

What Is the Matter with the Modern Boy?

He Is Less of a Boy. But Not More of a Man, Than His Father Was—The Reason and Cure Outlined by One Who Knows Him

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IN what respects is the American boy changing? His sports are different, his books are different, his amusements are different, his school and his studies are different from those of his father. He is possibly more alert, more self-reliant, better informed, more precocious. He has grown older in his experiences, he has become busier, he has become more restless, he has become less boyish. He is more a creature of distractions and amusements, and although he may be less of a boy, he is not more of a man.

There are few subjects of study that are more interesting than the personality of the American boy. In spite of the fact that he is frequently badly spoiled, he is so adaptable and resourceful that he compels often one's affection, if not one's approval. He knows about practical, every-day matters, and about almost everything except those things a knowledge of which can be gained only from books. In view of the increasing excitement of American life and the great share which young Americans are allowed to take in it, it would be miraculous if they were good students. It is to be feared that the American boy of today is receiving the kind of instruction and is pursuing the kind of diversions that will lead to mental degeneracy and national incompetency.

Nowadays, the greatest thing in the life of the average boy is athletics. This is another name for organized play, but it has not the simplicity or the freedom it used to have. It is surrounded with a greater amount of ceremony. It requires a greater amount of paraphernalia; it has become conventionalized. Certainly, play, or rather athletics, has a much larger share of a boy's time and interest than ever before. The advantages of well controlled outdoor sport can hardly be overestimated. The change that has taken place is that play has become intensified, and especially that it has assumed an unnaturally important part in the thoughts of boys.

It is true that the type produced by our best boarding schools is the symmetrical product of thorough-going instruction and well organized and well regulated athletics. There can be no question that some of the fine qualities shown by these young fellows can be traced to the discipline they have gained from their sports as well as to the mental training of the classroom. To many boys, however, athletics, instead of becoming an aid in their scholarship, has developed into a distraction, and is crowding out more important things. The schoolboy athlete is a comparatively new type, and, in many cases, he is by no means an attractive figure. In the boy's code it is accepted as a primary thing that everybody should aspire to be a star in one or more sports. He may be anything else that he wants provided he is athletic. To be a "grind" is almost unpardonable, but if the "grind" is at the same time an expert player, his good scholarship is accepted as a sort of appropriate, but by no means necessary, embellishment of his natural greatness.

When boys discuss their fellow students, success in their minds usually means athletic achievement. It is, of course, exasperating to find boys develop tremendous excitement over an athletic triumph, whereas the intellectual successes of a school arouse no enthusiasm. This is discouraging, but it would be an intrepid schoolmaster who would hope to succeed in readjusting the values which schoolboys place upon things.

I suppose the headmaster of every boarding school is informed by his patrons very often that the reason for sending their boys from home is to avoid the great number of distractions to which they are exposed. They complain that the boy's study hours in the evening are continually broken into by social diversions. All boys do not have the same opportunities in a social way, but the number and variety of parties to which even very young people are invited are

growing at an amazing rate, and this condition is making the work of the schools much more difficult. Not only is the number increasing, but they are assuming in a larger measure each year the characteristics of the entertainments which are given for adults.

There is a factor in the life of schoolboys which is not observed in any other country except America. I allude to the extreme freedom of the sexes. Girls begin to play a part in the existence of

performances. They seem to be surcharged with the sentiment of the piece. It is evident that they have been stirred by what they have seen. Ninety-nine out of a hundred of these productions are wholly untrue to life. They have no literary or artistic value, but they always have a sentimental "punch." They are "fast and furious," "vivid, vigorous, vital stories." They contain "a thrill, a tear, a heart-throb," "just one gasp after another," "the acme of pep, punch



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young Americans at a surprisingly early age. This statement is not intended necessarily as a criticism of our social conditions. There are some advantages which come from the unconstrained association of boys and girls; but it must be said that what the schools, especially the day schools, accomplish is sometimes impaired by the large share which the boy's girl friends have in his occupation. There are many households where the boys are required to live in a normal and sensible manner, and where they are protected from many of the distracting influences to which reference is made. But one cannot go far in studying the characteristics of American boys before he discovers that the opposite sex occupies a disproportionate amount of his time.

