Bringing UP BOYS

THE PATH FROM BOYHOOD TO MANHOOD HAS NEVER BEEN EASY, BUT THE CURRENT CRISIS IN MASCULINITY IS DEVASTATING A GENERATION OF YOUNG MEN AND THE SOCIETY THEY LIVE IN, WRITES **DAVID LESER.**

It took a horrific car accident for Nigel Roberts* to be able to talk properly to his father again. As a little boy he had experienced visible displays of love and tenderness from the man he adored, but once Nigel had reached puberty it had all suddenly fallen away. For the next five years, until the age of 18, the two had barely spoken, except in a kind of stern, perfunctory way.

Then one day – tragedy, or divine providence, depending on your point of view – Peter Roberts* broke his neck on a road in country NSW while travelling for work. This seemingly powerful, all-knowing man in Nigel's life was now a quadriplegic.

Out of a sense of duty Nigel began visiting his father each day in his hospitalised bedroom. As time went by something quietly miraculous began to occur. The sense of duty Nigel had initially felt began turning into a deep sense of privilege. "We got to know each other as a young man and older man for the first time," Nigel recalls now. "We began communicating in a way that would never have happened had he kept going to work or not become an invalid. There was nowhere for him to go, no way for him to be distracted."

Nigel Roberts found himself reflecting on this again a few months ago, while considering the behaviour of his own 13-year-old son, Aiden*. As Aiden's body had begun to rapidly change, so, too, had his emotional disposition. No longer was he the bright, cheerful boy his parents had known. He'd become preoccupied and withdrawn. "I was having trouble talking to him," Nigel says. "I could feel him isolating himself in the house." His son agrees. "It was all a little bit stressful – school, family, nagging about homework ... and I wasn't dealing with it."

Nigel decided to take Aiden on a six-day camp run by a group called Pathways to Manhood. He'd heard positive things about the camp and how it not only brought out the potential in boys, but also taught fathers and sons how to speak more easily to each other. True, there were certain New Age aspects he was sceptical about – the emphasis on stories, myths and bonding ceremonies – but he was willing to push that aside out of love and a sense of portent that if he didn't do something, *anything*, he might lose a relationship he valued beyond words.

What helped inspire confidence in Pathways was the fact that it was a national organisation with a top-quality board and management team backed by leading firms, such as advertisers McCann Erickson and legal group Mallesons Stephen Jaques. The chairman of Pathways was Robert Bleakley, founder of Sotheby's in Australia and owner of the Verona cinema complex in Sydney. His fellow directors included high-profile executives and consultants, as well as the Sydney-based clinical psychologist-turned CEO Dr Stephen Moss, whose own son, Alex, had been "going off the rails" until he, too, had gone on the Pathways program with his father.

"He was beginning to use marijuana and drink inappropriately with his mates, he was spray-painting trains and getting into fights," Stephen said later. "His schooling was naturally falling behind and in two years we actually had him at three different schools.

"I had to tell Alex we were going to do this [Pathways] together. He resisted at first, but we actually did get there [and] that time began the turnaround for Alex, and probably, more profoundly, the turnaround for ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD WHITFIELD.

Opposite: Clinical psychologist-turned CEO, Dr Stephen Moss, and his son, Alex, 17, who found a new closeness through the Pathways program.

him and me in our relationship. We talked, listened and honoured each other in a profound way.

"Alex responded very positively to the Pathways camp and, in fact, has done two further camps as a 'returning young man'. He is now in Year 12 at the Australian Institute of Music and doing really well, confident, not smoking at all and is involved in helping other boys who have difficulty in their schooling."

Nigel and Aiden Roberts ended up spending six days in the NSW bush with 15 other fathers and sons. It was the most important six days they'd ever spent together. They pitched tents, dug latrines, cooked, washed up and went on mountain hikes. Each evening they sat around the campfire taking it in turns with the other fathers and sons to speak. No one was allowed to interrupt. No one was allowed to talk in any way other than from personal experience.

