

# Boys in Crisis: An Interview with Warren Farrell

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When IFS contacted Warren Farrell, Ph.D., to request an interview for *Family-Studies* about his forthcoming book, *The Boy Crisis*, he not only said yes but graciously provided us with the book's first draft to review. Dr. Farrell is an award-winning educator, speaker, and activist, who chairs the Coalition to Create a White House Council on Boys and Men. The author of seven books on men's and women's issues, he is probably best known for his 1993 book, *The Myth of Male Power*. He has been described as the "intellectual father of the men's rights movement," but his 30-year focus on the issues facing men and boys actually began with the women's liberation movement, where he played a key leadership role.

In the following interview, Dr. Farrell talks about the journey that led to his focus on men's issues and to his deep concern for today's boys, who often struggle with a sense of hopelessness and a lack of purpose, which he links (at least in part) to family breakdown and dad-deprivation. *Note: this interview will run in two parts and has been edited for clarity.*

**Alyse ElHage:** *You went from playing a key role in the women's liberation movement and being a leader of NOW, to being deeply concerned about family breakdown and what you saw happening to men, especially fathers. How did that journey come about?*

**Warren Farrell:** When the women's movement surfaced in the late sixties, I felt it was so important that I changed my Ph.D. dissertation (at NYU) to focus on it; formed some 300 men's and women's "consciousness-raising" groups (one of which was joined by John Lennon); and was elected three times to the Board of NOW in NYC. This led to my traveling the world trying to get the sexes to understand each other. I soon discovered that getting the sexes to understand each other made Don Quixote look pragmatic, but was at least a formula for perpetual full employment!

But as divorces became common in the 1970s, and I saw families suffering from fatherlessness, I beseeched NOW to support the equal involvement of dads after divorce. But NOW feared losing the support of women who wanted the option of having primary custody.

As the women's movement went mainstream, I loved the options for women it created, but also felt there was a demonizing men, an undervaluing of the family, and a blindness to how boys and men were being harmed that would have profound effects on families, boys, addiction, careers, women wanting children without the involvement of failure-to-launch dads, male unemployment, the global economy, and so on. When I uncovered reasons that were not part of the public consciousness, I felt I had something to contribute—which led to *The Boy Crisis*.

**AE:** *You've argued that boys are basically a "national afterthought" compared to our focus on girls. Why don't we focus more on boys, and how has this lack of focus contributed to the boy crisis you describe?*

**WF:** It starts with how we've used our sons historically. Every society that has survived has done so by training its boys to be disposable—disposable in war, in work (coal mines, oil rigs, firefighting). This means the survival of our sons conflicts with our survival. And it is hard to become psychologically attached to someone we might lose. And to train our sons to forfeit their lives in war and hazardous jobs (92 percent of workplace deaths are male), we had to train them to act tough and not express feelings. We don't pay attention to the wheel that doesn't squeak. And women can't hear what men don't say. Which is also why boys and men's weakness is their façade of strength.

Second, we've assumed males had the power and made the rules, so if they had a problem, they could just change the rules. *The Boy Crisis* explains a different type of powerlessness boys and men often experience. For example, a boy's dream to be an actor, writer or mountain climber often becomes, if he has children, a reality of selling product X that he doesn't believe in—or, in brief, feeling obligated to earn money his family spends while he dies sooner. We've cast men's higher pay as privilege and power, as opposed to understanding that the road to high pay is a toll road. When we discount a gender's contribution—as we used to when women said “I'm just a housewife”—it's easier to make them an afterthought.

All of this contributes to our caring less about boys, and the closer they get to becoming men, the less we care. What we care little about can easily become an afterthought. And it isn't just a *national* afterthought. The boy crisis exists in the 61 largest developed countries.

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**AE:** *You argue that the number one cause of the boy crisis is dad deprivation. And you write that the gap between dad-deprived boys and the dad-enriched boys will “become the single biggest predictor of the gap between boys who become economically poor versus economically rich.” What happens when boys do not have their father in their life, for whatever reason?*

**WF:** Boys with minimal or no father involvement often look to their dads as role models, but because they don't have much time with their dads, their role models are more “straw men” or “straw dads.” These boys don't benefit from overnights, hang-out time, and the many hours it takes for boys to bond with their dads, and trust that their feelings won't be dismissed. Dads tend to build bonds with their sons by, for example, playing games and rough-housing, and then use the resulting bond as leverage for their sons to “get to bed on time” lest there be “no playing tomorrow night.” This boundary enforcement teaches boys postponed gratification. Boys with minimal or no father involvement more frequently suffer from an addiction to immediate gratification. For example, with minimal or no father involvement there is a much greater likelihood of video game addiction, more ADHD, worse grades in every subject, less empathy, less assertiveness (but more aggression), fewer social skills, more alienation and loneliness, more obesity, rudderlessness, anger, drugs, drinking, delinquency, disobedience, depression and suicide.

