

'A hammer of a book that seems to hit the male right on the head' *The Times*

MANHOOD

A GUIDEBOOK FOR MEN



STEVE BIDDULPH

The million-copy bestselling author of *Raising Boys*

Contents

Cover

About the Author

Title Page

Permissions

Foreword to the UK Edition

1. The Problem
2. Liberation for the Rest of Us
3. Seven Steps to Manhood
4. You and Your Father
5. Sex and Spirit
6. Men and Women
7. Being a Real Father
8. Making School Good for Boys
9. Finding a Job with Heart
10. Real Male Friends
11. The Wild Spirit of Man

Appendix: Some Thoughts about the Importance of Male
Community

Bibliography

Contacts and Resources

Index

Acknowledgements

Copyright

About the Author

Steve Biddulph has been a psychologist for thirty years. He was one of the pioneers of family therapy in Australia, working with struggling families in the industrial city of Launceston, where he recognised that there was a need for books that were humorous, easy to read and matched the needs of young parents without much time or energy at the end of a busy day.

His first book *The Secret of Happy Children* certainly filled this niche, reaching over a million parents in 27 languages; it has been in print for 20 years. Steve has also worked with sexual assault victims, Vietnam Veterans, the police, emergency services and, for eight years, directed the Collinsvale Centre, which taught medical professionals to use counselling skills and understand people's feelings as well as their bodies.

In 1994 he released *Raising Boys* - a number one bestseller in countries as diverse as New Zealand and Brazil. *Raising Boys* broke the logjam of thinking about nature or nurture, detailing how by working with nature - boys' physical and hormonal differences - we could then nurture them into caring, safe, exuberant and focused young men.

Biddulph was voted Father of the Year in Australia for his contribution to encouraging fathers to engage with their children. He visits the UK, Germany, Japan, New Zealand and Korea regularly to work with parents and also in encouraging school systems to be more boy-friendly. All proceeds from Steve's talks and seminars are used to

improve Australia's treatment of refugee children and their parents and for the care of refugee families across the globe.

Manhood

Steve Biddulph

Vermilion
LONDON

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Foreword to the UK Edition

I'm standing backstage at Melbourne's Concert Hall, and my heart is threatening to beat right out of my chest. I don't usually get stage fright before a talk, but sometimes it just hits me out of the blue, so I use a tried and true remedy - I go and chat with some of the audience waiting in the lobby. This nearly always works because it reassures my 'inner child' that they are a friendly bunch, eager to have a good time.

I've been out in the lobby for just a few minutes when I notice a big, bearded, tattooed man in a denim shirt with the sleeves torn off standing not far away. He's noticed me too, and he beckons to two other men he is with. The three of them begin to move across and in a moment he is right there, his head tilted back and a frown on his face.

'You been following me around?'

My mouth opens and shuts wordlessly, but I am thinking, 'Help!'

He doesn't let me suffer long. His face breaks into a wide grin. 'That bloody book of yours - that's the story of my bloody life, mate.' I grin too, as I slowly work it out, and soon he is introducing his father and brother. He explains, while they silently nod in agreement, that the three of them had been estranged for years until he had read this book *Manhood*, and passed it on to the other two, and they had 'sorted things out' between them. They had come along together to say 'thanks' in person and see what else I had to say.

For a family psychologist, job satisfaction doesn't come much better than this, and yet it's a recurring message. A week or two earlier I had heard something very similar from one of Australia's few truly philanthropic billionaires, so it had nothing to do with class or education. *Manhood* was doing what I hoped - giving men a tool they could use to break out of their isolation and outdated macho roles. The idea was catching on: you could be a real man and still be warm, open and live a free and exuberant life. There was more to life as a man than just being a 'walking wallet'.

Manhood was first published in Australia, then Germany, and was read by half a million people across Australasia, the UK and Western Europe in its first year of release. The USA had *Iron John* by Robert Bly and *Fire in the Belly* by Sam Keen, both excellent books, but *Manhood* spoke more to regular, hard-headed men, and looked to more earthy and lasting changes. What *Manhood* said was that there is more to life as a man than lonely struggle, earning and spending, being a cog in an industrial society you don't even like. It also said that men's conditioning - in family, school and popular culture - was seriously handicapping us and it was time for a change. (Remember, there was something called Women's Liberation that did just this for women, with remarkable success, several decades ago - so it was not impossible.)

