Valuing Boys, Valuing Girls

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Valuing Boys, Valuing Girls- Celebrating Difference and Enhancing Potential

It is an exciting time to be involved in education. For the first time we can link the research that emotionally supports young people and protects them against suicide, drug abuse and violence with our growing knowledge of how they learn and what changes are needed to create a system that truly values boys and girls.

At the same time, there is a great risk. Some of you will clearly remember the Professor in Gilligan's Island. A brilliant man. Able to invent coconut compasses, a wind powered generator of electricity not to mention a thousand other quirky creations but somehow never found time to either work out a way to patch the hole in the ship or build a new ship entirely,

Too often the discussion about boys and girls education risks becoming a debate about which side of the ship we should patch first, Today I want to spend some time talking about what would happen if we built an entirely new ship.

Firstly, I want to discuss ten things that I believe, if we did them and did them well would increase the resilience of boys and girls.

Ten things we can do to create a Resilient Society

1. Increase the sense of belonging -decline of social, safe environments and meaning

Central to all the research on resilience is the sense of belonging a person has. It is the most powerful protective factor. It is the strongest antidote to suicide, violence and substance abuse for our young people. It is the most powerful remedy for loneliness, hopelessness and loss of meaning in all our lives.

In research on Australian young people three forms of belonging dominate: belonging to and feeling loved by your family; belonging to a diversity of friendship groups; and belonging to and fitting in at school.

Our harshest, most severe punishments always involve the denial of belonging. Solitary confinement has always been considered the most extreme punishment. Banishment from the group has always been seen as the final penalty throughout the ages, perhaps even more punishing than death. To wander all your days as an outsider was seen as a dreadful thing. Ostracisation, being excluded for a group is the most hurtful form of bullying.

All humans desire to belong. The sense of not fitting, not belonging causes us to wither in ourselves. Not belonging causes us to turn against ourselves in the most hateful and spiteful ways. Belonging bridges the gulf between intimacy and isolation. It doesn't just shelter you from feeling separate and different, it awakens in you a sense of the great belonging that connects us all and embraces everything- the universal compassion and wisdom that Tibetan monks speak of.

We live in a time when our investment in the social capital of raising children is declining. The time and energy given to children in their homes is an important aspect of our country's social capital. It is undeniable that this form of investment is declining as parents spend less time assisting their children to achieve academic and life outcomes. Reduced family time, reading time, longer working hours and high levels of family break-ups all reduce this form of social capital. We live in a time where too often the hurried child interacts with the hassled adult, briefly and parenting is restricted to an odd combination of bribery, fear and distance,

Not surprisingly then, schools wanting to achieve positive outcomes are forced into a surrogacy role in which they need to provide a level of care that goes far beyond traditional roles,

Busier lives come at a great cost and that cost is seen in the most vulnerable in our society- our children,

A recent study of 13-15 year olds in Victoria, found over 40% of the students felt that they did not have anyone who knew them very well – that is, who understood how they thought or felt. Almost a quarter said they had no one to talk to if they were upset, no one they could trust and no one to depend on.

Jean Twenge, an American psychologist, recently examined survey data from 1952 to 1993 and concluded that the average American child in the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s,'(1)

Instead of having a sense of belonging to people young people these days belong to a click and go generation in which people are expendable, values are malleable and everything, absolutely everything is negotiable. Many of the young people I see in therapy live virtual lives. They don't have close families; they have people they watch TV with. They don't have friends they can talk to but they do have people they can text message.

The problem with living a virtual life is that it makes young people information rich but experience poor. Rushed from activity to activity, protected from stranger danger by anxious parents, attending schools with an over-crowded curriculum that numbs and dumbs increasingly large numbers of students, they develop a belief that life is controllable. Not only controllable but that if something or someone doesn't suit them they can either click or go.

If you truly believe that life is controllable, the day will come when you knocked for a sixer and your are overwhelmed, The click and go generation are ill- prepared for this and it is no surprise to me that we see increasing levels of depression in our young.

We live in a time of great loneliness. There is a crisis in belonging. While it is fashionable at this point to investigate this crisis among young people, I actually think it is in adulthood where we can see this crisis most poignantly. At the time when people should be harvesting their creativity, all too often they find themselves living empty lives.

