

SOCIETY

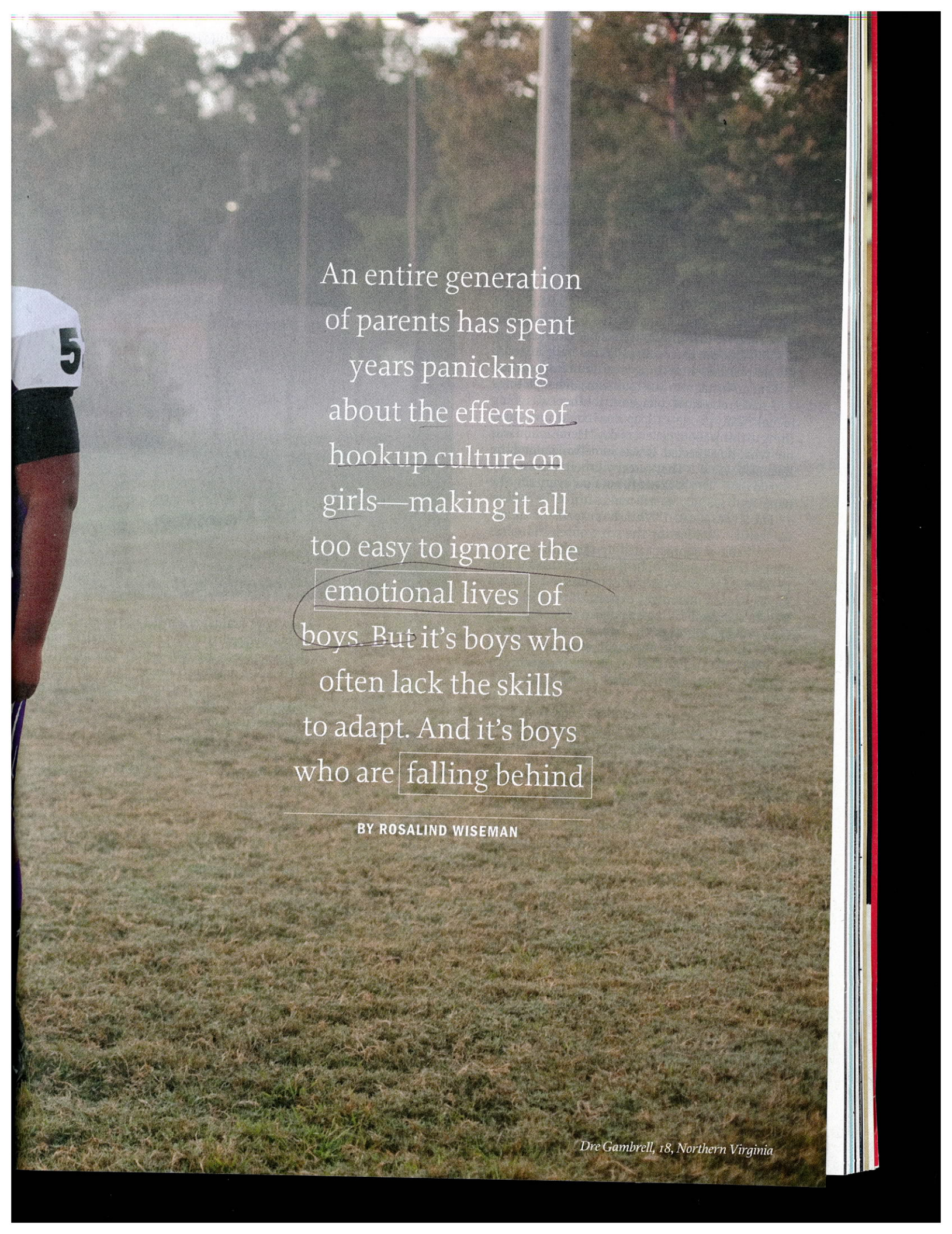
WHAT

BOYS

WANT



Photographs by Laura Pannack for TIME



An entire generation
of parents has spent
years panicking
about the effects of
hookup culture on
girls—making it all
too easy to ignore the
emotional lives of
boys. But it's boys who
often lack the skills
to adapt. And it's boys
who are falling behind

BY ROSALIND WISEMAN

Dre Gambrell, 18, Northern Virginia

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IGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD DRE GAMBRELL doesn't look like the sentimental type. A defensive tackle at Potomac Falls High, he's a big athlete at a big, diverse 1,600-student school in Northern Virginia. A guy like Dre doesn't have to look

too hard for a date, but not long ago he fell for a girl who wasn't in his usual universe—a pretty girl, a friend of a friend from another school. He tried to get to know her, but their conversations stalled. So Dre thought he'd do something creative to impress her: "I went on Instagram and took some of her pictures and made a cute little collage and told her I was going to make it my phone wallpaper so I could have something to think about her every day." Her reaction was not what he expected. It was something along the lines of "Ewww ... That's creepy as hell. Why would you do that?" Dre backed off, but now every time he happens to see her, she still makes fun of the collage.