The boys spoke about the issues that preoccupied them – their embarrassments, their relationships with their friends and family, their hopes and fears about the future. Just as importantly, they heard their fathers talk, often for the first time, about their own childhoods, about their relationships to *their* fathers, their marriage break-ups, their sexuality, their job losses, their love for their children and the deep, aching wounds that they had somehow carried inside themselves for years without even knowing it. These men were labourers, bikies, pharmacists and businessmen like Nigel Roberts. They covered the gamut, and as they talked some of them cried openly and unashamedly.

"I wouldn't have thought these men had these sadnesses," Aiden told The Weekly. "We were hearing from grown men who were supposed to be big, strong, dominant figures, but they still had these weaknesses and sadnesses. It suggested that they weren't all they appeared to be on the outside ... it was such a relief."

More than a relief because, after six days and nights on this camp, and after going through a series of physical and emotional rites of passage that tested the boys in ways they'd never been tested before, the boys found that something big had shifted. They were no longer boys in their own eyes, or in the eyes of their fathers, other family members or friends. They were young men.

Above: The chairman of the Pathways group, Robert Bleakley, with his son Oliver, 16, and dog Lukey.

LEFT: PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUSSELL SHAKESPEARE. RIGHT: COURTESY OF PATHWAYS.

Nigel Roberts credits Pathways facilitator Dr Arne Rubinstein as being the man responsible for what he, Aiden and hundreds of other fathers and sons achieved on these camps. "Arne has lived on the bones of his arse and given up being a doctor to do this work," Nigel Roberts says. "He should be knighted for it and if Latham and Howard are serious about masculinity issues, then they should look to someone like Arne because he is already doing the work for them."

As chief executive of Pathways and a GP specialising in adolescent health and preventative care, Arne Rubinstein believes the rites of passage Pathways offers to young men are crucial to their mature development. And not just young men who've turned to delinquent or criminal behaviour. All young men.

"All indigenous communities had a rite of passage for birth, death, marriage and puberty," Arne says. "But the one they often put the most emphasis on was the rite of passage for a boy becoming a man. That's because they recognised the health of their community depended on having community-oriented, healthy men rather than big boys not knowing how to be men."

Such male role models can show a boy that true manliness doesn't come from getting into fights, bullying, driving cars fast, drinking too much, or treating sex as a conquest. It comes from learning to engage with one's father and other men in an honest, open way. It comes from learning – where possible – respect for elders and for mothers and for women in general, and the community at large. It comes from hearing the stories of the past and being made to have an involvement in decision-making; learning to connect privileges with responsibilities.

> What worked for them as boys no longer worked ... **THEY WERE ANGRY ... AND LOST** because they were still operating from boy psychology.

While working as a GP for 11 years, Arne Rubinstein regularly saw 11- and 12-year-old boys brimming with life and joy, only to become, two or three years later, sullen, angry and depressed. "They'd gone through puberty," he says, "and something hadn't happened. What worked for them as boys no longer worked for them now. They were angry and they were lost because they were still operating from boy psychology."

To understand this boy psychology, Arne observes, you only need picture the typical behaviour of a seven-year-old in the playground. He wants to be acknowledged all the time. He sees himself as the centre of the universe. He takes no reponsibility for his actions. He finds it difficult to deal with his emotions. And he wants his mother.

"Whereas in the healthy man's psychology," Arne says, "a man sees himself as part of the universe, not the centre of it; he takes full responsibility for his actions, he deals with his emotions and he looks for a healthy relationship with the feminine.

"If you ask a lot of women if they know any men who are still doing the boy psychology stuff, the majority will actually say, 'Yeah, I married him'. "

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On February 18 this year the federal leader of the Opposition, Mark Latham, gave a landmark address to the National Press Club, spelling out what he described as the "crisis of masculinity" now gripping Australia.

No one who has worked down the coalmine of youth suicide, homelessness, mental health, juvenile justice or the education system would have been the least bit surprised by his words. They've known it for years, but coming as it did from an alternative prime minister, the message was sobering and more than timely.

