

*A Common Ground Conversation*  
with **Michael Gurian**  
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*The story of Michael Gurian's life is one that every parent should hear, especially when discouraged. Gurian was born in Hawaii, but lived all over the world with parents who worked in the Foreign Service. His mom, he says, did not understand his hyperactive, intense personality. He hated school and felt teachers were "clueless" about how to focus his often-disruptive energy. Gurian's early struggles prompted him to research gender differences around the globe and to delve deeply into neurobiology. Eventually, he became a licensed therapist. He published The Wonder of Boys in 1997, a bestseller that challenged society to reexamine how boys were treated. Then came influential works such as The Wonder of Girls and Boys and Girls Learn Differently. Today, he has published more than 20 books and is a co-founder of The Gurian Institute, an organization that trains teachers and other professionals in how to best apply gender-specific principles of neurobiology and brain science in their work. He lives in Spokane with his wife, a therapist, and two daughters.*

**OK, there is one question everyone wants to ask a parenting expert. Do your kids always agree with you?** Oh, no! (He laughs.) No, I raised my girls so they don't agree with anything I say. We have had contentious relationships. One daughter shoplifted and had to go to a diversion program. I shoplifted when I was a kid. The one thing I try to do is be completely authentic. So, if I'm sick of it, I'm really sick of it. I don't worry if it's going to hurt my child's self-esteem. I've told my daughter, "I'm not going to argue with you anymore and I'm taking a day off from arguing with you." I give her a chance to realize that she has gone too far.

**Can you tell us more about your parenting style?** One thing is I apologize a lot. I think that is really crucial. I am a very busy person and I make mistakes. I have to make sure I apologize. Another thing I do is try to celebrate something that has gone well. Kids can be very negative about their lives, so I always try to find something to celebrate. Consistency is also crucial. My wife and I try to support each other's parenting decisions, even if we don't completely agree. We've divided most of our parenting into different domains. She's good at certain things. I'm good at certain things. If she sets a line, I have to support her on keeping that line. We find it is very important with adolescents to show each other this kind of support.

**What is the most exciting new research in the field of gender science?** Compared to when I started, it is the imaging scans of the brains, where you can actually see so much about how the brain works. The second thing would be the new hormonal biology. What we didn't know 25 years ago is that there is an organizational period for the brain in utero in which hormones are set up for the brain and then there is an activation period for the brain during adolescence. Gender in your brain is pretty well set up chromosomally in utero, but there are

hormonal surges in the first few years of life and then seven years of hormone changes in puberty. Some cells are being activated and some are being pruned. It's fascinating.

**What first led you to write about gender?** The way I started out, well, it's a weird story. I was a philosophy and an English major and I was going to be a lawyer, but then I decided to be a writer. I went to the University of Washington to get a Ph.D. in English, but then I decided I didn't want to do that and by then it was 1980 or 1981 and I was already interested in gender. Why did I eventually fall in love with the topic? I don't know. I could guess. My family lived all over the world when I was a kid so I interacted and played with a diverse set of kids and then there was my mother...

**What did your parents do?**

My parents were in the Foreign Service. My dad has a Ph.D. in American studies and was a sociologist. My mother was an anthropologist.

**How did they influence you?** My mother and I have talked a lot about that. One reason I think I have tried to help other people deal with boys (through my work) is that my mother really did not understand me. We are both very clear on that... I also have two daughters and that has made me interested in the subject.

**Can you talk a little bit more about that your personal journey as a child and how it led to the work that you do?** Well, in my book, [The Minds of Boys](#), I talk about how I was hyperactive. I was on Ritalin when I was 10. I was very, very hyperactive. I was labeled a problem child... Looking back, my parents didn't really get how to handle a kid like me and the schools were clueless. They didn't understand anything. I was born in 1958 in Honolulu when my father was teaching at the University of Hawaii. I attended public schools and my schooling was kind of bizarre. Fortunately, I'm a bright guy and I ended up doing fine.

