Notes on the fragile male

Mortality
Males are more likely to die, or be damaged by stress, than females at every age from conception to old age, from very low birthweight babies (22% vs 15% die) to schoolchildren to old men. There are always more widows than widowers. One factor is that while males have only one, females have two X chromosomes – with one in reserve – so that a mutation on one can be counteracted by its absence on the other.¹

There is also a strong social class difference, so that, from toddler to school leaving age, boys in the bottom social class are more than twice as likely to die from any cause as those at the top. There is a social gradient for girls but it is not so marked. Female sex irons out vulnerability to external stress. (See also effects of maternal depression, and suicide statistics below)

Biologically a species does not need many males if one individual can produce offspring from many females. In many (but not all) mammalian species, only a minority of males produce offspring. The rest are redundant, so it's worth taking big risks if you want to get a mate. It makes evolutionary sense that males tend to be less cautious than females.²

One of the least known facts about male vulnerability is the effect of maternal stress on sex

¹ Platt 1998
² Platt 1998
³
ratios. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York in 2001 the number of boys compared to girls born around four months later (during January 2002) was lower than at any other recorded time. This suggests that male fetuses already 5 months old were the most vulnerable. Other studies have shown similar effects of major disasters on sex ratio.

If fewer males are born in hard times then conversely it could be the case that high male:female birth ratios indicate more optimistic mothers. In the data below peaks in 1920 and 1946 coincide with renewed confidence and relief at the end of world wars, while in 1975, though there was considerable political and social uncertainty, levels of income inequality in Britain were lower than they have ever been before or since (see p 5, below) which is associated with lower social stress and greater social cohesion.

![Figure 1: Live male births per 100 live female births, England and Wales, 1838-2012](source: Office for National Statistics)


**Developmental problems**
Autism, hyperactivity, learning difficulties, conduct disorder are all commoner in boys.

Hyperactivity is a serious problem, much commoner in boys, but it only affects a small minority. Besides some genetic influences the impact of a mother's antenatal anxiety and/or postnatal depression on attention is more marked in boys, even long after her condition has lifted. Affected boys tend to be more dreamy, restless and hard to manage in primary classes and continue to show academic effects into the teens.
Apart from sheer muscle power and skill (such as in sport) on average (there are always striking exceptions) females are better at most cognitive skills except three-dimensional spatial awareness/mental rotation\(^{10}\), which includes a variety of abilities from architectural imagination and Rubik’s cube, to reversing into car parking spaces, ‘bending it like Beckham’, and darts. Not all of these are culturally determined (which female diffidence about maths is thought to be\(^{11}\)) There are some similar differences in rats for example.

**Suicide**
Historically male suicides increase when there is more unemployment (an unmatched peak in the 30s) and down when there is a war (more social solidarity).
Suicide rates in young men increased rapidly in societies where neoliberal policies took hold, such as New Zealand and UK. For instance in UK in 1971 male rates of suicide among young men 15 - 24 were double the rates for females in the same age range. By 1981 suicide amongst young men had doubled again, yet the rates amongst young women did not change at all. Since a recent peak around 1997 male rates declined but in the youngest age group (10-29) are now rising again.
Suicide occurs when the person in despair feels there is no help available\textsuperscript{15}. The tendency of males to be self-reliant and less understanding of – even to feel contempt for – their own emotions are likely to be factors in this worldwide and highly significant difference.

Males have been left behind in a feminised world, but that is no reason to backtrack on gender equality.

Men die, women suffer.

**Education**

The female: male gap in GCSE results is around 10\%\textsuperscript{16} every year, girls always ahead of boys. In England in 2015 70.9\% of girls and 59.2\% of boys passed five or more A*-C grades.\textsuperscript{17}

It is possible that education favoured boys when it was more regulated to rote learning and punishment, and when less was expected of girls.

**Social disconnections**

Enormous increases in social and wealth inequality\textsuperscript{18} in UK compared to most other EU countries will be a factor in children’s and young people’s unhappiness, because everyone (even the very rich and the political class, who are largely out of touch) is alienated in such a society.

![Image](http://wid.world/)

No one feels secure on a steep slope\textsuperscript{19}. Child-unfriendliness is only a symptom. Children are profoundly affected by what happens to their parents, and inequality is not people-friendly. It is a source of morbidity and mortality\textsuperscript{20}.

**Conclusion: males are human**

The main message is that when parents and educators fully realise that boys are more vulnerable to both biological and psychological stresses they will be in a better position make allowances for individual boys who might otherwise be misjudged as too temperamental, or dismissed as lazy or not trying hard enough to concentrate.

Although the differences are small they are quite significant and are amplified by social attitudes about male and female qualities.

When I first produced this material in the *British Medical Journal* seventeen years ago\textsuperscript{21} the press said I was suggesting that boys should be treated more like girls. Not so. I say they should be treated more like human beings, rather than little bundles of muscular energy. Infant boys require more maternal help to settle themselves than girls\textsuperscript{22,23} and also display more emotions but tend to stifle them as they are socialized into current versions of masculinity\textsuperscript{24}.

Parents need time to get to know their babies, of either sex, before getting full time back into their work or careers. We need more and longer and better paid parental leave and support from health visitors and children’s centres in the early years. There is increasing evidence to show that the more parents are paid to care for their infants, the fewer of these children die\textsuperscript{25,26}.

Sebastian Kraemer  
2009-2017

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1 “There are 1100 genes on the X chromosome, and most of them are not expressed from the Y chromosome.”  


rotation and spatial rotation in a virtual environment.


ONS 2016

Book review http://bjp.rcpsych.org/content/191/6/573.full?et=

range 6.8 – 14 between 2010 – 2015

http://www bstubbs.co.uk/5a-ctml#table1a

www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/our-publications/spirit-level-slides

http://bit.ly/1JkGil5
at 6 months "boys displayed more negative affect than girls during the face-to-face still-face paradigm. They were more likely than girls to show facial expressions of anger, to fuss, to gesture to be picked up, and to try to escape or get away by turning and twisting in the infant seat. In addition, boys tended to cry more than girls.

... mothers and sons more carefully tracked each other's behavior and facial expressions than mothers and daughters. This greater coordination, which takes place at a subtle microtemporal level, may function to help boys maintain self-regulation... the capacity for self-regulation may be at the base of gender differences in infant emotional expressivity.

Boys appeared to have a more limited capacity for self-regulation than girls and made their needs explicit to the mother by using a wider range of both positive and negative expressive displays”


A recent review confirms these findings. The entire volume 38(1) of the Infant Mental Health Journal is devoted to the vulnerability of boys.


Tanaka S (2005) Parental Leave and child health across OECD countries The Economic Journal 115, F7-F27 (F11)

"paid leave reduced mortality during the post-neonatal period (between 28 days and one year) and in early childhood (between one and 5 years). For example, a 10-week extension of paid leave could reduce post-neonatal deaths by 3.7–4.5% and could decrease child mortality by 3.3–3.5%."


"the links between family policy and child health may have more to do with the distribution of economic resources than with the level of economic resources in society"