Dre is complicated. While he's capable of romantic gestures and feeling the sting of rejection, he's also capable of sophisticated manipulation. Sometimes, as he explains it, he'll ask girls to send him pictures of themselves partly undressed, and not for the reason one might expect. "If the girl lies a lot, goes around saying she doesn't like me ... I'll have that picture of her," he says. In an environment where looking as if you've been rejected in front of your friends is tough to stomach, the images are insurance. Sometimes, Dre says, he'll ask for a picture just to see if a girl will send it.

Such is the code of Boy World—a place where the rules of courtship shift by the hour and the Internet can accelerate any teen impulse to the speed of light. As an entire generation of parents panics about hookup culture and its effect on their daughters, it's easy to write off the emotional lives of boys. (Even the word *hookup* is fraught with ambiguity; it can refer to any kind of physical intimacy ranging from kissing to intercourse, though among high school kids it's less likely to be the latter.) Boys often wind up portrayed as either opportunistic perpetrators of the worst sexual behaviors or thoughtless beneficiaries of an era in which boys get sex and girls get hurt.

But is that really what boys want?

As the mother of two boys who's worked with teens for more than 20 years—and having previously written a book about girls' interior lives and social dynamics—I wanted to delve deeper. So I spent two years researching my new book to better understand boys and the challenges they face. I explored the latest research, talking to experts and examining studies in fields ranging from psychology to the neuroscience of

Wiseman is the author of Masterminds and Wingmen (Harmony Books, 2013) as well as Queen Bees and Wannabes (Harmony Books, 2002)



81%

Percentage of suicides in the 10-to-24 age group that were males, vs. 19% females, despite the fact that more girls report being depressed

43%

Percentage of college students who are male, down from 58% in 1970

how boys' brains are wired. I also worked with and interviewed pediatricians, occupational therapists and learning specialists. But—most critically—I conducted detailed ongoing conversations with hundreds of boys and young men across the U.S. (Straight and gay boys participated. I saw their issues as intertwined, and I focused on how homophobia and the performance aspect of masculinity affect both straight and gay boys.) This cross section of teens I spoke with came from places as varied as elite East Coast academies and New Orleans charter schools, working-class towns in the Midwest and upper-middle-class Southern California suburbs. What I found was striking.

First, to get it out of the way: *of course* boys want sex, and they spend a lot of time thinking about it. (Let's remember: so do girls.) More surprisingly, though, I found that teen boys face many of the same challenges and are longing for many of the same things as girls: they fall in love easily, get their hearts broken and have very mixed feelings about the hypersexualized culture in which they live; they hunger to be more open about their feelings, both with their families and with their male friends, though they exist in a culture that discourages such emotional openness; and they desperately want to maintain their social position among their guy friends, regardless of the cost to them or others.

While some of these problems are eternal, the landscape for boys has been changing in significant ways. A culture of sexual liberation and empowerment for girls and young women has left boys (and



parents) largely at sea. The rise of digital communication has opened up new ways for boys to express themselves to girls, with a scary and complicated lack of established rules. And the very idea of pickup culture (whether or not teen sexual behavior really changed all that much in recent decades) altered how boys see their female peers. As many boys are left to process these cultural changes on their own, lacking many of the communication skills girls have in spades, they appear to be paying a price for this deficit in elevated rates of depression and falling levels of academic achievement.

What's Changed—and What Hasn't

LOOKING AT THE DATA ON ADOLESCENTS AND RELATIONSHIPS, it's surprising how much overlap there is between boys and girls—and how little things have changed in the past few decades on key issues like when most teens lose their virginity.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit that promotes reproductive health and rights, only 10% of teens have had sex by age 15, and there is little difference between the genders in the age of first intercourse. In 2012 the birthrate among teens dropped to the lowest level in the 73 years the government has been collecting these data, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It's now less than half what it was in 1991. Among students in grades 9 through 12 nationwide, the percentage who say they've ever had sexual intercourse actually decreased from 1991 to 2011, to 47.4% from 54.1%.