**What, specifically, was your experience as a boy during those years?** Well, I couldn't sit still. I was supposed to focus on one thing and then I'd focus on a bunch of different things. I was very project driven... (Work sheets) bored me to death. You know, I just wouldn't do them. Culturally, in brief, I was hyperactive and aggressive, which was confusing to a lot of my peers, but, on the other hand, I was a pretty sensitive, emotive, kind of a therapist kid, the kind you would expect to grow up and become a therapist. I was somewhat literate, so I was kind of getting beaten up for that and because I was kind of weak. I didn't know how to relate to kids very well because we moved around a lot. It was genuinely a complex situation so I'm sure that is a reason that I am so sensitive to (the experience of) boyhood.

**But you overcame these cultural challenges and became a success – something that many hyperactive, misunderstood kids are never able to do. What turned your life around?** I was in therapy from about age 16 to age 26 and that helped a lot. I also had really good mentors. I really hated high school, but college was a better environment for me because I am verbal. A lot of boys who fail in college do so because they are not verbal. College was also a place where I could do more projects and study in greater depth.

**What about the use of drugs, such as Ritalin, to help kids?** I'm not against it. Ritalin helped me, but probably 30 to 40 percent of kids on these type drugs do not have a brain disorder. They are simply a mismatch for their environment. Parents get scared to death their kids won't succeed so they put them on Ritalin. There are a lot of high-performing parents who put their

boys on Ritalin because they are scared their boys are not focusing. These parents have not gone deep in their research. They don't understand that the male brain is two to three years slower than the female brain, on average. Now, if a kid really has a brain disorder, then that kid definitely needs medicine.

**You write about the study of gender from a scientific point of view, but you have a strong artistic background.** Yes, I have published four books of poetry and two novels. I have a spiritual side, but I also have always really liked science and biology so it makes sense I went down the scientific road to study gender...

**How did you happen to write your first book on gender?** I was lucky enough to live overseas when I was working on my fiction and it always bothered me that there was not any dialogue on gender... (I took a teaching job in Turkey after I was married in 1984) and decided to test my theory that there was clearly a difference between boys and girl that was genetic and biological. For two years I went out to Turkish villages and took notes and, sure enough I found that what I suspected was robust and true... Initially, I wrote a small book and then one on the father/ son relationship and the mother/ son relationship and then I was starting groups..."

**At that time, did you have any formal training in therapy?** No, I didn't have any formal training in family therapy. But I started getting calls after I wrote these books and people said, "Would you do therapy for us" and I said, "No..." and they'd say, "Would you just meet with us?" So, I had to go out and figure out what I needed to do in the state of Washington to be a counselor. I had a practice for about 10 years... until after "The Wonder of Boys" came out. Then, with the media demands and all that, it just took over.

**So, The Wonder of Boys was the book that launched your career?** There were no books on boys when it came out... I later learned about the work of Bill Pollack and Michael Thompson, but they had not written any popular books on the subject and I didn't know about them because I was going the brain route. I couldn't sell The Wonder of Boys at first. Twenty-six publishers turned it down. It was all women's studies, all girls and that was all good, but I was being told (by publishers). "We don't care about boys."

**Do you see yourself more as a journalist or a philosopher?** A philosopher... I think I am more of a philosopher than a journalist because I am typically male and I deductively deduced a theory and decided to prove it instead of inductively studying something for 10 years and then saying, "Oh, I think I get it...". You know I was very deductive. I had lived in all these places all over the world and I could see the differences in what boys and girls were doing. (The concept of) socialization was too thin for me. I mean, I took psychology and sociology classes but they were too thin for me. It really bothered me that we were talking about boys and girls and no one was talking about the brain.

**Given this country's long history of sexism and gender inequality, do you understand why some people might feel uneasy when you talk about "fundamental" differences between boys and girls?** In the first place, it is important to understand that I am not saying there is only one type of boy or one type of girl and I think most people understand that....

**Where do you weigh in on nature vs. nurture?** It is really nurture *and* nature. No leading scientists are involved in the nature vs. nurture debate anymore. That's being kept alive mostly by the media, I think.

**What do parents most need to know about the different challenges of raising a son or a daughter?**

For the first 10 years or so of my career, I tried to answer questions like these on the talk shows. You know, "What are the three things every parent should know?" That kind of approach is just meaningless... What parents need to understand is that there is now a body of work out there on brain differences that they can read and allow their intuition to adjust to fit their child. There is no one tip.

