconcile the teacher’s perception that our son’s conduct was worrisome with our sense that the qualities that seemed to distinguish him from the other boys were, in fact, within the range of normal.

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The issues my husband and I were confronting in our son’s education brought me back to my studies with Carol Gilligan, whose groundbreaking research with girls has inspired and informed worldwide efforts to support girls’ healthy psychological development and whose book *The Birth of Pleasure* makes the link between girls’ gender socialization at adolescence and boys’ gender socialization at early childhood. Drawing on her work, I undertook the first research study to apply a relational framework and use relational methods to examine boys’ socialization experiences and development during early childhood.

The importance of relationships, particularly as a context for development, has been widely recognized in most developmental and psychological theories. What distinguishes relational theory is that it starts from the premise that our perceptions of, and subsequently our knowledge about, our selves and our world are inextricably embedded within and influenced by our interpersonal relationships as well as our social and cultural contexts. That is, relational theories of human development and psychology emphasize the centrality of relationships in people’s lives. From this perspective, human development occurs not in isolation (with the option of having relationships), but through and within relationships with other people. More than a context for our development, our relationship experiences—including how we experience our selves in relationships—are a primary means by which we develop our self-image and learn how it is possible for us to express ourselves and engage with others.
A relational approach to psychological inquiry reframes the study of psychology as a practice of relationships and emphasizes the need for researchers to account for the fact that the quality of collected data depends in part on qualities of the researcher-participant relationship. In other words, relational methods center on the understanding that the stories people tell us, or what people are willing to share with us about their experiences and their lives, are partly determined by how they view us and our intentions, and whether they trust us. In my study, I used a voice-centered relational method that involved attuning myself to what the boys said and how they said it, and also reflecting on how the boys responded to me and how I responded to them in our interactions.

Revisiting Boys’ Development

In the autumn of 1997, Carol Gilligan and I went to the Friends School—an independent primary school (pre-Kindergarten through grade six) in New England—to study the boys in the pre-Kindergarten class. Carol had studied sixth-grade girls at this school with her colleagues from the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development, and their research had revealed ways in which heighten ed pressures at adolescence—to conform to conventions of femininity, or notions about what qualities and behaviors are appropriate and desirable for girls—could constrain girls’ expression of a full range of thoughts, feelings, and desires, and thereby hinder their relationships. In this work, Carol had been particularly impressed by the girls’ knowledge about the relational world (including their attunement to interpersonal dynamics, their ability to reflect critically on gendered norms of behavior, and their ability to distinguish between appearances and reality), the girls’ resistance to giving up their voices (including their struggles to remain open and honest within their relationships), and the girls’ ability to articulate both their knowledge and their resistance.

Based on the research with girls, Carol introduced the concept of resistance as a way of capturing what she had come to see as “a tension between psychological development or well-being and an adaptation that was both culturally scripted and socially enforced (i.e., an initiation into gender binaries and hierarchies that divide human qualities
into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ and privilege the masculine while at once idealizing and denigrating the feminine).”

Carol had observed girls resisting this initiation and described “the paradox girls face when pressed to silence an honest voice in order to have ‘relationships’ that girls recognized were not relationships in any meaningful sense of the word.”

The significance of this work is its emphasis that, as individuals, “we have a voice and, with it, a capacity for resistance.” Subsequently, Carol asked whether boys also know about the relational world and show a similar resistance (e.g., against compromising their sense of agency and choice) when faced with pressures to align with conventions of masculinity that—despite the social advantages of being male and acting masculine—may be detrimental to boys’ psychological health and jeopardize boys’ relationships. It was this question that led to my study with four- and five-year-old boys.