ON PARENTS

'I have a little sister who is 15, and they will pay a lot more attention to her feelings, because when a girl is sad she's not afraid to show it. And boys, when the moment comes to say something, they don't even know how.'

—SEBASTIAN LUNA (LEFT), 19, SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



ON BETRAYAL BY A FRIEND

'WE NEVER REALLY SAT DOWN AND TALKED ABOUT IT. EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, IT GETS BROUGHT UP, BUT I JUST LET IT GO. I KEEP HIM AWAY FROM CERTAIN STUFF.'

—DRE GAMBRELL, 18, NORTHERN VIRGINIA

Despite our culture's recent focus on girls and their self-esteem, it's actually boys whose emotional and academic lives have been suffering. A working paper this summer from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that from the 1980s to the 2000s, the mode (that is, statistically, the value that appeared most often) of girls' high school GPA distribution shifted from B to A, essentially leaving boys behind, as the mode of boys' GPA distribution stayed at B. College enrollment has followed the same pattern. Whereas 58% of college students in 1970 were men, by 2010, 57% of college students were women, according to a recent study by Harvard's Graduate School of Education. The same study found that women are now also more likely than men to earn college degrees and to enroll in graduate school, making up 60% of grad students.

Girls are more likely to report attempting or contemplating suicide—but boys are much more likely to die from suicide. For every 100 girls in the 15-to-19 age group who commit suicide, 394 boys in the same range kill themselves, according to the CDC. High school is when the suicide rate for boys spikes to four times the rate for girls, whereas in early adolescence it is three times the rate for girls. That gender gap has been consistent since 1991. Mental-health experts have long wrestled with the question of how to narrow that gap and improve suicide prevention for boys and men, but because they are less likely to report depression, it's more difficult to help them.

"As boys enter manhood, they do, in fact, begin to talk less," says Niobe Way, a professor of applied psychology at NYU and the author of *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*. Her research has shown a big decline in the use of words related to positive emotions and an increase in feelings of isolation among boys after age 15. And that isolation can lead to depression. The more boys reported not sharing their feelings with their friends and the more they reported figuring things out on their own, her research has found, the higher their scores were on depressive symptoms such as feelings of worthlessness and loss of interest in normal activities.

When the Advice Is Just Bad

CLEARLY, GIRLS AREN'T THE ONLY ONES STRUGGLING with modern adolescence—but at least most girls have developed the vocabulary to talk about the connection between sex and relationships, and they usually have an adult who believes it's critical to their health and safety to have those conversations. Many boys don't have that. Often, all they get are stern warnings based on the assumption that their overpowering sex drive makes them thoughtless or irresponsible.

"Well, they say things like 'Try to think with your other head. The bigger one,'" Ian Davis, 19, told me at a group discussion I held in a classroom at his

high school in a small town east of Columbus, Ohio. "When I'm walking out the door," another boy told me, "without fail, my mother will say, 'Don't bring me back any grandbabies.'"

Treating boys as emotionally illiterate has costs. It shames them into hiding how much they want meaningful connections in their intimate relationships and leaves them unprepared to process their feelings—or convinces them they can't go to anyone for support when they're in pain. I met Sebastian Luna, 19, at his small high school in Southern California. A good-looking, well-liked kid, Sebastian says he thinks guys are more prone than girls to fall in love in high school because, as he puts it, they don't think so much about it. It just happens to them.

The first time Sebastian said, "I love you," it was to a girl he was dating whom he describes as stunningly beautiful. "She had a great personality, really fun, and I was head over heels. She was all I thought about for months," Sebastian told me. "My parents said, 'If only you could treat school with that same attention.'"

Then he started hearing rumors that she was cheating on him. Friends told him they'd seen her with someone else at a party. "I texted her and said, 'I'm coming over,'" he recalls. "Then she confessed."

"But the thing is, I was infatuated with her," Sebastian says. "I didn't want to lose her. I cried. I stayed up all night. Then in the morning, I realized I couldn't do it." He broke up with the girl the next day and never spoke to her again.