Mark Latham talked about how boys' school retention rate lagged well behind girls; how their literacy levels were lower; how they were, in disproportionate numbers, the victims of drug overdoses, road trauma and youth suicide. What he didn't spell out were the graphic details – that men and boys were now committing suicide four times more frequently than women and girls. (Suicides among 15-19-year-old males have quadrupled since ▶

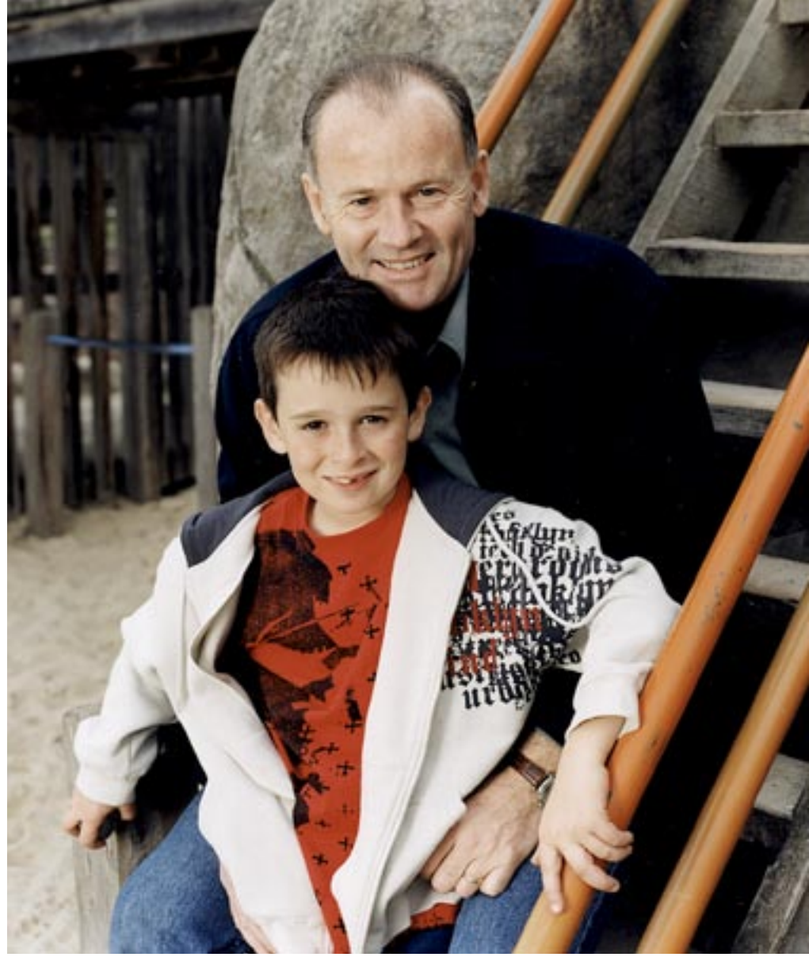
Top: Boys enjoy themselves at a Pathways camp, where mentors such as Alan Lauer (above, left) give support to their young charges.

the 1970s.) Men were committing 90 per cent of the acts of convicted violence and comprising 90 per cent of the inmates of jails. They were making up 74 per cent of the unemployed. They were living, on average, six years less than women and in four out of five marriage breakdowns, they were the ones being left.

Among boys and young men, there was more obesity, homelessness, schizophrenia, substance abuse, binge drinking and attention deficit disorder than ever before. Young men were entering university in fewer numbers. In schools, nearly 90 per cent of children with behavioural problems were boys and 80 per cent of those with learning problems were also boys.

Boys and young men had by and large always taken more risks than girls. They'd played harder, driven faster, died earlier. It was just that the catastrophic consequence of their risk behaviour had only recently been talked about in great detail. What was new here, though, was the boys with problems were getting younger and younger. Primary schools and preschools were reporting depression, anxiety and violent conduct.

"Teachers and parents were noticing that boys had lost their way," says Richard Fletcher, manager of the Men and Boys' program at the University of Newcastle's Family Action Centre. They'd lost their way to such an extent that, from Coober Pedy to Cairns, the clarion call from parents and schools had gone out for a special "boys in school" program.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL GOSNEY.

> "Boys make trouble to get noticed ... **THERE IS A PROVEN EQUATION: AN UNDER-FATHERED BOY** equals a discipline problem in school."

Teachers and parents were desperate to know how to make education more interesting for boys, how to help boys organise themselves better, how to give their lives direction and meaning.

