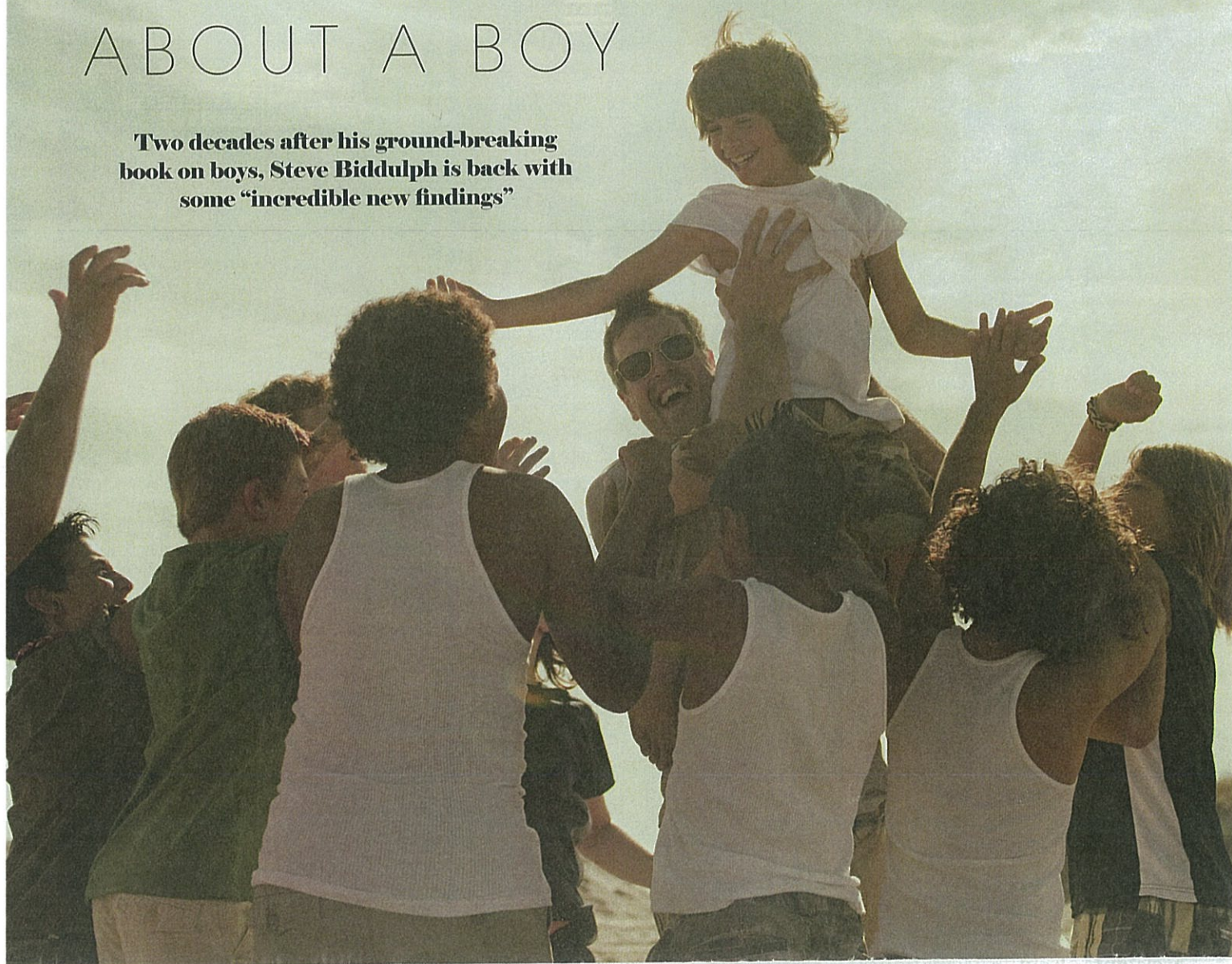


By Rachel Carlyle

ABOUT A BOY

Two decades after his ground-breaking book on boys, Steve Biddulph is back with some “incredible new findings”





It was 20 years ago that Steve Biddulph first alerted the world to the crisis in boys' lives. The eminent Australian psychologist began a campaign to recognise that boys' emotional needs were being neglected. As a result, they were

falling behind at school and were three times more likely than girls to have problems with reading and become addicted to drugs in later life.

In a newly revised version of *Raising Boys*, the seminal book he wrote in 1998, Biddulph sets out to address the latest issues that worry parents of sons. It's not all bad news, though. Despite growing anxiety over screen time and the horrors that lurk on the internet, Biddulph believes that in many ways it's a lot easier to bring up a son now. We

know a lot more about the way young minds develop. We better understand gender differences. Fathers tend to be more hands-on. "With all the work over the past 20 years, there has never been a better time to be a boy, at least for many centuries," he says.

In the past two decades, Biddulph explains, research has proved what he and many others suspected all along – that boys are more vulnerable than girls, especially in the first few years of their lives, because of their biology.

"There are some incredible new findings about boys that we didn't know in 1998 – that in the first year their brains are weaker, more unprotected and grow more slowly," he says. "We now know from research that boys have particular times – in the first year, at four, at eight and at puberty – when doing the right thing is critical," he says.

In 1997, Biddulph's was a lone voice challenging the consensus that the sexes were essentially the same. "I started with the basics, recognising that boys were different creatures with

specific risk factors, which we had been in denial about up until then," he says. "They were more likely to fail at school, to have difficulty reading and communicating, and to have problems due to lack of engagement by fathers. Today, so much has changed. Dads have trebled the time they spend with their kids in one generation."