The book was part of a broader discussion just starting to break out. Hundreds of magazine articles, newspaper columns, radio debates and thousands of conversations were taking place about the possibility of men changing, not (like good little boys) because they *should* (a famously unsuccessful formula for change) but because they were beginning to find that they *could* and wanted to. Movies such as *The Full Monty* and *About a Boy* were addressing the question of masculine choice, and even the hit TV show *Seachange* had a men's group. Awkwardly, hesitantly, something was starting to change.

Women's liberation, for all its successes, has not been enough to bring the needed changes. There are bigger issues than who does the housework or who is the chair of HSBC. We are still a civilisation going to hell in a handbasket of materialistic greed. Our current almost hysterical obsession with terrorism seems rather ingenuous, given that our relationship with the undeveloped world is almost entirely one of theft. Fair trade, debt reduction, no longer propping up vicious regimes because they are someone we can do business with are the only real solutions to the eternal risk of terrorism. The danger to our children's children is not terror, but corporate globalised waste and consumption, driven by the unhappiness of Western men, and women too. We have to change ourselves fundamentally if the world is going to work. Everything is connected. How you make a living, what you consume, how you spend your time - the questions of men's liberation - will determine the future of the globe.

There is great confusion right now about where we are going. Social trends swirl about, like the currents at the change of the tide. Yet it's always like this when a significant change is beginning. It's getting better even as it's getting worse. While some men work 60-hour weeks, others are quitting their jobs or cutting their hours to have time to love their children. While some men think money is God, others are simplifying and walking away from wealth, choosing freedom of time to be creative or involved in their community. While some men are drowning their sadness in drugs, drink and promiscuity, others are rediscovering the joy of intimate sex, friendliness and compassion in their relationships with women. Men are starting to change.

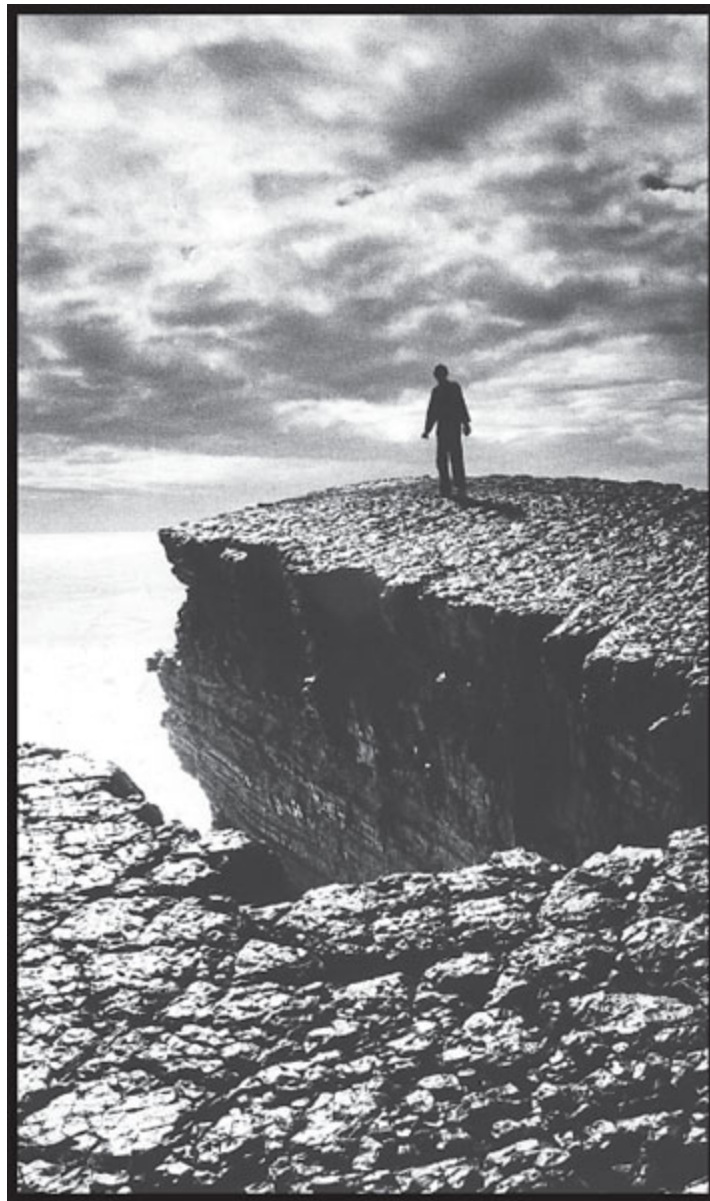
If you have just started reading this book, I hope you will find it makes a difference in your life. If you like it, please share it with friends and talk about the ideas in it. Your