One suggested way was, of course, to attract men back into teaching, especially in primary schools, where 80 per cent of teachers around the country were now female. Such a scarcity of men in the formative years of a boy's life was leading many to conclude that the world of learning was inherently unmasculine.

Another suggestion was to start boys in school later, given the slower development of their fine-motor and cognitive skills. As Steve Biddulph wrote in his best-selling book, *Raising Boys*: "The learning environment of schools seems designed to educate senior citizens, not young people at their most energetic."

Biddulph also suggested getting male teachers to become more involved with under-fathered boys.

"Boys make trouble to get noticed," he wrote. "In schools all around the world where I have consulted, there is a proven equation: an under-fathered boy equals a discipline problem in school."

Which is not to say, of course, that girls don't need their fathers, too. Alison Ingram, program director of the Bell Shakespeare Company's Shakespeare in Action program, has for the past three years been introducing Shakespeare to troubled youths in Sydney's west, and with great results. She sees girls suffering from the same father absence as boys. "The lack of fathers is having an impact on their lives just as much as boys," she says. "It's just that we see more boys."

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It's an interesting exercise to ask men to talk about their relationships with their fathers. There are a few I know who can speak with fondness and respect. The majority cannot. One friend of mine left Australia 20 years ago largely because of the hurt his father had inflicted on him since he was a little boy. At 16, his father had called the police to take him away because he'd found him experimenting with cannabis. His father didn't speak to him again for almost a decade. On one occasion, five years after he'd left home, my ▶

Above: Labor MP, Lindsay Tanner, with his son, James, seven. He is responsible for Labor's national mentoring scheme, which is particularly focused on young men.

Above: Dr Arne Rubenstein and his son, Jarrah, 13. Arne is a guiding force behind Pathways to Manhood.

other good night. "You're a man now," he told him. Twenty-two years later, the son grabbed his father and hugged him goodnight. "Dad, I've been wanting to do this for years." Both men wept.

"There is clear and incontrovertible evidence," wrote Steve Biddulph in another best-selling book, *Manhood*, "that all through the 20th century and into the 21st, men have been suffering uniquely and severely.

"The statistics are all dominated by men. And hurt men also tend to hurt others. Physical violence against spouses, child sexual abuse, divorce, moral bankruptcy in business and politics, all point to something badly wrong with large numbers of men."

Steve Biddulph traced the crisis for men and boys as far back as the Industrial Revolution when, for the first time in history, men abandoned their agricultural communities and went in search of jobs in the cities, thereby splitting their family roles between home and work. Suddenly, men were no longer working alongside women and children in their villages and farms. They were miles away in factories and mines. And centuries later, following World War II, the revolution in motor car ownership actually increased and cemented this huge gulf between home and work. Men were forced to travel large distances, while women remained housebound, locked in their dormitory suburbs.

"In a break with eternal tradition," he wrote, "boys began being raised by women. For aeons before this, boys [and girls, too] grew up with the sweetness of male teaching from committed older men, who took pride and placed great store in the maturation of their students. Unless the tribe or village raised good men, everyone's life was endangered, and it was seen as men's job to do this.

> The lack of male input into growing boys created **A HUGE BREAK IN THE FAMILY FABRIC,** yet we adjusted to it and assumed it was normal.

friend saw his father walking towards him in the city. "Hello, Dad," he said half-expectantly. His father looked at him, said nothing and kept walking.

I know one man who, as a young boy, was repeatedly bashed and thrown against walls when his father came home in a towering, drunken rage. This man is now a senior management consultant trying to bring what he calls "the soul" back into business. I know another man who tied his six-year-old son to a pole and left him all day out in the sun because he'd told his father he was bored. "I'll show you what bored is," his father replied. Twenty years later, these men barely speak, although the last time they did, the son punched his father in the face.

I know men whose fathers died early or walked out on the family when they were young – never to return. I know men whose fathers were rarely if ever at home, so preoccupied were they with their work. I know men who, rather than face up to their own corporate mistakes, have publicly humiliated their sons. I know a man – one of a legion of men – who still laments the fact his father never told him he loved him. He suffers from constant depression.