**AE:** *Hopelessness is one problem you talk about in your book. And I've certainly seen this hopelessness in my family with my brother and a nephew, who both have absent fathers. My single mom would tell you she often felt helpless to fix this for her son. Why does dad-deprivation cause a sense of hopelessness in boys?*

**WF:** I appreciate your sharing about your younger brother and nephew, and also the hopelessness many single moms feel. Single moms are among society's most devoted, giving people. So for their sons to often have so many problems is heart-breaking. Here's why it is not the fault of the mom, but there is something crucial moms can do.

A boy looks at his dad and sees the man he could become. If his dad is minimally present, that doesn't give him much hope that marriage with children will lead to him having the emotional satisfaction of being a fully-involved dad. Some dad-deprived boys see their dad living in a small apartment after divorce, and having to fight in court to be more involved with them, even as their dads are working a job they don't like to pay for the children they can't see as much as they'd like. That reinforces their purpose void and an abyss of hopelessness.

The solution is for a mom to become a pioneer in understanding what dads contribute, and why their more-frequent propensities toward rough-housing, tough-love, boundary enforcement, and letting boys work it out on their own often seem like insensitive parenting when in fact they are a crucial balance to a mom's contribution to children's development in general, and to boys' development in particular. *The Boy Crisis* gives a lot more detail, but I hope this gives a clue.

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**AE:** *One of the most powerful topics you address in the book is how hurting boys ultimately hurt others or themselves. And you cite several recent examples of school shooters who were essentially dad-deprived young men. This is a factor in the school shooting crisis that is often overlooked or ignored.*

**WF:** Yes, boys who hurt, hurt us. School shootings—which are both homicides and either direct or *de facto* suicides—are just one example of dad-deprived boys both being hurt and hurting us—in essence, blaming their schools for not being adequate substitute dads.

I was impacted by the evidence I discuss more in-depth in *The Boy Crisis* of the degree to which ISIS recruits have in common their being dad-deprived boys. I recalled then that Hitler Youth also searched for recruits among boys who were fatherless.

Fatherless boys are far more likely to be molested, recruited by gangs, and to join the military—each of which often produces its own form of PTSD, whether depression, isolation and/or alienation. Boys with dad-deprivation often experience a volcano of festering anger. Anger is vulnerability's mask, and with boys' much greater tendency to act out, the boys who hurt will be the ones most likely to hurt us.

**AE:** *You argue that boys today suffer from a lack of purpose, and you referred briefly to this earlier. How has this lack of purpose contributed to the boy crisis?*

**WF:** The boy crisis is a crisis of developed countries. Developed countries have in common the luxury of divorce. Divorce often leads to dad-deprived children. Which leads to boys not having a role model to give them a sense of purpose as a future role model.

Prior to the surge in divorce, young boys and girls learned Mars and Venus-type senses of purpose: women: raise children; men: raise money. Women: risk life in childbirth; men: risk life in war.

The women's movement helped our daughters prepare for divorce—or being single—by expanding the options for our daughters' sense of purpose: work full-time, children full-time, or do some combination of both. This created what I call "The Era of Multi-Purpose Women."

However, there was no "Era of Multi-Purpose Men" for our sons. If your son is reasonably successful, marries and has children, he has three "slightly different" options for a sense of purpose: work full-time, work full-time, and work full-time.

When "work full-time" meant a young man had a unique role—sole breadwinner—he felt he had a unique contribution to make. However, once our daughters could also define themselves by their work, being the sole breadwinner could no longer *uniquely* define our sons as men.

The solution involves guiding our sons to seize the opportunity to find more meaningful senses of purpose in work and parenting—ones tailored to their unique self. We have to develop "The Era of Multi-Purpose Boys and Men." Dads and male mentors are crucial in this process, as are women who understand how to not throw out the baby of masculinity with the bathwater.