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The Case for Boredom

Stimulation, Civility, and Modern Boyhood

Ours is an uncivil age. Entertainers rationalize incivility as part of the show; your offense only indicates a defective, un-hip sense of humor. Politicians reframe incivility as moral indignation in the service of the public good. Public incivility now defines the national character as much as independence, perseverance, and prosperity.

The decline of civility encompasses the erosion of manners, but extends beyond manners alone. Manners are more or less matters of habit—reflexes that require little premeditation. In contrast, civility requires not only courteous action, but empathic intention. It is the distilled spirit of concern for the emotions of others that guides common rules of civil social engagement. In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, an aging sheriff reflects on the savage violence taking place in his west Texas town, explaining, "It starts when you begin to overlook bad manners. Anytime you quit hearin' 'sir' and 'ma'am,' the end is pretty much in sight."

Instilling civility is at the center of my vocation as a psychologist. For

more than a decade I have wrestled with helping school-age children to understand how to lead civil lives. This work can be both intensely frustrating and extremely rewarding. It has brought me face to face with the evolving nature of childhood, and has made plain the ways that the little niceties of life that we usually take for granted—polite greetings, sincere apologies, expressions of gratitude and sympathy—are essential to civilized life.

For some years, I primarily worked with small groups of boys, seven or eight at a time, in a kind of therapy typically referred to as a "social-skills group." Through discussion with families and schools, I found I could identify and gather a group of boys with tendencies toward impulsivity, rudeness, and social indifference; I could then present an alternative set of strategies for coping with self-defeating thoughts, urges, and behavior; and finally, I could coach the boys to apply those skills in their daily lives. My work now mostly involves studying boys' social and cognitive development and contributing to the international and cross-cultural dialogue about modern boyhood. With some perspective on my former work, I still believe that my initial approach was worthwhile, although I can now better appreciate the ways that young minds are equipped to resist this type of learning.

Confronted with the difficulty of conveying the relevance of civil behavior to boys and young men, it's easy to feel discouraged by their moral ambivalence. One wonders why these boys don't care about how they are perceived, or what makes them feel as though empathy is optional. And although such questions are relevant concerns for the psychology of boys in general, civility has a more formidable nemesis—one that is on the attack and growing stronger by the day.

Among most schoolchildren, incivility and the demise of social skills have much less to do with rebellion and the preferred diagnosis of "oppositionality" than they do with the annihilation of boredom. Fifty years ago, the onset of boredom might have followed a two-hour stretch of nothing to do. In contrast, boys today can feel bored after thirty seconds with nothing specific to do; the threshold has been drastically lowered. Their lives are now filled with electronica—games, phones, computers—an updated version of the old counterculture mantra "turn on, tune in, drop out." The beeps, buzzes, and cryptic messages of electronic feedback are ever-present, and many boys want nothing to do with moderation. This ubiquitous, battery-powered cacophony of multisensory junk food can hold boys spellbound for hours.

The choices of adolescents, in particular, are prone to inverse intuition. The adolescent mind is nowadays so hyper-stimulated that the absence of stimulation—boredom—is unsettling, while the chaos of constant connection is soothingly familiar. A languishing teenager feels irritable and instinctively knows how to rev up: go online, turn on the TV, call someone, text.

Continuous stimulation and communication comprise the new normal. It is a state of being that conflates sensory pleasure with happiness. Meanwhile, the gaps *between* moments of heightened stimulation have been shrunk, and are on the verge of disappearing altogether. Consequently, virtually all waking cognition is now of the highest intensity for a great majority of young people. Electronica has squeezed the boredom out of life. It makes us crave more of what makes us sick, like an addiction.

As the synaptic mindscape of daily life becomes increasingly marked by peaks and the disappearance of valleys, we might reasonably expect to see some signs of distress among the hyper-stimulated. But that doesn't seem to be the case. Instead, we are witnessing an adaptation so massive and rapid that it raises the question of where disorder really lies: when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that many millions of Americans meet the diagnostic criteria for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, this putative disorder is arguably no longer a disorder at all—it's just the way we are.

No one likes to be bored—indeed, boredom so deeply invades the mind-body system that bored children sometimes feel queasy or lethargic, or complain of headaches. But the occurrence of boredom in young minds would be a welcome sign in one respect—it would suggest the presence of available resources for thought, reflection, and civil behavior. By extension, there is a relationship between the elimination of opportunities for boredom and the rise of incivility. While boredom is hardly something to strive for, its presence confirms the existence of brief gaps in the continuous stimulation that dominates the thinking cycle of many kids. These pauses enable thought and reason to infuse action; *they* are boredom's natural habitat, and the genesis of civil behavior. It is only during moments of relative calm that young minds learn to bind empathy to action, and the development of thoughtful behaviors we associate with civility.

Although the civility drain is widely apparent among youth, it isn't only because of electronica. Among a great many boys, civility and social skills are often greeted as a slog of irrelevant, artificial etiquette. This is in part because the preponderance of boys between the ages of eleven and fourteen associate civility with subordination. Civility feels like submission or servitude to these boys and as such is inconsistent with their idealized selves. Boys' minds inhabit a world of evocative images and narratives that influence their behavior. These images and stories, the personal mythologies of boyhood, have more to do with a longing for autonomy, power, and superiority than an appreciation of civic interdependence. To an extent, boys are affected by the public examples of incivility that they routinely encounter at school, on television, and elsewhere. These role models release a child from the burden of his own conscience, and drown out whatever kindness he

may have come by naturally. Still, we want children to be kind toward each other as though such intentions should magically spring from the essential goodness of childhood.

In contrast, civility is constructed brick by brick, one example at a time. Being civil is rarely fun—it requires patience, forethought, and some willingness to tolerate tedium. While happiness and contentment are civility's ally, fun, as defined by the relentless quest for pleasure, is tragically its foe. For all the billions of hours devoted to electronic fun, does anyone think that young people have become happier?

I sometimes worry that therapy is no match for the effects of electronica on young male cognition. In this new topography of mind, boredom isn't just dull; it is out of sync with the tempo many boys have come to associate with strength and wellness. Like a car whose idle is set too low, bored boys feel as though they are about to stall. They may try to triage with sugary, caffeinated drinks, but will have a hard time satisfying themselves until they have a device in hand. And as boys become men, those who find boredom entirely intolerable will sublimate by testing the limits of physical endurance, or perhaps even seeking a rush by experimenting with drugs or otherwise breaking the law. By then, the prospect of civility will have long since passed. It is when boys are still boys that we have a practical chance of shaping their conception of manliness, and of making civility a part of that vision.

Teaching civility often feels like swimming against the tide, and in my sessions I'm always vulnerable to feeling awkward or embarrassed by boys' reactions. Sometimes it's like I'm back in middle school myself, and I feel priggish for suggesting a topic the boys view as alien or emasculating. But that vulnerability has helped me to appreciate the awkwardness that punctuates the social lives of boys. That is the place where civility begins in our groups: not just as an idea, but as a living example learned one interaction at a time.

Civility requires intelligence less than it does patience and a willingness to put the brakes on when you feel like accelerating. For those who might wonder, change *is* possible. I have watched difficult boys become promising young men, and witnessed how the perception of civility is transformed from something alien to a chance for honor.

Few of us enjoy boredom, yet the availability of mental space that boredom represents goes hand in hand with a civil mind. We should cling to the pauses in cognition that boredom signals as we might cling to a life raft. It may be our last hope for a private moment of time and space—a chance to breathe and consider how to treat others, before the prospect of civility drowns in a wave of electronic thrills, and there's no air left to think.

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