yearning to be happier and your efforts to find a larger life
are part of the world's salvation too.

Steve Biddulph
Launceston, Tasmania
January 2004

Chapter 1

The Problem



MOST MEN TODAY don't have a life. What they have instead is an act. When a man is deeply unhappy, desperately worried, or utterly lonely or confused, he will often pretend the opposite, and so no one will know. Early in life little boys learn - from their parents, from school and from the big world outside - that they have to pretend. And most will do this for the rest of their lives.

The act that a man puts on is drawn from a very small range of choices, clichés almost: he may play the role of tough guy, family man, hard-nosed businessman, detached professional, cool young dude, and so on. The core pretence of all these roles is that 'everything is fine'. What's more, every man seems to believe that if he just keeps up this pretence of happiness, it will magically one day become true. But it rarely does. Thoreau puts it best: 'The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.' And he's right. At the end most men lie on their deathbed with a look of bewilderment and failure; that something more was supposed to happen, but didn't. Many of us have sat beside these deathbeds and witnessed this bewilderment. It's tragic and a waste.

Most women today are not like this. More and more, women live from inner feeling and spirit. They have their problems and struggles, but most women today have a clear sense of self, and they relate to at least several friends and family members with almost complete honesty. Women generally know *who they are* and *what they want*. The men in relationships with these strong and healthy women are simply no match for them, in every sense of that word. Conversations go nowhere and relationships collapse because to be in a relationship you have first to know who you are, and the man does not have this worked out.

Acting happy when we are not places us in terrible emotional isolation. When a man kills himself, or does

something else precipitate and harmful, friends will often declare, quite truthfully, 'I had no idea...' The pretended life also damages our families, which often consist of a woman and children who are close, with a man standing off to the side, unconnected and anxious. It is also the reason there are so few authentically vibrant men to lead us. We need a Nelson Mandela, but we get a Tony Blair. We need a Martin Luther King, but we get the Archbishop of Canterbury. It's because of the long-running man-crisis that we are in such a mess within our families, as a nation and in the world as a whole. Yet the solution is not all that hard to find. As a society, we have only gone half way. We have liberated our women (who, with their ability to collaborate and verbalise problems, were easier to liberate anyway), but we have done nothing comparable for our men. So it's time something was done.

How the difference began

How did this difference between men and women come about? It seems important to understand this if we are to undo the tangle and start again.

Little children start out well enough. A young child, whether they are a boy or a girl, bounces into life as if it were a spring garden. They expect to find every day an adventure and a pleasure. But early on, a difference starts to set in, and you can see this in your own family. A boy's spirit begins to shrivel. By mid-primary school he is uptight and edgy, and by the teenage years he is in anguish. (Sue Townsend's clever but deeply fatalistic books about Adrian Mole treat this course of events as normal, yet it is essentially a blighting of adolescence, a case of development thwarted and stunted by a lack of real adult help. The adults in Adrian's life are incompetent, self-seeking and lost.)

What becomes clear to us as we examine the lives of boys and men is that key ingredients for growing up well are simply not provided to boys in our culture, and have not been for hundreds of years. By the time the twentieth-century boy became a grown man, he was like a tiger raised in a zoo - confused and numb, with huge energies untapped. He felt that there must be more to life, *but he did not know what that 'more' was*. Lacking any idea how it might be different, he just worked harder at the pretence. Alcohol, drugs, compulsive sex, workaholism, sports could distract or numb him, but they didn't provide answers. They didn't provide any real sense of freedom.