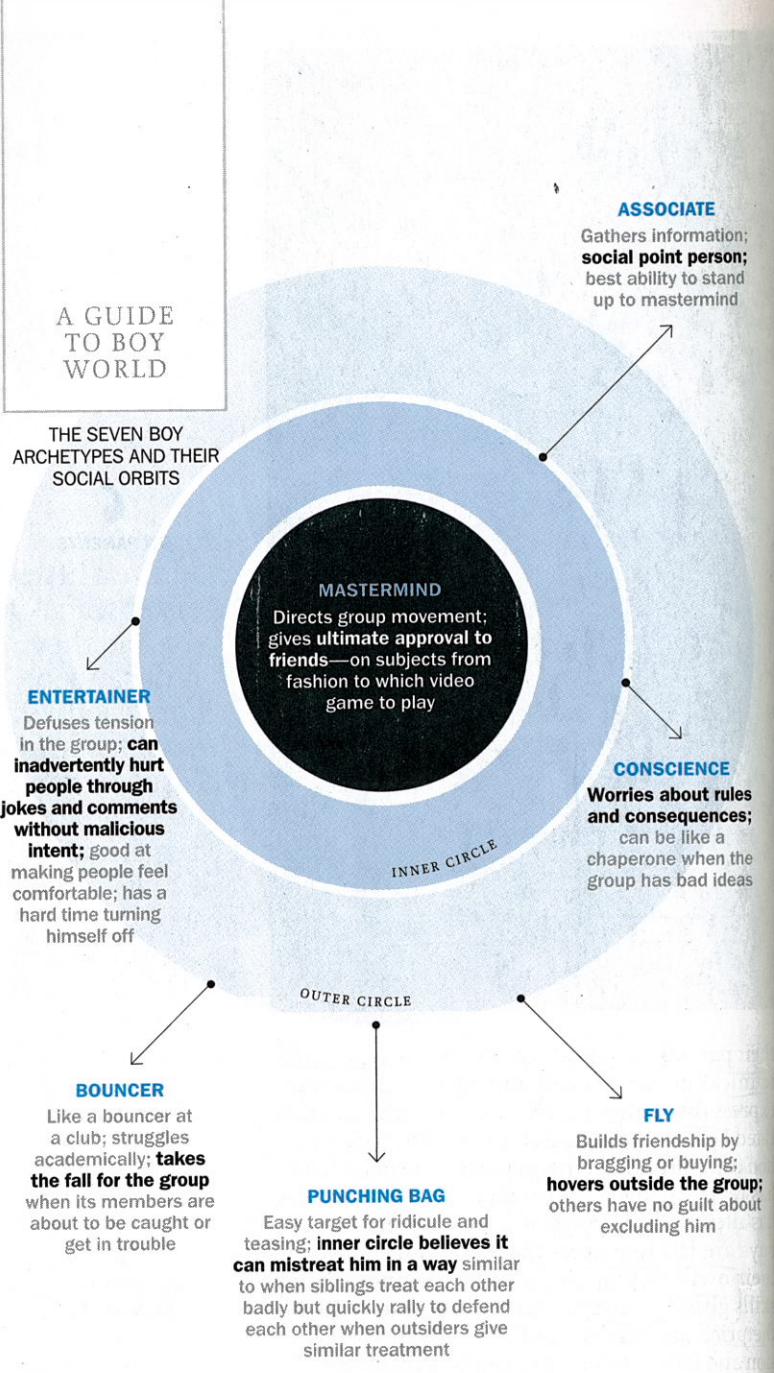
In all this turmoil, he never even considered going to his parents for advice after the breakup. "My parents are amazing," Sebastian says. "But they're not really concerned about me unless I'm really depressed... I have a little sister who is 15, and they will pay a lot more attention to her feelings, because when a girl is sad she's not afraid to show it. And boys, when the moment comes to say something, they don't even know how."

Sebastian was devastated by the breakup. He says he felt as if he "lost his world" for a while. "My grades themselves dropped hard—very hard. I simply didn't care. Which was very uncharacteristic of me, considering it was my junior year, the most important time for college applications," he recalls. "As cliché as it sounds, this girl and what she had done to me literally consumed my thoughts."

Yet this kid, who clearly has the capacity for deep emotion, felt he had nowhere to turn after getting his heart broken. What's more, this same boy—a guy comfortable talking about being in love and having his heart broken—says he's arranged hookups with girls (ones he doesn't even know) on Facebook.