One of the time absorbing, and for the most part unprofitable, diversions of the modern boy is the moving picture theatre. The moving pictures usually mean something big with sentiment and adventure. The boy barely tolerates reproductions of beautiful scenery, or pictures of industrial processes, or natural history scenes. He likes the humorous features; he gives a grudging interest to the striking pictures of everyday life, but he luxuriates in the longer plays without which no moving picture entertainment is complete.

One watches a group of boys as they leave the theatre after one of these highly colored, unreal, melodramatic

and power," "fifteen crashing chapters," "the startling, stirring story of the life struggle of two women," "gigantic climaxes." A picture deals "daringly and unsparingly with a vital phase of modern marriage." "The most superlative superlatives are inadequate to express the dynamics of the climaxes."

What effect is the indulgence in this form of imaginative debauch going to have upon the minds of American boys? A generation ago boys devoured novels which dealt with wild stories of Indians, detectives and hairbreadth adventure. But the most enterprising spirits were able to read only a few of these books a year. The doses of unreality were neither large nor frequently repeated. This form of literature has been almost discarded, and the boy gets his sentiment and his imaginative excitement in big ladlefuls from the moving pictures. They certainly are not stimulating to his mentality, although they may have a very exciting effect upon his emotions. The unrealities which are laid before him cannot fail to give him a distorted idea of life. In the realm of the moving picture virtue is triumphant and vice rarely gets off without serious chastisement. The real conditions of life must seem unreal to the boy when there arises in the back of his mind the long procession of film heroes and heroines whose actions, somehow or other, do not seem to square with the men and women of the everyday world.

Even the most taciturn and self-restrained and unemotional types of boys have a deep substratum of sentiment which deserves a better and different treatment from that which it gets at the hands of the writers of moving picture plays. It seems particularly unfair and improper that the hidden longings of boys for what is heroic and daring and distinguished should be spoiled by the impossible heroism and bravery and elegance of the figures on the screen.

The American boy is not generally much concerned with what is artistic, but he is a fearful dreamer and sentimentalist. He lives a double life. His passion for athletics and for the usual activities of boys covers an inner life about which he almost never talks and about whose existence his adult friends have little conception. The characters which are shown in the picture plays are as he would like to have them. They seem to realize some of the aspirations which he cherishes in secret. It is unfortunate that his pent-up sentiment should be wasted upon such unworthy objects. But quite apart from these considerations, they represent a great waste of time. They are a form of dissipation which is by no means elevating, and it is clear that they are not contributing toward the creation of better scholarship and better ideas of life.

One of the noteworthy and valuable developments in the last generation in the lives of boys consists in the fact that science has been brought down to their level. The exploits of the boy detective were not more interesting to boys of a former generation than are the romances of scientific progress today. Only a certain percentage of boys have mechanical ability, but they all, or nearly all, seem to have a passion for reading of the wonders of science. The automobile has done a great deal to popularize mechanics. The average boy is a veritable encyclopedia of lore concerning all the different phases of automobile construction and operation. He knows the latest type of engine, he can discuss in endless detail, and generally with great intelligence, the merits and improvements that the various cars possess as they are put on the market from year to year. Many a father has become convinced that his boy is destined to be a great figure in the engineering world because of his dexterity in dealing with his automobile.

But the automobile is only one element in the boy's store of mechanics. He is frequently a wireless expert of greater or less degree. He has learned how to construct a coil; he is learning the telegraph alphabet and other details of operation. Sometimes he is able to persuade his father to allow him to install the aerial on top of his house and the rest of his equipment in the garret. Sometimes he even succeeds in securing a license as an operator. In any case, wireless telegraphy is one of the hobbies of the American boy.

It would seem that schoolboys know more about flying machines than their parents do. The daring of the aviator and the hazardous nature of his calling appeal very strongly to the boy's imagination, and the fascinating mechanical devices of the aeroplane are particularly absorbing objects of study. I have heard a boy whose knowledge of decimals and fractions was still very elementary discuss with amazing thoroughness the different types of flying machines—the characteristics of their engines, their lifting power, their stability, and many of the other details of their construction. He knew what he was talking about because he had built one himself, but his father would not allow him to have a strong enough engine because he did not want him to fly—yet.

It is hardly worth while to classify or enumerate all the phases of the boy's interest in matters mechanical or electrical. It is sufficient to know that this popularization of science is one of the important and new factors in the experiences of boys of today. This phenomenon is not altogether extraordinary when we

consider the fact that mechanics and machinery play a much larger part in the life of the average adult than ever before. The remarkable thing is the instinctive interest that boys display in mechanics. This feeling has, doubtless, led schoolmen to pay greater attention to manual training, but because boys like to do and undo things with their hands does not prove that this branch of study is going to help them greatly in gaining greater mental power and better methods of concentration.