2. Clarify a vision of what a good school looks like for children

There are many people here today who will be able to articulate the latest findings on boys and girls education far more clearly than I. I'd like to consider a different set of questions (2).

How are we to become a 'clever country', a 'knowledge nation' or to fulfil any kind of truly democratic chance for individual and social maturity in the lives of our young people? We are not going to be able to survive economically in the future by scaling down, selling off even more public assets, decreasing wages, becoming leaner and meaner. The only way that I can see that we can compete in the future is if we use education to make us smarter and wiser.

That requires us to ask some tough questions of schools and ourselves:

Why are such a large proportion of young people disengaged from formal learning ? There is almost no research focus being put on the cumulative impacts upon adolescents of our traditional schooling practices and prescriptions.

Why do we encourage young people all day long in peer group cohorts and then worry about peer pressure? Few cultures in history have made so powerful a requirement of age-banding the young.

Who exactly was the bright spark who decided the best model of education for either girls or boys was to have a secondary school teacher to try to cope with success in learning for several hundred individual students and to write meaningful half-year reports on each? Certainly they weren't basing their thinking of how people learn.

Who set the model school size at 600 to 800 for primary and 1200 to 1400 for secondary students and why did they?

Does our tabloid excitement about results, league ladders, the 'top 50' and the 'competitive academic curriculum' act as a positive stimulus to any more than a minority of teenagers - boys and girls ?

Why do we persist with a standardised, homogenised approach to education when growing evidence suggests that is not suited to the majority of children?

There is a great deal of crucial learning that simply cannot be accomplished while dressed up in uniforms or timetabled in the itty-bitty episodes we call lessons. I could go on but I'll bore you. Our unthinking devotion to learning that is desk-bound, paper-based, syllabus-driven and test-proven exacts a heavy toll on the good will and maturing self-confidence of far too many of our young people.

3. Reduce Social Toxicity-

Children aren't more violent than they used to be but they are more lethal. In fact many figures suggest we are live in a time that is substantially less violent than previous times, Nevertheless we live in a time of fear especially of random violence that can be inflicted on anyone, anywhere.

In the past five years I've seen a great change in young people. One of those changes has been in the young men I work with work with who murder, assault and inflict severe violence on others, There is always an internal logic to these acts of violence and that usually involves the correction of injustices that have occurred to them. In the past few years grievous envy plays a greater role in many of these young men's explanations for their acts,

"They've got it, I can never get it, they don't deserve it, I do". Later I'll talk of the click and go generation but these young men and increasing numbers of young women belong to a don't click at all generation.

One response to this is to round up the wagons more tightly, create walled and secure communities, become ever more vigilant and fearful.

This seems to me to ignore that in our society are "psychological asthmatics" who are prone to responding to vivid portrayals of violence. Televised images of violence and video games steered by holding handgun shaped controls are especially problematic for children who grow up in adverse circumstances.

It is not just violent video games and shows that are toxic for young people. Media generally defines success much more narrowly and usually in economic terms.

4. Invest in prevention-

The overwhelming sense of research is very, very clear prevention pays off. Specifically the types of programs that have been found to be effective are:
Home visiting for families with young children,
Early educational enrichment through play
Parenting programs
Aggression management in the primary school years
School transition programs both at school entry and between primary and secondary and
prevention of animal cruelty programs.

These have all been demonstrated to have clear social as well as economic benefits.

Most areas of Australia do some of these; too few do all.

5. Ensure that every child receives affirmation-

Rejected children end up with whatever psychological malignancies are on offer. Rejection means shame. Experiencing shame often means depression or aggression.

Any society that has not resolved issues of racism will be plagued by violence.

6. Reduce Economic Inequality- the gap between rich and poor

-In Australia (4) the income of the top 10% is at least 4 times that of the bottom 10%. It is critical that we do not lose sight of the needs of indigenous Australians. We recently completed a resilience study of young indigenous Australians only to find that their greatest fear was dying young. This is perhaps not surprising when the life expectancy of indigenous Australians is lower than it was for white Australians in 1900.

While re-dressing economic imbalance we should not become defined by economics. We are society not a marketplace. We need to reclaim our rights as citizens and not allow ourselves to be defined as customers. Customers have needs, citizens have power.