I know another man who, when he turned 10, was told by his father that they could no longer kiss each

"The lack of male input into growing boys created a huge break in the family fabric, yet we adjusted to it and soon assumed it was normal. The possibility that boys might need fathering for many hours a day, not just minutes, and that uncles and grandfathers had a critical role in male mental health, was forgotten. Deep and dangerous gaps in male development arose. Defective and unbalanced men were everywhere."

When Mark Latham addressed the National Press Club, he talked of the need for more stay-at-home dads in Australia. "This is an important part of rebuilding male identity," he said, "We should foster fatherhood at every opportunity."

But that, of course, is easier said than done. Massive structural changes to the economy and relentless work pressures have resulted in parents spending 40 per cent ▶

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WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

Pathways to Manhood: email enquiries@pathwaysfoundation.com.au; or visit www.pathwaysfoundation.com.au.
The Uncle Program: phone (02) 6680 8582; email info@uncle.org.au; or visit www.uncle.org.au.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF PATHWAYS.

BRINGING UP BOYS *Continued*

less time with their children today than they did 20 years ago. And because of the accelerating rate of divorce and single parenthood, there are now nearly one million children living without one of their parents at home. In most cases, that means the father.

Earlier this year, Dr Wade Horn, an adviser to US President George W. Bush on children and families, outlined to a Melbourne audience the grim statistics of modern America: 20 per cent of families were now fatherless and boys from a female-headed household now had a 60 per cent greater chance of committing rape and 75 per cent greater chance of committing murder. Australian research has shown similarly that boys in fatherless families are far more at risk of suicide and far more likely to end up dropping out of school and/or ending up in a juvenile institution.

"Fathers don't realise how important they are to their children's development," says Richard Fletcher.

"They think it doesn't matter that much if they're not involved. The research doesn't bear that out."

Paul Moulds, director of The Salvation Army's Oasis Youth Support Network in Sydney, told The Weekly that most of the 300 people in crisis that they were assisting were homeless young men. "These young men haven't had father figures in their lives or had positive involvement with any father figures," he says. "Many of them have been violent and aggressive."

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Steve Biddulph has established a world-wide reputation for his ground-breaking work on boys and men's issues. He describes the widespread absence of fathers as "father-hunger" – a deep, biological need for "strong, humorous, tender, sweaty, caring, intelligent masculine input" into a boy's life. This, he says, is the most important concept today in male psychology.

"When I meet with men in gatherings around the world, I conduct a survey [and] the results are always the same. Thirty per cent of men report that they don't even speak to their father. Another 30 per cent have a somewhat 'prickly' or difficult relationship. They do sometimes spend time with their father, but it's a painful and awkward time.

"Around another 30 per cent fare somewhat better – they visit their father or phone him regularly, show up for family get-togethers, go through the motions of being a good son – and yet discuss nothing deeper than lawnmowers.

"Less than 10 per cent of men are friends with their father. Only about one man in 10 says, 'My father is a great help. He's an emotional anchor in my life'."

The absence of so many fathers has led Mark Latham to pledge to train 10,000 new mentors by 2006 should Labor win the next election. Already there are a number of individual mentoring schemes around the country, such as the nationally run Big Brothers Big Sisters Program and The Uncle Project in Byron Bay, on NSW's north coast. Byron Shire holds the dubious distinction of having the highest proportion of single-parent families in the country – 47 per cent as opposed to the national average of 23 per cent. For all its laid-back appeal, Byron Bay is home, therefore, to literally hundreds, if not thousands, of boys and young men with little or no contact with a male role model.

What The Uncle Project tries to do is find men, all of whom are closely screened, to take an active interest in these boys – take them surfing, kayaking, climbing ... anything that might expose them not only to the sometimes rough-and-tumble world of masculinity, but also to the notion that there are men in their community who actually care about them.

"We get mums coming to see us with boys who are two or three years old and they tell us that every time the postman comes to the gate, their sons attach themselves to his legs," says Peter Keil, Uncle's mentoring co-ordinator. "It is obvious to us and to these mothers that these boys need a good male role model in their lives. But they need a role model that is no longer the brutal, warrior moron type of male or the businessman with no interest in his community. They need men who can give a sense of meaning and purpose to these boys' lives."