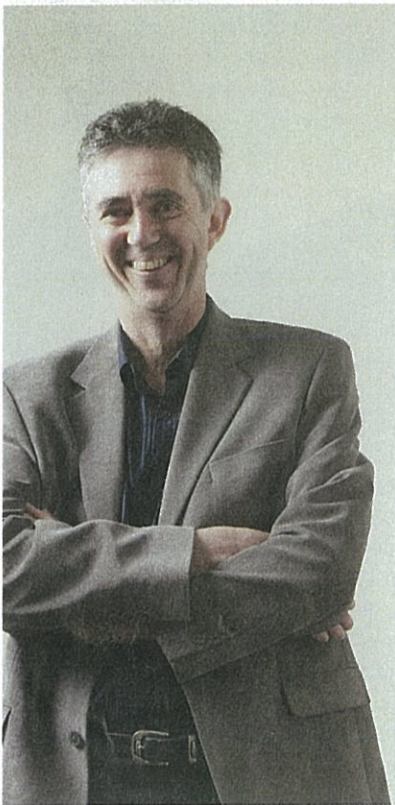
Our understanding of gender has also become more sophisticated, and Biddulph has rewritten the book's section on the differences between girls' and boys' brains. "There's overlap and variation," he says. "Kids are not hung up about being effeminate or macho any more, which is a huge change that has freed everybody."

Biddulph was a shy and gentle child – what psychologists now call a "low-testosterone boy".

"That meant I was not a 'real' boy growing up in the 1950s, as I wasn't into fighting and I wasn't big and muscular," he says. "At least now we can see there are many different types of boys, and in some ways I'm more worried about the high-testosterone boys, because they are misfits in the modern world. They're three times more likely to have a reading disability, which is a serious problem when you can't get a job shovelling gravel and you have to be able to talk, read and communicate."

He says it's important for parents growing boys to know that most males are slower at learning to talk, read and write than most girls. Most start puberty a year or two later than girls, boys' puberty doesn't end until they are about 17, and their brains don't fully mature until their 20s. "These things matter if you have a boy to raise, and keep alive," Biddulph says.

Misfits: "I'm more worried about the high-testosterone boys," says Biddulph



THERE'S A MINI PUBERTY AT FOUR

Four-year-old boys can suddenly become more energetic, which in 1997 was believed to be down to the doubling of testosterone. Recent research shows that at four, boys are laying down Leydig cells in their testes to ramp up testosterone production later. "In a sense, four is the start of the puberty process," Biddulph says. "We don't know if this is connected to the often observed increase in boisterousness at this age, but I suspect it is," Biddulph says.

BOYS GET EMOTIONAL AT EIGHT

If your eight-year-old has suddenly become more tearful or bad tempered, it could be down to the adrenarche, the preparatory stage for puberty, Biddulph says. Australian research from 2015 found that the adrenarche is more likely to cause emotional upheaval for boys than girls. It could result in more tears, but also more aggression in an insecure boy. "The key is to be understanding," Biddulph says. "If he has a meltdown, choose a time to discuss it when he will feel calmer."

NEVER TELL A BOY NOT TO CRY

We are better at encouraging boys to show their emotions, Biddulph believes, but there's still work to be done. "There is still a very widespread suppression of emotion in boys," he says, "and it's only very enlightened parents – the soft, middle-class, organic baby food types – who are aware of how crying protects mental health and heals the brain after loss." If boys don't cry, it will come out in other ways, often as anger or violence. Biddulph advises parents to stand beside or hug them when they are crying and affirm them by saying, "You really care, you're a great boy", or "It's really sad what's happened".

BOYS CAN BE 20 MONTHS BEHIND GIRLS

Exposure to testosterone in the womb and during the first year after birth slows boys' brain development so much they are far more vulnerable than girls to stress, a recent research review found. "Boys are so far behind in their brain development that the frontal cortex, caudate and temporal lobes – the thoughtful and analytical parts of the brain – are faster growing in girls by as much as 20 months, and at ages seven to 12 boys lag by as much as two years in social sensitivity," Biddulph says. "We have to

work on boys' abilities to think through their actions, understand their feelings and those of others, and be calmed by loving affection when they are upset. We have to not blame or shame them for not being on the same trajectory as girls."

GROUP CHILDCARE CAN DAMAGE BOYS

Biddulph has always stuck his neck out on this. Now, he points to new research by US neuropsychologist Dr Allan Schore showing increased vulnerability of boys' brains in their first year. "The research indicates that probably no boys under the age of one should be in group care," he says. "It is still less desirable in their second year, and still second-rate to what we can provide in their third. Girls are somewhat more resilient." By the age of three, part-time group care can be a plus. "I have a choice: to make everyone feel good, or to tell the truth," Biddulph says. "Attachment really matters and you can't pay someone to provide love."

YOU MUST TALK ABOUT PORN

Just under half of all Australian children aged nine to 16 have viewed pornography, according to the Australian Institute of Family Studies. "Younger boys are the biggest concern because their sexuality is still being formed and can easily be moulded towards cruelty and non-intimate sex. Girls tell us that boys don't even kiss; they want to get straight into it because people don't kiss in porn. Parents have to say to their boys, 'You are going to see this stuff and it's very inaccurate about how couples make love.'" Tell them it can be harmful to keep looking at such material. "Don't make your son feel bad for being curious... but explain that you want to guard him against getting addicted."

PUT STRICT LIMITS ON GAMING

"Left to themselves, most boys' gaming will get out of control," Biddulph says. "Kids are not good at putting limits on themselves because of their immature brain development, and one of our jobs as parents is to provide these limits." He thinks 30 to 40 minutes a night and perhaps two hours on weekend days is about right. "The biggest problem is that screens are isolating. You don't get to learn social skills and you don't share your worries." ● *Raising Boys in the Twenty-First Century* by Steve Biddulph (\$29.99, Finch Publishing) is out on Tuesday