I have been frequently asked what sort of things the boys of today like to read, and I have answered that they enjoy the popular presentation of mechanics and science. They like a short story with a great deal of action. They do not read many complete books unless they are of a peculiarly stirring character. Mention good literature to most boys and they at once place themselves in a posture of defense. The greatest element in their reading is the sporting pages of the newspapers. This is the boy's favorite hunting ground. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of sports before he develops any interest in the other portions of the newspapers. If his school work demanded an examination in the biographies of athletes or the condition of contemporary athletics, he would receive a mark that would make a strong contrast to his other averages.

The American boys' school has changed in the last generation in many respects. Education, because it is so common, does not seem to be so valuable, and the boy's respect for learning has certainly not increased. The school is now supplying many elements in the life of young people which it formerly did not possess.

Public school men are interested almost as much in the sociological side of their work as they are in the strictly academic features. On this account, as well as for many other reasons, the school has extended its sphere far beyond the old-fashioned limits of teaching the contents of books. It has become the centre of a much larger number of diversions. Athletics has a more important place in the life of schoolboys. The social features are more prominent. Some of these changes are doubtless for the better, but nearly all of them produce a wider dispersion of the boy's attention, and he as a result has a lessened regard for the importance and value and dignity of scholarship. In the revolution that has taken place within the schools in the last generation nothing is more significant than the growth of the conception that there should be an immediate practical value for whatever is presented in the boy's course of instruction.

The freedom of the American boy's existence has given him a certain kind of originality and mental independence that would make of him a good scholar if patience and industry could be added to his other admirable qualities. The education that he gets at school lags far behind what he learns from his surroundings—from his contact with people. If one could only harness the power that he seems to possess of absorbing knowledge from his associations, some of the problems of education would be solved. His cleverness and his resourcefulness seem to subside when brought face to face with the printed page.

The first step that is necessary to make things better is to realize that all is not as it should be. In order to make

education more worth while it is necessary to get back to a simpler form of existence, to resist the encroachments that the unnatural amusements are making upon the time and attention of boys. Above all, effort should be made to gain for scholarship a more important place in the thoughts of Americans. Practical education, vocational and technical training are necessary if the resources of our country are to be developed wisely, but American scholarship and American schools should stand for something vastly bigger. American boys are not realizing their possibilities, and they will not do so until their lives are less artificial, and until the schools appreciate the necessity of greater thoughtfulness.

The schools can hardly be expected to create a race of mental giants, but they are likely to produce a nation of pigmies if the present tendencies in education continue. Recent reformers have set for themselves a standard of scholastic achievement which is so low that it is hard to believe their methods can produce men who will be able to accomplish anything that is distinguished. There is unquestionably a place in the American scheme of education for such theories. They help to make pleasant the lives of many children who are unable, on account of their surroundings or on account of their limited mentality, to do more serious school work; but a great danger to American life consists in making the very elementary accomplishments of such schools as modern educators would have us create a national standard of what American boys should do.

Possibly the picture of the American

boy which is drawn here is done in colors that are too gloomy. When one goes over the list of one's boy acquaintances he finds a good many who are real boys and who are unspoiled by the modern tendencies to which reference has been made. At the same time, in this list a not inconsiderable number inevitably lack discipline because of the failure of the homes to exclude the influences lurking everywhere to disturb the normal manner of living which is necessary if boys are to get the right kind of education. There is a feverishness, an unrest, an excitement in American life as it affects young people which bodes ill for their proper development. High thinking and austere mental discipline seem to be strangely out of harmony with the occupations of a large part of the American youth.

I suppose General von Bernhardt would say that America needs a war to eliminate the flippancy and thoughtlessness and triviality of our boys. We certainly do not want a war, nor do we need one, but we do need a national shaking up—something that will make us realize fully that all is not well with the American youth, that the kind of training that many of them are receiving is not going to produce great thinkers, or great statesmen, or great artists. If only some one with an authoritative voice would proclaim convincingly the need of a more elevated program of education! If he could only make the public feel that it is not undemocratic for a nation to have an intellectual aristocracy! If such a man could make the people of the United States realize the emptiness and the futility of the lives of many American boys he would bestow a great blessing on the nation.