7. Protect childhood

There is an often-misquoted statement that it takes a village to raise a child. In fact the original statement is that "It takes a *whole* village to raise a child". I don't think we have a whole village. In fact I think we have a society that treats childhood as if it an ailment to be remedied- ideally as quickly as possible.

Raising a child is a social matter- We need to support people are doing the work of protecting childhood and to rail against those that would turn them into mini-adults. We also need to have permanent relationships with families who hurt children.

8.Base social policy on human rights

As a country we need to think about the rights that we hold inviolable. A public debate around this issue is greatly needed in Australia

9. Make better use of the fact that we are spiritual beings

There is a great yearning among many young people for a "scale of the gods" of something to believe in beyond themselves.

Australian researcher Jim Barber recently compared youth suicide rates with adolescent self-esteem, school and social adjustment in seven countries. He found that the higher the level of self-esteem and adjustment, the higher the male suicide rate.

Richard Ekersley recently examined associations between youth suicide rates in up to 21 developed nations and a wide range of social, economic and cultural characteristics, and found that male suicide rates were highest in the most individualistic countries. The more personal freedom and control over their lives young people felt they had, for example, the higher the suicide rate (1).

We need to have more than ourselves to believe in and this is particularly the case for young men,

10. Recognise the importance of androgyny

I want to consider this last point in some depth. Valuing boys and girls is not just about considering the mind and how young people learn, it is also about developing good-hearted compassionate people.

Responding to adversity and having a resilient outcome requires people to flexibly call upon internal and external resources. Androgyny, the ability to utilise and to call upon the masculine and feminine sides of yourself has a powerful role in resilience and belonging,

When a man loses touch with his feminine side he becomes lonely, moody, driven to compete but experiences a bankruptcy of spirit and belonging. He strives to climb the corporate ladder of life only to find it has been placed against the wrong wall. If we think of belonging as consisting of two impulses: being and longing, we can consider the impulse of longing can be attributed to the masculine and the sense of being more strongly associated with the feminine within us,

Society devotes so much time to the masculine sense of longing that it neglects the power of the feminine, All too often we value science over the humanities, specialisation over integration, the mechanical over the emotional, achievement over collaboration, the short term gain over the sustainable, action over consideration, fragmentation over coherence, problem solving over problem sharing and individualism over community.

This is not to say that all masculine impulses are misguided. Indeed many of the great gains of public welfare and health have been achieved through the masculine. But a world that becomes imbalanced in its values not only risks an epidemic of meaninglessness, it loses the vital combination of forces that provide it with the power to change things for the better, to flourish.

Similarly a woman who has a distorted contact with her masculine side either loses a sense of her own power and personal agency to create change in the world or becomes tyrannically angry, I see increasing numbers of angry young women, Often angry that life and their mothers have let them down. Now I like to see young women being feisty but this is different. These young women are furious but often ineffectual and their anger is all too often turned inwards in the form of eating disorder or self-harm.

 Alternatively a young woman may come to only value herself as an object to be desired deciding that it is more important to be desired by others than to have desires herself.

She becomes vulnerable to society's stereotyped prescriptions for women as either shag, hag, nag, witch or bitch. (The male equivalent for this has to be yob, slob, knob, sleaze or squeeze!) Alternatively she takes on a role as a martyr and enacts pathetic servitude. Many of you will know adult woman who take on this role. " Don't mind me dear, I'll just sit here in the dark- don't bother turning on the light". Around Australia this is known as the burnt chop syndrome- " don't worry, dear, I'll have the burnt chop".

Today I want to spend some time considering how we can help people to be in touch with both aspects of the self- the masculine and the feminine and to bring both into their relationships,

In the programs we run in schools to promote resilience called "The Heart Masters" we spend considerable time working with young people to investigate the meaning of love and the power of media to distort love into romanticism and to divert people away from developing a self regard and self- love. These forms of distraction emphasize love as being oriented to the other and focus on desire and longing rather than being loving and compassionate.

We live in a world that is impoverished in its vocabulary, The Persians had 52 words describing different types of love, we, of course, have one. By focusing on the external forms of desire and love we lose something very important. We lose the ability for people to look within themselves for nourishment, energy and solace, We risk having people who are dependent, focused on the external and not fully formed as people who value their own uniqueness.