Pretending is hard work, so it's not surprising that eventually a few cracks start to appear in a man's façade. Even a moment of joy can be the trigger for this. Sometimes a man gets a fleeting glimpse of being fully alive. He finds himself alone on a beach or mountain-top and suddenly feels dissolved in the waves, trees and sky: he regains a sense of being connected to the natural world. Or in a certain kind of moment with a woman - of intense passion or the sudden sweetness of compassionate understanding - he understands fleetingly what it really means to be close to another human being. Or playing with his children, he suddenly feels like a child again, loses all self-consciousness, feels laughter coursing through his body. In these moments he glimpses something unsettling but beautiful...and then it passes. He almost feels worse off, not knowing how to get that moment back, so he shuts the memory away and goes back to business as usual.

More often, the breakdown in a man's act can occur in more painful ways - marriage problems, a child taking drugs, business or career failure, a foolish traffic accident. Or, in the middle years of life, a deep despair combined with exhaustion settles upon him as he realises that not only is he not *loved* by those closest to him, but he is not even *known* by them. His connection to his own life

suddenly appears to be the thinnest of threads, ready to snap at any moment. We hear such stories every day.

Not long ago, I was addressing a seminar of school principals. It was the first session of the morning. The group was strangely quiet, so much so that in the end I asked if something was wrong. They told me that just before I had come in, they had learned that one of their colleagues, a man in his thirties with two young children, had drowned himself. They were not completely surprised. His wife had rejected him sexually and begun an affair with another man. This was bad enough, but as it became public knowledge, it had proved too much to bear. The man had been great at his job, much loved by parents and children at his school. Everyone was devastated. They loved him, and now he was dead.

When writing this book, I began to remember instances of male disintegration running right back through my life. A good friend of mine in high school had been intensely driven to do well. In the final exams he managed five distinctions out of six subjects – a superb score, but not a perfect one. On the night before taking his place at university, he waited until his family were all asleep, then went out on the riverbank behind his home and killed himself. Sometimes even the prospect of becoming a man is too much to contemplate.

What is important here is not the adverse situation these men found themselves in, for marriage problems or career setbacks are very common, almost universal. The problem is that both these men, although much loved by their friends, did not feel able to share their problems, so their friends did not get a chance to show they cared.

There is clear evidence ([see here](#)) that all through the twentieth century men have been suffering uniquely and severely from problems of unhappiness. Not just suicide, but premature death from stress, accidents, violence and addiction – the statistics are all dominated by men. And

hurt men tend to hurt others. Physical violence against spouses, sexual abuse of children, divorce, moral bankruptcy in business and politics...all point to something badly wrong with large numbers of men. As Robert Bly puts it, 'Are you depressed enough already?'

Reconnecting men

The bad news helps us to know where to begin. The biggest breakthrough in health research over the last decade has been not in wonder drugs or technology, but in understanding the effect of social support - specifically on recovery from cancer and heart disease and, of course, on depression and mental health. People with friendship networks, intimacy, laughter and play in their lives have better immune systems, more energy, clearer thinking, are less prone to panic or extreme acts, and less likely to get sick or die. We are soothed and healed when we have a supporting net of social connections. Women usually have this, but men usually do not.

Facing the facts

We are often told it's a man's world, but the statistics on men's health, happiness and survival show this is a lie. Here are some of the *facts* about being a man in the twenty-first century....

- Men, on average, live for six years less than women do.
- Men routinely fail at close relationships. (Half of all marriages break down, and divorces are initiated by the woman in four out of five cases.)

- Over 90 per cent of convicted acts of violence will be carried out by men, and 70 per cent of the victims will be men.
 - In school, around 90 per cent of children with behaviour problems are boys and over 80 per cent of children with learning problems are also boys.
 - Men comprise over 90 per cent of inmates of gaols.
 - Men are also 70 per cent of the unemployed. (A million men have disappeared from the workforce in the last decade, while two million more women have joined it.)
 - Men and boys commit suicide three times more frequently than women. (Twice as many men kill themselves as die in car accidents. *Five thousand men in the UK take their own lives each year - or about 18 per day.*)
-

When we compare the longevity of men and women in Britain today, we find a stunning difference. In health terms, men are like a Third World country. Just pause for a moment and make a guess at what is the biggest killer of men in the developed world. It's not heart disease or cancer or traffic accidents. These deliver the final blow, but they are not the cause of death. Most men die, years prematurely, from the 'big L' - loneliness. Men live in the same society as women, but they do not connect to it in the same way. As a result, they do not gain its benefits. And this difference kills them.