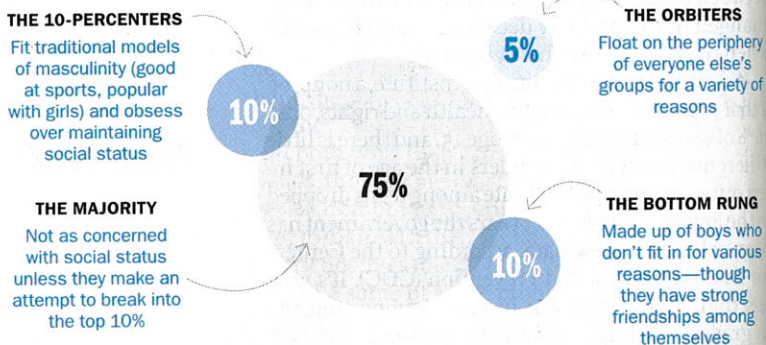
Digital Dalliances

FACEBOOK, TWITTER, SNAPCHAT, SEXTING—EACH successive technology can introduce a new set of practical and emotional challenges for boys as well as girls. And while boys are often cast as thoughtless



A BOY BREAKDOWN

AT MOST SCHOOLS, SOCIAL GROUPS BREAK DOWN ROUGHLY ALONG THESE LINES



Adapted from *Masterminds and Wingmen*, by Rosalind Wiseman

slobs in this arena—tossing off offensive sexts to girls as a clumsy way of flirting or passing around girls' pics that were supposed to be private—their thoughts and perceptions on the topic are more acute and subtle than one might think.

First off, if you think boys don't obsess over this stuff the way girls do, well, you'd be wrong.

"You can tell what she wants pretty much by how she texts," Dre tells me. "The dry 'Hey' is O.K. But then there's some that have the 'Heyyy' with the extra y's and the winky face [emoticon], and that means this conversation could possibly go somewhere. They're probably the hooking-up type."

Ian, who came out as gay during his sophomore year in high school, also says emoticons play a key role in sussing out a crush's potential feelings. "When I see a smiley face, it's the opening of the doorway to emotions," he says. "That first emoticon is significant. When it comes, it means something."

Brian Tian-Street, 19, whom I met at the magnet school he attended in Maryland, told me over e-mail about how he and a friend tag-teamed communication with a girl the friend had met at a dance. "He kind of wanted to continue it and thought it was easiest to bring it up via text," said Brian, who is now a sophomore at Yale. "What followed was me helping him phrase text messages letter by letter ... We discussed whether to use '.' in certain places, what to capitalize and what to not, emoticons and their placement ... Every detail was discussed, such as the time between responses. Wait at least a few minutes between responses, so as not to appear clingy or desperate." A character from *Girls* could hardly do a better job of picking apart linguistic minutiae.

Of course, all this technology has its explicit side—which is typically where boys get into trouble, though it's not always boys acting as the aggressors. One mother told me the story of her son's being sent explicit pictures from a girl at school, in various stages of nudity. The images came with the message "You are special, and no one else gets to see this," the mother said. "My son eventually discovered that it had been sent to all her 'special' ones, numbering about a handful."

For boys, getting sexy images from a girl, solicited or not, raises their social status. "It's a big ego boost," says Ethan Anderson, a 17-year-old from Boulder, Colo. Girls send pictures for lots of reasons: to get attention, in response to requests from a boy or to compete with other girls. But the boys don't always know what to think. "I've gotten probably like four unwanted pictures ... just desperate girls who are looking for a good time with everyone," says Winston Robinson, an 18-year-old who is starting his first year at Drexel University this fall. "It's awkward, especially if you didn't ask for it. When it happens, I delete it, so the parents don't try to screw you over if they find it."

"You have to use Snapchat. It's the condom of

sexting," says Ethan, referring to the popular app that lets users send photos that disappear after a brief viewing period. But even digital condoms break, it seems: new apps let people save Snapchats.

Lost in Translation

TEENS MAY NOT BE HAVING SEX ALL THAT MUCH earlier than previous generations were, but their culture is far more saturated with sexual language and imagery. And while discussions of sex and hookups are constant, both genders still struggle to communicate what they want or don't want. "Sex is a sport to my generation. For girls too," says Ricky Coston, a soft-spoken 20-year-old from New Orleans. "I have friends who just want to have sex with me, but it's nothing real." Ricky describes the daily speculation at the charter high school he attended about who'd "gotten with" whom. It's a culture he clearly finds exhausting and confusing.

Ricky, who is a church youth leader and was homecoming king in junior and senior year of high school, told me a story about a moment when he felt caught between his sexual desires and the expectations for guys when it comes to sex. A girl offered to give him oral sex, and rather than feeling triumphant, he felt conflicted. "I never told her I didn't like her. At the point leading up to it, I could have walked out," he said. And even though it's easy to assume he said yes simply because he wanted sex, there were multiple factors at play in his decision. He didn't want to hurt her feelings, he said, and he worried that if he rejected her, she would get angry. The guilt came later: "I wanted it, but it felt bad at the same time ... I felt like a man-whore, and I really regret treating her like that."