If you are not helped to fully form yourself as a person and to value that corner of creation that is uniquely yours, you not only fail to live out the life that is truly yours, you can form relationships with others where differences become threatening and you settle down into a prison of the mediocre. Placing limits and barriers on each other that give the illusion of security and fidelity but take us away from thriving to merely surviving.

Too many people do not learn to take responsibility for integrating their masculine and feminine aspects and bring a partially formed self into their relationships expecting their partners to make up for the deficiencies in themselves. Of course we are all flawed. Indeed it may be our flaws that are the most lovable part of ourselves.

I once heard a wonderful story about Mozart who once wrote a symphony so structurally perfect, so beautifully balanced that it was boring, Mozart decided to improve it by putting in some notes that too long and others that were slightly imperfect to give the piece liveliness and richness,

It is not that we are flawed but that we fail to look within, to develop a mindfulness of our interior world that creates the damage and instead people all too often create relationships that resemble prisons and find that their partners come to resemble warders.

Partners, wives, husbands, boyfriends and girlfriends are rarely able to remedy flaws in each other. At best they can compensate and make do.

For example I see some wonderful couples in therapy, Sweet people, lovely people who fell head over heels in love at school and were too polite, too damn nice to ever break up the relationship. Perhaps it was fear of loneliness, of not finding another or just being too kind to the other and not kind enough to the self. But by their thirties and forties they have not developed as individuals, they confused being close and being similar and live in relationships that bore and stifle them,

Society's obsession with romantic love distracts people for learning how to love themselves,

For our young people this means that when their first treasured love falls apart- when they get dropped- they are devastated and alone in a way that despairs them. They risk finding life not worth living or rush into the arms of another in a way to soothe the wound of their own aloneness,

The point here is that for people to be truly loving and compassionate to others- they first need to love and be good to themselves, They need to attend to their internal world and to find ways of merging their feminine and masculine. They need to develop an enthusiasm for themselves. The word "enthusiasm" comes from the Greek "en theos" meaning the God within. We need to help people revere the God within themselves.

Lets consider incorporating the feminine forces in our lives and in doing so, I want to focus mostly on this issue for men, not because women don't get muddled about this, but that I suspect a female presenter may do a better job of presenting this from a woman's perspective.

Men it seems to me often get into a muddle in relation to their feminine side. They also regularly confuse their interior feminine aspects with exterior women. This creates great pain and disillusionment in our world.

One of the great tragedies of the modern world is that people take their own anima, their internalised feminine selves, their spark and project it on to flesh and blood people.

We fail to differentiate loving someone from being in love with someone. When we fall in love we ask someone to undertake something angelic for us. Ideally that early being in love transfigures your life and you use it to build a better, stronger person,

But if you do not. If you continue to project your anima on to a flesh and blood person, No living person can live up to the projection and so eventually it wears thin. Some men, when they find the initial flames of passion calming fail to take the lessons inwards and instead rush off to fall in love with someone else. Seemingly they do this in 7-year cycles. Women are also prone to do this.

This is particularly in mid life when the passions that have been projected onto their partners, children and then careers wane. Many men and women then miss a grand opportunity in their lives to develop a vibrant mature identity.

Obviously this confusion creates great pain for the partners, the children and an enormous disruption in people's lives.

"Your basic extended family today includes your ex-husband or -wife, your ex's new mate, your new mate, possibly your new mate's ex, and any new mate that your new mate's ex has acquired. It consists entirely of people who are not related by blood, many of whom can't stand each other"

-                                    ***Delia Ephron***

The failure to differentiate internal anima from external romance and the failure to distinguish being in love from loving someone, has dire consequences for families, But it has tragic outcomes for the individual.

If you don't get one of the great experiences of life directly, you will get it indirectly as symptom. Mid life crises are all about your anima surging in an attempt to be identified, It is as the anima pounds on the door of your life and if you don't give it room it expresses itself indirectly through symptom-depression, bitterness, loss of meaning, substance abuse.

Rather than letting go of families and loved ones, it's about incorporating anima into your life. Valuing the masculine and the feminine,

The great fear is that we lose the path of life and find ourselves barren with nowhere to belong. As Dante's Comedia teaches us emptiness is not a place we can live but if we want freedom it is a place we must a some stage of our lives pass through.