**Fair enough, but based on your understanding of gender brain differences, what are the best ways for parents to motivate a son or a daughter?**

Well, if the child is performing fine, then no worries. But if a child is not performing well academically there are several things to look at. One is to look at the match between that child and the school. Is there a good match between the child and the classroom? Usually if there is a mismatch it is between boys and the school... So, that's huge – is it the child or is it the school? That match is crucial and in order for the parent to understand that, the parent has to understand that the parent is going to have to do research. Don't just read Newsweek. Don't read one article, it is not enough. Don't watch one Today show article. It is not enough. Parents need to realize this is 1 million years of development they have given birth to...

**Since you wrote The Wonder of Boys have things gotten worse or better for boys in our culture?**

In public schools, things are getting worse. Now, in independent schools we can have a different dialogue because those schools really get students who are the cream of the crop. But at the Gurian Institute we have found that 80 percent of the requests we get from independent schools concern boys. About 20 percent of the requests are about the girls, usually on such issues as how to help them be more competitive in male-dominated careers such as engineering, how to help them succeed in math and science and on relational aggression. With boys, we're getting requests such as, "How do we get them to do homework?" These kinds of problems are even more exacerbated in public schools, where it becomes something even more basic, such as, "How do we get them to come to class?"

**Do you think all boys and girls should be in single sex schools?** No... the determining factor in which schools are good for children is teacher training. Single sex schools can be great; coed schools can be great. But for either of them to be great, teachers need to be trained. They need to understand boys and girls and how they learn.

**Are you implying that all girls learn the same way or all boys learn the same way? And that teachers just need to know the difference?**

No. I show brain scans in my talks that demonstrate "bridge brains," these are the brains of people who are toward the middle of the brain spectrum on gender. There is a brain spectrum and there are some males, like me, who are a little bit more "female" and some females who are a little bit more "male" You can scan them and see this. But in terms of averaging, if the Gurian Institute is contacted by someone urgently in need of help, it is usually because they have a boy who is more male in how his brain

functions. You don't tend to have as many problems with boys who have bridged brains, that is, boys who are highly verbal, and/or verbal/emotive.

**Can you explain what a brain-bridge female would look like?** A bridge brain female, and this is anecdotal, is, say, if you looked at a CEO of a corporation in Silicon Valley running a company of 20,000 or 30,000 30 employees. If you were to scan her brain, what we would find, probably, is that she has higher testosterone, an aggression chemical, and the assets in her brain probably include a higher degree of spatial/mechanical assets than most female brains. So, (Females with bridge brains) may be less verbal/emotive, they might have been tomboys, didn't like dolls, didn't really care about everyone's emotions...

**Couldn't this CEO be a woman who is just exceptionally skilled at adapting to the male environment found in most corporations?** Right. She might have been brought up with four brothers, that always helps. These are all just mights, and nurture can be a factor.

**As I listen to you, I wonder if we need to find a new terminology to describe such extremes of the brain spectrum. Perhaps it would be better to move away from the descriptive words of "male" and "female" in relation to brains since such terms may be culturally/historically/psychologically loaded with personal baggage about gender. Perhaps we should use words that more accurately describe the cluster of traits that you indicate, ranging, for example, from highly verbal to highly nonverbal, and so on...** Well, I mean, that's fine. (But the descriptions of brains as "male" and "female") works for me and for the classroom and for the parents. There are a small number of people, I think, who would say there is not a male or female brain.

**But if we insist on describing brains as "male" or "female" doesn't that set up a dynamic that might make the significant percentage of boys and girls who don't fit the mold, those who have "bridge brains," feel ashamed or less valued.** Oh, that's stereotyping I don't do that... Anyone who has read my books knows that I am not stereotyping.

**But, isn't there a risk of someone sitting in your audience, listening to such descriptions of male and female brains, and assigning greater value, ability, to one gender or another?** No, it doesn't happen... Here's a "for instance" - when I'm called into corporations it is usually to figure out ways to help women advance. They want to know, "How do we attract good women? How do we retain women? How do we advance women?" They're using the brain research in that case to help corporations to achieve balance, to get more of the male and female brain into their organizations. Whereas schools understand the female brain pretty well, corporations are set up as more male systems. They are testosterone driven, and we need to educate the males in that system.