Developmental psychologist Andrew Smiler has spent decades studying masculinity and adolescents. "We've been teaching girls for two generations to be in charge of their own sexuality, their desires," Smiler says. "But we're still teaching boys the same things we did 20 years ago ... that they are supposed to be the pursuers. But the world has changed around them."

What's more, recent research shows that boys get every bit as emotionally invested in adolescent relationships as girls do—the main difference being that boys feel far less in control of how those relationships progress. A 2006 study from Bowling Green University included interviews with more than 1,300 adolescents. The researchers found that boys report significantly lower levels of confidence compared with girls in navigating their romantic relationships. Yet they had the same levels of emotional engagement as girls. What's more, the boys felt their romantic partners had greater power and influence in their relationships.

Brian, an 18-year-old American who attends high school abroad (and who doesn't want his last name used), told me about a girl he "really liked" at his school. "I thought she liked me back," he

ON SEXTING

I've gotten probably like four unwanted pictures ... just desperate girls who are looking for a good time with everyone. It's awkward, especially if you didn't ask for it. When it happens, I delete it, so the parents don't try to screw you over if they find it.

—WINSTON ROBINSON,
18, SOUTHERN
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said. "We had hooked up a couple of times, and I believed we were moving forward ... until I saw her making out with another guy at a party, and it broke my heart." Brian, like so many other boys I talked to, took betrayal quite hard. "I talked to her afterward, and she acted as though what we had was nothing. I felt used," he said. "It was horrible, especially since the guy she made out with was a friend of mine."

The Bro Code

BOYS' FRIENDSHIPS MAY NOT SEEM THAT COMPLICATED. Asked about their inner circle, they'll tell you things like "I'll do anything for a friend." Some will respond with declarations of the "bro code" or "bros before hos."

But within these friendships, there are often moments of deep betrayal and manipulation. Boys' relationships look quite different from those of girls. Whereas girls actively compete and jockey with others for social supremacy, boys' roles are much more stable. These roles often get set as early as grade school and don't change much through high school. It's not that boys' social structures aren't hierarchical; it's that boys are much more resigned to their place in the hierarchy. Thus, they form very deep bonds with other boys at their social level, and they spend a great deal of time trying to avoid conflict.

Even something as juvenile-seeming as dibs (that is, one boy calling dibs on hooking up with a girl, as if she were a choice seat on the bus) has a very specific function in male friendships—namely, avoiding conflict—and is subject to an elaborate set of rules that is remarkably consistent among boys of all backgrounds. (You have to make it recognized that you liked a girl first to call dibs, you can't call dibs if you have no chance with the girl, you can't call dibs just to annoy your friend, etc.)

When these bro-code rules are violated, boys often lack the social permission or skills to talk about it with one another. Dre tells a story of how a good friend of his hooked up with a girl Dre had recently broken up with. According to the code, that girl should have been off-limits. "I went to him, and I didn't say anything," Dre says. "I just started swinging, but I stopped because I shouldn't be fighting him, because he's like a brother to me."

The relationship with his friend, however, never fully recovered. "We never really sat down and talked about it," Dre says. "Every once in a while, it gets brought up, but I just let it go." And even though he says they're still close, there are now limits to their friendship. "I keep him away from certain stuff... Every time I tell him about someone, he says the same thing: 'Oh, she's a goer [promiscuous],' which means he'd hook up with her," Dre says. "I don't want to be like, 'I have feelings for her.'"

Expressing any feelings about girls can be tricky between boys. During one of my interviews, Brian (the boy who goes to school abroad) told me about a



ON THE MEDIA

'I SEE GLORY SHOTS OF FRATERNITY BOYS PARTYING WITH BEAUTIFUL GIRLS IN TANK TOPS OR POLOS, WITH KHAKIS AND SPERRY TOP-SIDERS. EACH IS TALL, EACH IS MUSCULAR, AND ALL LOOK VERY PUT TOGETHER. HOW CAN ONE SEE SOMETHING LIKE THIS AND NOT BE COMPLETELY INFATUATED WITH THE LIFESTYLE?'

—RAFFAELE SAPOSHNIK (RIGHT), 18, SAN CLEMENTE, CALIF.



ON ORAL SEX

'I wanted it, but it felt bad at the same time. I felt like a man-whore, and I really regret treating her like that.'

—RICKY COSTON, 20, NEW ORLEANS

girl he really liked and with whom he'd hooked up just that weekend. "At first, I didn't tell my friends," he said. "As soon as word spread, all I heard for the next three days were nasty sexual remarks." In fact, it's not uncommon for boys to relentlessly trash-talk a girl they know one of their friends likes—saying she's "nasty" or even that she has an STD. But then the same boys might go off and pursue the girl themselves.