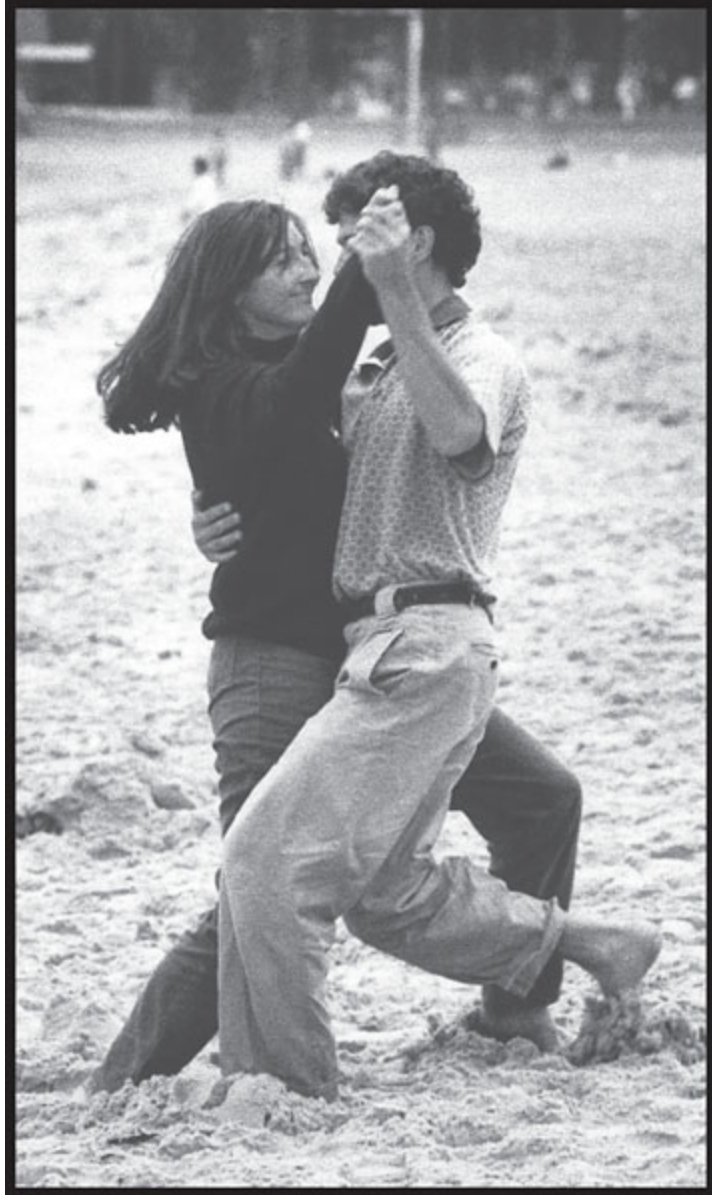
This has to change - and we should start changing it now - with our baby sons, with little boys in school, with teenagers, and with adult men. Men's liberation has to be the next great social project. Without men of integrity and wholeness, how can a society hope to survive?

The rest of this book is a road map to show how this is done. My purpose here has been to make a point - that malfunctioning men are not the exception, but the rule. The whole way we 'do' maleness has come unstuck. Today's modern urban or suburban man is a pale imitation of what being a man can be. In Shakespeare's time, even in Dickens' time, in other cultures, times and places, men had just so much more 'juice'. Here in Britain we have the longest history of industrialised urban living in the whole world. We are, in a sense, the most 'tamed' men on the planet. And therein lies the problem.

Today, at long last, we are questioning the roles that have been handed out to us: cannon fodder, factory fodder, office fodder, divorce fodder. We've had enough of malfunctioning role models: politicians we can't trust, grey men in suits wrecking our world, idiot sportsmen and boring drunks. There is a sense that we can be better than this - real, alive, warm, funny and tender, intelligent, passionate, focused, gentle and strong. We are getting ready to change the meaning of manhood, starting with *ourselves*.