**You teach them that the female brain can be an asset?** Oh, an amazing asset. Often (company executives) end up seeing the female brain as superior to the male because they learn that females tend to be more verbal, emotive, capable of multitasking and have more tender intent. We have a real fear of male energy. Testosterone scares us. It's all about directing this stuff.

**Partly because you are the father of two daughters, I was surprised to read that you take issue with some of the work by Mary Pipher, author of Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls, in which she concludes that today's toxic culture is harming our girls. Our Common Ground audiences know Dr. Pipher pretty well – she was a guest for us last year.** There are different empathies, different lenses. I think we all agree that the culture is toxic. There is absolutely no doubt... But, I mean, if someone said to me, "What is the biggest challenge facing girls in the industrial world?" I would not say gender stereotyping. I mean, maybe 200 years ago, but right now gender stereotyping is low on the list. I say this as a therapist, a professional student of gender and the father of two daughters. Most girls see through this stuff. Remember, Mary's book was based on ten clients, ten girls who were mentally ill, anorexic, and bulimic. They do not represent the average child... Mary gave us great language to talk about girls, but most girls are not bulimic or anorexic. They're just fighting their way through to maturity. What they are struggling with is how they can find the attachments, the bonding, the mentoring, the relationships, the extended family that they need to lead them from the age of 10 to the age of 20. They need this to keep from being sucked into cyberspace and into unhealthy relationships. Once they have those four or five relationships that can really help them navigate these things, then they get pretty bored with the stereotypes in our toxic culture. That pretty well solves the problem.

**But what about the pervasive media messages, persistent images of super-thin female bodies, the early sexualization of girls, in our culture? Don't they have an effect?** (The vast majority of) girls are going to go through a three to four period of trying to be pretty. It doesn't matter what we tell them... I see no credible research that proves that if a girl looks at pictures of really thin girls they are going to become anorexic. There is no proof of that because the truth of that is that girls who develop those types of problems are mentally ill. They have a brain chemistry problem.

**But couldn't these cultural pressures trigger psychological problems?** It may trigger it, but it does not cause it... The point I am trying to make is that people are putting too much energy into trying to save us from gender stereotyping. What we need to do is look at things like hormonal imbalances. When we are concentrating on stereotypes we are not doing anything biological for them. You have to look at hormonal biology. They may, in fact, have a progesterone or estrogen deficiency... There are lots of people out there doing this kind of thing, like Louann Resnick in the University of California in San Francisco... She's brilliant. I have no credibility as a primary scientist. I am a philosopher.

**You believe spiritual tradition should be an important part of parenting. Can you explain?** What I say to parents is two things: If you don't already have a religious affiliation, find something good, something you like, about some religious tradition and then create your own family rituals. What I've done with my kids is to go down to the Spokane River and teach them to meditate. We had a number of rituals that were nature based so they had some kind of spiritual language.. When you develop the spiritual nature of a child, you are developing character and emotive ability because any conversation about god will be a moral conversation...

**You've said that your mission through your work is to make your own children, and the world, a safer place. What changes do you wish you could make?** I'd like to see us as a culture transform parenting. I would like to see folks utilize the research tools available to them, such as Google, and go deep. Don't read just one article or book. When you decide your child has a boy brain, read a bunch of books. Look at (examples of) brain scans. We live in

a society that relies too much on “experts,” (one) that disempowers parents and makes them feel clueless. It’s only after doing your research that you can argue with the experts. You know, say, “I don’t think Baby Einstein works...”

After they’ve gone deep, parents should set up a parenting team. They should enlist four or five people to help them raise their kids and be there when they themselves need support. These people, whether they are family or friends, will serve as scaffolding for your child.

Finally, if you decide something about your child needs work, don’t be afraid to face it because you are afraid you might hurt (your child’s feelings.) Face it directly, but don’t forget to look at the institutions your child is in because so many of our institutions are not set up for certain brains. Don’t be afraid to change the institution before your child gets hurt. If something is really wrong, try medication. Do whatever is needed.