The anima belongs inside your self and very few people realise this. It is the great message of Romeo and Juliet- take care of yourself or lose everything. What do you do with your anima?

When we neglect what matters to us, that becomes the matter with us. We want to help boys and girls not just create lives that work but lives that count.

How Young People Learn

Let me start with a puzzle from the work of Harry Lorayne:
You are driving a bus, which contains fifty people. The bus makes one stop and ten people get off, while three people get on. At the next stop, 7 people get off and 2 get on. There are 2 more stops at which four passengers get off and three get on. The bus has mechanical trouble two passengers decide to get off and walk, when the mechanical trouble is taken care of, the bus goes to the last stop and the rest of the people get off.

Question 1: How many stops did the bus make?
Question 2: What is the name of the driver of the bus?

The answer of course to the first question is, six and your own name, "you" are the driver of the bus.

I recently gave this puzzle to a group of students. The boys , while not exactly disgruntled weren't exactly gruntled, and complained that they had been counting the number of people on the bus. A few other boys wanted to talk about their experiences of mechanical breakdown. And one boy, who I reckon had Asperger's syndrome, wanted to talk about the pro's and cons of Bedford trucks.

The girls on the other hand were much less likely to express annoyance at the trickiness of the puzzle and to say things like "I'm not good at puzzles" or "I never get these things right". A couple were amazed that they could ever drive a bus.

The point I'm clumsily trying to make is that the differences between girls and boys are often about the way they construct meaning and the implications of this are much more subtle than bold research findings indicate.

Gender and learning

There are a series of research findings about gender and learning. Let's give you a smattering.

High achieving girls are the least resilient learners. They are the most likely to give up and proclaim themselves as "dumb".

Girls have been out performing boys since 1977 and girls have higher school retention rates.

Overall, young men are at higher risk of drowning, low literacy, drug offences, suicides, assaults, bullying, attention deficit disorder, impulsivity and expulsions from school. Young women are at greater risk of eating disorders, depression, sexual abuse, suicide attempts and self-harm. Late maturing boys and early maturing girls are especially at risk.

There are higher levels of non-completion by boys in rural and remote areas of Australia though this is not new. In 1998, over70% of rural girls completed Year 12, as compared with 55% of rural boys and under 50% of remote boys.

Boys are seen as something to be fixed. Lack of positive role models and unsuitable curriculum

Boys often feel girls get better treatment by teachers- are given more encouragement into stay in school

The lack of recognition for achievements outside of school seems to be an issue for many boys. In 2002 the retention rate to year 12 was 75% with females (81.7%)having a higher retention rate than males (72.4%)

While boys still tend to dominate in the top 5 % of Year 12 marks, they outnumber girls two to one in the bottom 10% of marks

In 1967,about 26% of boys completed their schooling as compared to 18% of girls. By 1993, the situation had changed with 81% of girls and only 72% of boys completing Year 12,

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The debate is too global- as always the variance between within groups is larger than between groups

Creating Resilient Learners – the ideal classroom.

So now taking into account the research on learning and resilience and happiness, let's tie it together it the types of activities and structures that should be supported at various times in the classroom,

Pre-school

Boys	Girls
Build fine motor skills – beadwork	Develop gross motor skills
Have books around	Take pictures of successful tasks
Lots of hands on experiential activities	Use water and sand tables
Develop feeling barometers	Rotate leadership in learning groups
Personalise and build a sense of ownership	Make maths concrete (dice rolls)
Bring in male mentors	Praise more than you think you need to
Encourage language expression	Make sure you don't miss high energy girls

Primary School

Ideal ratio is no more than 1: 15

Volunteers, parents, adult mentors. vertical mentoring , teaching aides. Multigenerational classrooms

Limit computer use – many students already have enough screen time at home

Imagination functions of the brain do not grow as richly when attached to mechanical stimulants (because they provide the visual) – therefore increase story telling without pictures

Up to Grade 6 there is no significant difference between the verbal and mathematical skills of boys and girls

Boys	Girls
Concentration skills	
Use boys only groups at time	Use manipulatives and visuals (graphs) to teach maths
Close bonding	
Navigate energy	Give special access to technology
Pay attention to less competitive, sensitive boys	Match maths with journal writing feedback
Allow physical movement	

Resilience and peer relations – The Heart Masters

Don't keep chairs in a row
Storytelling and myth
Touch, do, feel
The team behind the teacher
Keep PE and recess
Encourage language expression

Earn as You learn

Strategies: ensure classrooms are calming as well as visually interesting, avoid fluorescent lighting, use aromas (especially lemon and peppermint). Incorporate theatre sports with literacy- this increases comprehension of girls and boys.