I was interested in learning how boys at early childhood experience and respond to their gender socialization, and specifically how boys negotiate their self-image, behaviors, and styles of relating to others in light of cultural constructions of masculinity that manifest in their everyday interactions with peers and adults at school. I had spent the previous two years studying adolescent boys and found that most of the boys had already resolved any conflicts they may have experienced regarding their gender socialization. For instance, many of the adolescent boys in my studies had come to accept any gaps between the way they experience themselves to be (e.g., their self-knowledge) and the way they are said to be (e.g., societal norms and expectations for boys) as being the way things are.

With Carol’s encouragement, I decided to study younger boys in hopes of gaining insight into how they reconcile any tensions or contradictions between their self-image and prevailing assumptions regarding what makes a boy a “real boy,” at a moment in boys’ development when they are increasingly exposed to cultural messages and societal pressures pertaining to gender and when they are in the process of figuring out how they can act and be with others.

I was also interested to learn what young boys are capable of knowing (about themselves and others) and doing (in terms of expressing themselves and engaging others) and how these capacities evolve through and are influenced by their socialization and development. As every human is born into relationships with other people (otherwise
one could not survive), we all begin with an original sense of relational connection. Studies of infants have shown that both boys and girls are also born with a fundamental capacity and primary desire for close, mutual, responsive relationships with other people. Thus, boys are not inherently less capable than girls of being attuned to emotions (their own and others’) and responsive within their relationships. Moreover, studies indicate that boys as well as girls seek to cultivate and sustain close interpersonal relationships throughout their lives. Yet, older boys and adult men report having fewer close relationships and lower levels of intimacy within the relationships they do have. This discrepancy between infancy and adulthood suggests that boys’ development is somehow associated with a move out of or away from relationships. However, few empirical studies have examined boys’ relational development—that is, boys’ development as a process wherein relationships play a central and critical role, and boys’ development of certain styles of relating to other people—much less from boys’ perspectives.

Popular Discourse on Boys

I conducted my study against a backdrop of literature that highlighted ways in which pressures for boys to conform to conventions of masculinity could negatively impact boys’ development. Research on girls’ development conducted by the Harvard Project on Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development during the 1980s and early 1990s had inspired a resurgence of interest in boys’ development during the late 1990s. Specifically, revelations regarding the centrality of relationships in girls’ lives and the relational nature of girls’ development called into question traditional models of human development that promote individuation and separation in the name of growth, health, and, for boys, manhood. Following the studies of girls, a number of books focused on how boys’ socialization—towards masculine ideals that emphasize, for example, physical toughness, emotional stoicism, and projected self-sufficiency—may lead boys to devalue and disconnect from their emotions and relationships.

While this popular discourse on boys has been helpful in drawing attention to possible problems pertaining to boys’ gender socialization, it has been limited by its tendency to pathologize boys and
problematize boys’ development. For example, most of these books are based on clinical populations of boys and adopt a diagnostic approach to understanding boys’ development. Starting from the assumption that there is something wrong with boys, these books emphasize their alleged emotional and relational deficiencies (as compared to girls) and aim to identify what is wrong and who or what is to blame. Boys’ emotional capacities and relational strengths are rarely mentioned, much less addressed. Furthermore, these books do not account for group and individual differences in boys’ socialization experiences and outcomes, including how some boys manage to thrive, and not merely survive, within the same contexts that can be debilitating for other boys.

There is also a tendency in much of the literature on boys to conceptualize boys’ gender socialization in terms of a linear model of cause-and-effect wherein cultural messages about masculinity and societal pressures to conform to group norms manifest in boys’ everyday lives and subsequently affect their attitudes and behaviors. In depicting boys as passive recipients of culture and helpless victims of their socialization, this approach tends both to objectify boys and to discount their ability to influence their developmental outcomes. Seldom considered are ways in which boys—as active participants in their learning and development—can mediate the effects of their gender socialization, for instance through ways in which they make meaning of cultural messages and respond to societal pressures.