That kind of betrayal is a common story. But the bro code, where emotions are involved, quickly turns into a code of silence—which can lead to dangerous consequences, especially when it comes to girls.

The Dark Side of the Code

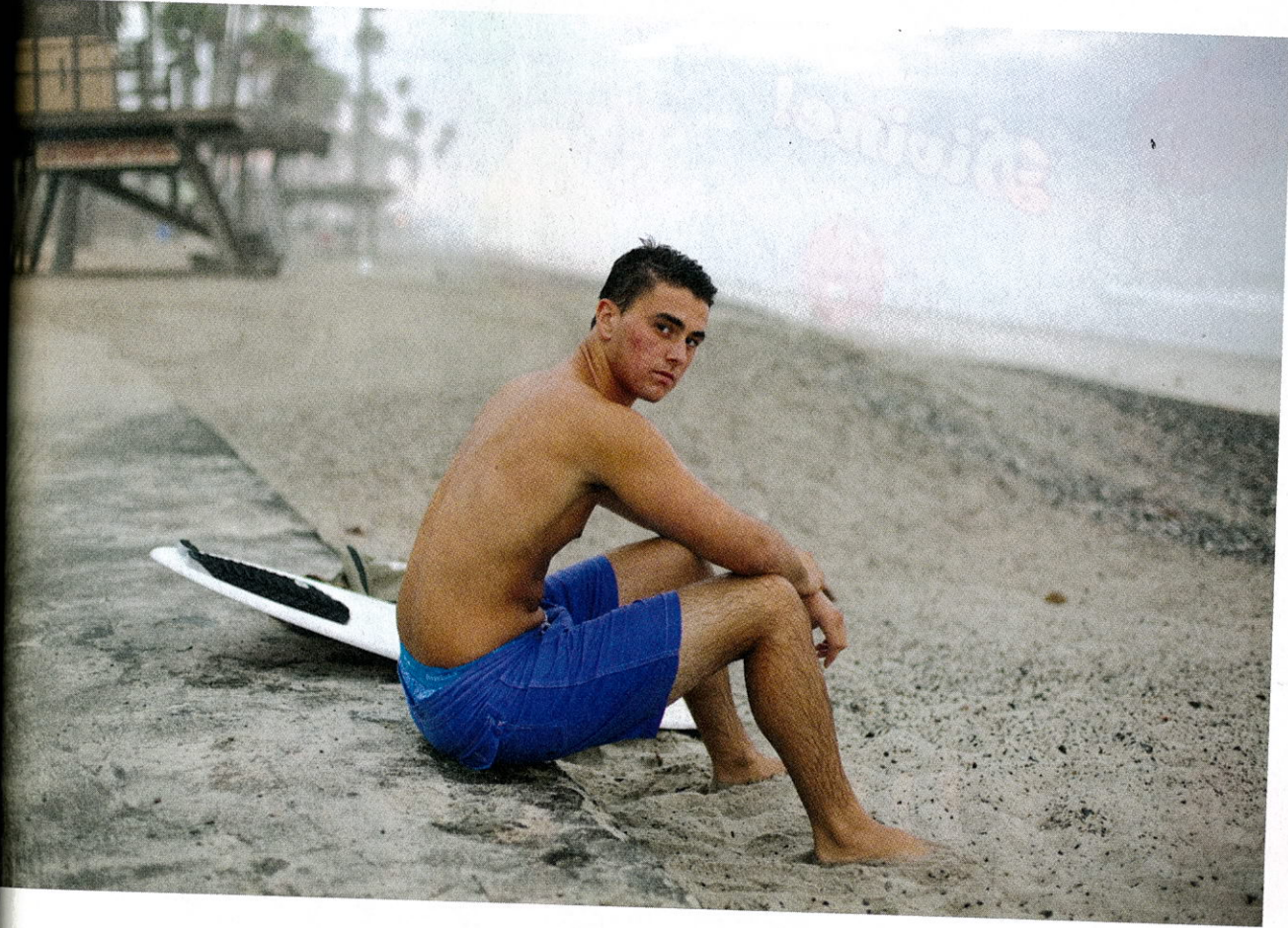
THAT CODE OF SILENCE—NOT LOYALTY—IS ONE reason boys have a hard time coming forward when they see other guys doing something humiliating or dangerous with a girl. When adults see disturbing stories of sexual misconduct perpetrated by groups of boys while other kids remain passive bystanders, it can be difficult to fathom. But for boys conditioned to avoid rocking the boat and to accept bad behavior from those who outrank them in the social hierarchy, combined with the punitive approach that adults use to talk to boys about these issues (if they talk at all), the outcome is predictable.