So successful has The Uncle Project proven to be in Byron Bay that it has become a best practice model for other communities around Australia, a fact not lost on Lindsay Tanner, federal Labor's spokesman for communications. He visited the men from Uncle in April this year and came away hugely impressed.

In January, Mark Latham gave Lindsay the added responsibility of community relationships, a title which will give him carriage of Labor's national mentoring scheme. It's a title that has resulted in him being branded by some of his bemused colleagues, "Minister for Hugs and Kisses". ▶

Lindsay remains unfazed. He has a deep interest in his subject. His recently published book, *Crowded Lives*, was a compelling critique of the contemporary world in which parents now find themselves – on the one hand, under enormous pressure to work harder, on the other hand, under pressure to be actively there for their children.

As a non-custodial parent with responsibility for his young son and daughter every second weekend, and then often for a week at a time during holidays, Lindsay knows the dilemma first-hand. "Prior to my marriage breaking down [in late 1999], I probably didn't appreciate the importance of my role as a father," he told The Weekly. "So it was a wake-up call for my emotional obligations to my children and it also meant I was put in a position where I had nowhere to hide. If I was to stay in my children's lives and contribute to their emotional wellbeing, I had to make a serious effort. I hope I am doing that."

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It needs to be said here that there are many thousands of good fathers in Australia – men who've traded places with their careerist wives to raise their children; men who struggle each day to balance the requirements of work and family; men who know in the core of their being that time with their children is the most priceless gift they could give them. Ten years ago, we wouldn't have had an education minister – as we do today in Dr Brendan Nelson – calling for a review of the gender equity policy in education so that it could become more relevant to both boys *and* girls. Ten years ago, we wouldn't have had a Labor politician – as we do with Lindsay Tanner – writing a book devoted almost entirely to human relationships and its absence from political debate. Ten years ago, we wouldn't have had a federal parliamentary inquiry calling for an overhaul of the child custody system and recommending a mediation and "parenting plan" for *both* separating parents.

(In April this year, federal cabinet endorsed the idea of a new Families Tribunal to encourage separating parents to agree to joint custody of their children. This followed complaints from thousands of aggrieved fathers about the system having discriminated against them.)

Late last year, some of the country's leading songwriters – men like Paul Kelly, Tex Perkins, Archie Roach, Neil Murray and John Butler – collaborated on a CD devoted entirely to the joys of fatherhood. On the Father's Day weekend this year, thousands of men and their children will converge on the NSW north coast town of Bangalow for what will arguably be the world's first Fatherhood Festival.

Today, the University of Newcastle can run The Engaging Fathers Project – designed to get fathers more involved in every aspect of their child's lives, even before they're born. The Benevolent Society is doing a similar thing.

In the corporate world – and at the most senior levels – men are looking at their priorities. What good the corporate salary package if they're only home for dinner one night a week? Why bust their balls for a job if their wives end up walking out the door with their children?

By the middle of the 20th century, it was women's dissatisfaction with their lives that turned the feminist movement into one of the most powerful social forces of the century. Today, it's men's turn to look at the forces that have corroded their lives and left them so deeply unhappy.

Men are questioning what it means to be a good man and, in so doing, becoming more open with each other than they've probably been for centuries. Men are seeking help more than ever, going to counsellors, joining men's groups, beginning to question what has left them so isolated from themselves and the people they love.

They know the old role models don't fit. Not the compulsive worker, not the cool, silent type, not the Sensitive New Age Guy, and certainly not the kind of swaggering male we have come to see among some of our elite sportsmen.

Nigel and Aiden Roberts returned recently from the Pathways to Manhood camp, having spent six days with each other in ways that would have been unheard of 50 years ago, or even 10. Aiden now regards his father as his deepest confidant. "I'm closer to my Dad now than I've ever been," he says. "I can talk to him about anything and he can talk to me. We've become friends."

Some fathers and sons wait all their lives to hear words such as these. Nigel Roberts heard them when his son was 13. Could there be any sweeter music to a man's ears? W

* Names have been changed.