A more balanced depiction of boys’ agency and awareness appears in Niobe Way’s and Carlos Santos’s research on adolescent boys. In her studies of boys’ friendships, Way acknowledges the obstacles that boys commonly encounter in their efforts to develop close friendships, including issues of trust and cultural stereotypes that denigrate emotional intimacy as feminine. However, Way also underscores the intense emotional intimacy in boys’ close friendships, especially during early and middle adolescence, and she emphasizes how boys value and fight to maintain (but often end up losing) their emotional connections to others. The core finding of Way’s Deep Secrets is that boys resist as well as adhere to norms of masculine behavior. She also indicates that a boy’s refusal to buy into masculine ideals is ultimately beneficial to his psychological health. Building upon Way’s work, Santos’s longitudinal survey study with middle-school boys similarly emphasizes
boys’ resistance against societal pressures to align with masculine norms, and shows this resistance to be linked to higher levels of academic engagement, as well as to higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression. These studies add depth to the discourse on boys by highlighting boys’ resistance to gendered norms and expectations that constrain their self-expression and hinder their relationships, and by demonstrating that this form of resistance—which emerged and gained prominence primarily through research with adolescent girls—is also vital to boys’ development and important for boys’ well-being. Moreover, these studies suggest the need to examine patterns of resistance in boys’ development prior to adolescence, in order to understand how and why, in the course of their socialization and relationship experiences, boys’ healthy resistance to gendered stereotypes might eventually give way to accommodation.

Importance of Early Childhood

Developmental theorists have identified early childhood as an important time of change, particularly for boys. Jean Piaget referred to early childhood as the time when gender bifurcated schemas that shape human behaviors and experiences are constructed and reinforced. Lawrence Kohlberg concluded that children acquire their gender lens by age six. Erik Erikson observed that, from this age on, “Conscience . . . forever divides the child within himself by establishing an inner voice of self-observation, self-guidance, and self-punishment,” as children learn to reconcile their desire to act on their impulses with their desire to avoid the disapproval and rejection that can result from behaving inappropriately. And Sigmund Freud described early childhood as a pivotal moment in boys’ initiation into manhood—a moment when boys establish their masculine identities by separating from women and girls and aligning with men and boys.

Although ideas about gender and gender-appropriate behavior may be introduced as early as infancy (e.g., through adults’ differential treatment of and responses to boys and girls), it is during early childhood that boys (and girls) begin to understand how these ideas may have implications for how other people view them and also for how they can be with others and in the world. Moreover, studies have found in boys a
marked increase both in symptoms of psychological distress— including depression, learning and speech disorders, attention deficits, and hyperactive or out-of-control behaviors—and in the use of Ritalin at this age. Yet, little research has been conducted to explore how boys experience their socialization during early childhood and how these experiences may have implications for their connections to their selves (e.g., self-acceptance, self-esteem) and to others (e.g., relationships).

The growing realization that pressures for boys to conform to masculine norms may negatively impact their development—coupled with concerns about young boys’ susceptibility to behavioral and learning problems—suggest our need and readiness for a new way of looking at boys and thinking about their development that both emphasizes their agency and awareness and considers what factors influence and motivate individual boys as they respond to their gender socialization. This book contributes to this emerging conversation by focusing on boys’ experiences at the time in their development when they are said to disconnect from their emotional lives and their relationships. Its centerpiece is an intensive two-year study of four- and five-year-old boys, and it is through their eyes and in their voices that we enter their world. The overarching argument is that boys have certain relational capabilities that are important to their health and happiness but are often overlooked or underestimated (e.g., in the literature on boys and in boys’ everyday lives) and may be at risk as boys adapt to dominant norms of masculinity that manifest, for instance, in their school and peer group cultures. Through documenting the pressures young boys face as they come up against gendered norms and expectations, and also highlighting ways in which boys can resist the loss of vital human capacities, this book brings research evidence to bear on current concerns about boys and boys’ development, and suggests ways in which parents, teachers, and others who have boys’ well-being at heart can join this healthy resistance in boys.