Middle School (Years 5-8)

Boys	Girls
Some separate classes (reading)	Some separate classes (PE, Maths)
Increase group and pair work	Call on them to contribute
Diversify peer connectedness	
Identity formation work	
Personal Best	
High expectations	
Help seeking and help receiving	Having a go and living by your wits
Model behaviour – heroes, fathers	Female role models, mentors, bonds
Rite of passage experiences	Hands- on maths experiences
Be Active!	Encourage computer use

Resilience-   The Heart Masters

Boys	Girls
Consistent discipline	Use multi-sensory strategies
Turn pictures and sounds into words	Turn words into images and sounds
Memory enhancement	
Mindfulness	

For parents: stay involved, know their homeroom teacher, treasure hunt for competencies,
Build good will in families and discourage and divert from aggressive acts, couple high expectations with high faith in them, watch carbohydrate intake, broaden friendship groups,

By Year 8 and 9, there is no difference in maths and science ability but girls become significantly stronger in English.

Year 9

Boys	Girls
Separate Maths, English and physical challenges	Separate Maths and English and physical challenges
Renaissance Projects	
Community Service (ongoing)	
Career education	

Get A Life!
All You can eat
Just Do it
Just Do it (together)
Making Money
Revolutions and Transitions
What's it All About ?

If adolescence is a time in which mothers and daughters often talk too much, it is also a time in which fathers and sons talk too little. Fathers have been absent in our society for generations. One of the tragedies in our society is the failure of fathers to teach their sons to be good men. For boys who do not have access to their fathers, the risk of idealising the stereotyped image of tough guy males is high. If I can't be with Dad, I'll try to be like what I think a real man's Dad should be, seems to be the solution attempted by many fatherless boys. Often the consequence is a tenuous separation from their mothers through a combination of rage, misogyny and homophobia. For these young men, male teachers often take on the role of social father (whether they like it or not). So the battles so often seen by schools between Year eight or nine boys and their male teachers may not be avoidable, indeed they may be crucial.

Senior School

Boys	Girls
Self- mentoring:	

Charisma- vision and sense of mission, instilling pride gaining respect and trust

Inspiration- communicating high expectations, using symbols to focus effort, Expressing important purposes in simple ways

Intellectual stimulation- promotes intelligence, rationality, and careful problem solving

Individualised consideration- to passion and to happiness.

Boys	Girls
Rites of passage	
Re-teach study skills (memory, synthesising , Note taking, goal setting)	
Re-involve parents	
Conflict –resolution	Assertiveness
Relationship authority	Emotional Vocabulary

Use fathers and male mentors	Innovation by women
Media literacy	
Relationship skills	Keep maths hands-on
Maintain literacy	Support computer time
Encourage language expression	

Aftercare for students (especially in country areas)

Much of the debate that rages around boys and girls education focuses on their minds and their respective achievements and rates of intellectual development. What is all too often ignored in this debate is the emotional development of these boys and girls as young people who are able to be compassionate, creative and caring. This doesn't start with loving- kindness towards others; it starts with directing these feelings to your self. This provides the emotional foundation for being able to care for others.

The ancient meditation of loving kindness (3) encapsulates this well.
" May I be filled with loving- kindness. May I be well, May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be happy".

We need to create schools and families that give our young people strong evidence that we don't only believe in compassion. We live it and we act on it.

The answer to how do we go about valuing boys and valuing girls is to make sure that they value themselves.

1. Cited in a chapter by Richard Ekersley, "Being young: never better, or getting worse?". My thanks to Richard for making this available to me.
2. I'd like to acknowledge that these thoughts are based on Michael Norman's work and to thank him for these.
3. See Jack Kornfield, A Path with Heart

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