Chapter 2

Liberation for the Rest of Us



SOMETIMES THE OBVIOUS can go unnoticed. About 10 years ago, writers and commentators around the world began pointing out something that we had never noticed before – that compared with the rest of the world, and compared with the rest of history, boys and young men in our society are profoundly *under-fathered* and are rarely given the processes or the mentor figures that could help their growth into mature men. With no deep training in masculinity, boys' bodies still turn into men's bodies, but they are not given the software, the inner knowledge and skills, to live in a male body with its unique hormonal and neurological traits. The result of this is an epidemic of dangerous, out of control, immature men. And that's just the politicians! Gangs, violence and uncontrollable school classrooms are the extreme effects of this father- and mentor-hunger. But even more common are the sub-clinical symptoms of this missing 'vitamin F' – lost, depressed, conforming but essentially empty men who can't engage properly with women, children or each other, and so cannot create healthy families or communities.

It seems obvious that if you live in a man's body, you need to learn how to 'drive' one from someone who knows how to drive their own. Older cultures provided this intensively, but ours is just too busy making money to be able to do it. If you examine any pre-industrial culture, you will find that men were intensely involved in the lives of children – teaching, caring for them, handing on skills first hand. There are still remnants of this in the world today, and the skill and care involved is touching to witness. Taking children to a restaurant in Italy, for example, is a much happier experience than in the UK because the male waiters will fuss over them and enjoy their presence. In much of the Third World, men and older boys routinely nurture and care for little children with skill and interest.

An American colleague of mine was visiting Red Square in Moscow with his family. His four-year-old scampered off ahead and suddenly ran into a gang of young men coming around a corner. My friend winced with fear, but the teenagers immediately smiled at the child, picked him up, gave him a genuine cuddle and carried him back to his parents. In the more 'backward' countries of the world, people are more tender to children, they have more time for them, and more skill in teaching and helping them.

Most fathers in the developed world are distant from their children, and have been so ever since industrialisation occurred about six generations ago. Studies of how long men play or interact with their children come up with figures like six or eight minutes a day. To make matters worse, a rapid succession of hammer blows - world wars, recessions, migrations - has added to the damage. Reeling from this, most fathers in living memory have been gruff, awkward and emotionally shut down. Even modern involved fathers, making brave and good efforts to be part of their children's lives, often feel ineffectual or lacking in some innate wisdom. It's not just a playmate that growing boys need, although that's a good start. It's not just fathers they need either. There must be a whole male community, diverse and offering different ways to be a healthy male. Yet elders - the uncles and mentors of an earlier age - have all but disappeared from the scene. Once a grandfather was someone in his late forties. Now he is so old that he can hardly stand up, let alone go for long walks in the snow, discussing life's meanings and deeper joys. Unless a boy is good at sport, is in the Scouts, or encounters an outstanding schoolteacher, he may simply not know any men closely at all. Not knowing the inner world of real men, each boy is forced to base his idea of self on a thinly drawn *image* gleaned from television, cinema and his peers, which he then acts out, hoping to 'prove' he is a man. Each boy then does his best to live his life using this

one-dimensional façade, which does not really work in any of life's arenas.

Girls, on the other hand, have a totally different experience. They usually grow up with continuous exposure to a range of competent and communicative women at home, at school and in friendship networks as adults. From this they learn an open and sharing style of womanhood that enables them to get close to other women and to give and receive support throughout their lives. Men's and boys' friendship networks - if they have them at all - are awkward and oblique, lacking in intimacy and often short term. (When my schooldays ended, I simply never saw any of my classmates again. Likewise when I left university and my first job.)

The lack of in-depth elder male connections during childhood leaves men bereft and struggling. Whether we are attempting to be the 'Sensitive New Man' or are clinging to the John Wayne, 1950s tough-guy image, we keep finding that it just doesn't work.

The first steps to healing

To begin with, most of us just feel there is something wrong with *us*, that we are deficient and have only ourselves to blame. But if we imagine what our life could have been like if competent, caring and wise men had always been there for us, teaching, guiding and encouraging us through our boyhood, our teens and the trials of being a young parent, for example, and how differently our lives could have gone, then we have made a start. We can see what we might have missed and need to make up.