Ricky, the boy from New Orleans, told me the story of a guy at his school who recorded himself having sex with different girls and then started showing the videos around the school. "Do you want to be next?" he'd ask girls as a way to seduce new partners, according to Ricky. "The girls that don't have a lot of self-esteem go for it," he said. "The ones who do have self-esteem think it's disgusting."

How do the other boys react? "Some guys say, 'Good job, man. How many videos do you have?' ... Others say the guy is a clown. It's a divide."

None of them, however, stepped in to tell the guy to stop showing the videos. Why? According to Ricky, the girls were recorded consensually (at least taking the word of the friend). It was the girls' choice, he said, to allow the videos to be taken. And it's worth bearing in mind that for the selfie generation, raised in an era when celebrity sex tapes are commonplace, public sexuality doesn't always seem particularly taboo.

Even Dre—maker of that cute Instagram collage—tells the story of a time at a party when he watched some boys get drunk and aggressive with girls, touching and grabbing. "There was one girl downstairs, and one dude grabbed her and tried to take her upstairs. She was conscious, but she was drunk too, so she was laughing about it." He didn't get involved to stop it. "It wasn't my place," he says. Drinking, getting out of control, taking risqué photos of one another—all these things are incredibly common at parties. It's often a case of blurred lines. When behavior crosses lines, what those lines even are isn't always clear to teenagers.



Bond Boy World

ES, BOYS WANT SEX. AND WHAT MIGHT LOOK TO
 like illogical, risky or callous behavior in pur-
 of sex can seem like the only option to boys in the
 ment. It's part of a complicated dynamic in which
 are trying to reinforce or elevate their social sta-
 among their peers, including girls. But boys want
 things too. They want intimacy, love and ro-
 ge. They want trust and respect from their peers.
 they want to be able to talk about their emotions
 taken seriously. Making that possible isn't just
 tant for them; it's part of helping them become
 partners, fathers and community members.
 the question for adults is what to do. How do we
 through boys' silence? Judging from what I've
 ed from boys, constant questioning (How was
 day? How was your test?), especially right after
 ll, just causes them to shut down. Boys will
 up to us when we say less and connect during
 er times—in the car, watching TV or at the
 of his bed in the evening.
 you can get them to talk, what do you say?
 it's very important to let them know that you
 assume anything about them or their friends.
 her you're talking about alcohol, drugs, girls
 lying, you can begin by saying, "I don't know
 are ever going to have this experience, but if
 o, I want you to be prepared."
 them know there are no excuses. Sometimes
 will get drunk so they don't have to take re-
 sponsibility for their behavior, particularly with
 so let them know that being drunk doesn't let

70%

Percentage of boys who say they have not discussed how to use a condom or other birth-control methods with their parents

47.4%

Percentage of U.S. students in grades 9 through 12 who reported ever having had sex in 2011, a decrease from 1991, when the rate was 54.1%

FOR AN EXCERPT FROM THE GUIDE, WISEMAN'S BOOK OF ADVICE FOR BOYS, GO TO time.com/boys

them off the hook. Stress that this is about how to live with yourself and how you look at yourself as a man. When it comes to hookups and relationships, you can talk to them about body language. Does this person really want to be there? Say that if you're unsure about it, it's a no. You can also remind them that they don't have to accept every sexual advance that comes their way. Tell them they are no less a man if they say no to a girl. That's not something they hear very often.

If you're a parent with real worries about your son's emotional state, but he says he's fine, tell him the reasons you're asking. In many cases, it's better if this conversation comes from another man, but the key thing is to let him know that there's no shame in feeling bad.

"So often as a male you have to make it look like there's nothing going on in your head, that you've got yourself under control and there's nothing bothering you," Brian, from Yale, says. "And even though I'm sitting here saying a boy should be O.K. expressing his feelings, I don't tell people a lot of things. I don't even know if this is how I am or if I'm just wrapped up in guy culture."

When I ask Dre what advice he'd give parents about how to talk to kids, he says, "Be straight up, and don't assume that we're going through the same things you did. And if you want to know how it is now, ask." He also wishes he and his friends could be straight up with one another when they fall in love: "If you love her, you love her, and you don't have to be like everyone else. You're still cool." ■