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Carrying on with Wayward Sons

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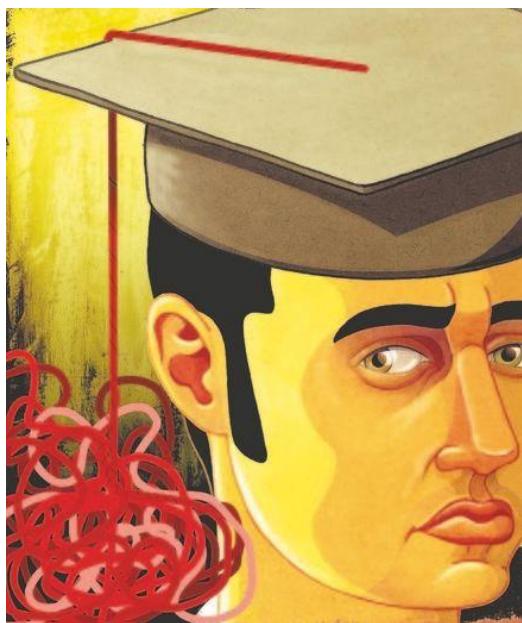
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Carrying on with wayward sons: With their brains not maturing until their mid-20s, it's time to use a different approach to life and learning with our young men

Henrik Lagerlund and Erika Simpson, Special to Postmedia Network
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Earlier this month, an 19-year-old volunteer firefighter — and son of the former mayor — in Mayerthorpe, Alta., was charged with setting several grass fires and burning down the town's wooden CN trestle bridge. Exhausted local firefighters had battled more than a dozen local blazes for days — with the young man now accused of arson, Lawson Schalm, by their side.

Schalm's father, Albert Schalm, said the family will stand by his son. "I have a non-conditional love for my son, no matter what," he said. "He will always be welcome in my home. He will always have a plate at the table."

His father says Schalm is an ordinary, popular teenager with no criminal record and no disciplinary record at school.

"The first thing I'd do is hug him," said the well-respected mayor, fighting back tears. "Tell him that I love him, that we love him and that when this is all over, and no matter how it goes, that he is always our family."

Our teenage sons perplex and confound us daily.

The rational part of the brain of a teen — male or female — isn't fully developed and won't be until the person is 25 years old or so.

Yet our daughters appear more efficient, organized and mature at younger ages. That may be partly so because girls' prefrontal cortices are generally more active than boys' and develop at earlier ages. For this reason, girls tend to make fewer impulsive decisions than boys do.

Girls have, in general, stronger neural connectors in their temporal lobes than boys have. The connectors lead to better listening skills and more sensually detailed memory storage — which brings about, among other things, greater use of detail in writing assignments.

At university, boys can often seem like laggards, shuffling and confused; on the other hand, young males tend to do better than females at abstract and physical-spatial functions, such as watching and manipulating objects that move through physical space and understanding abstract mechanical concepts.

If young adults are given five more years of schooling beyond Grade 12, however, the young men seem to realize in their early to mid-20s that they are expected to be strong providers responsible for raising families.

When boys become more like men, they avidly compete for marks, write logical and straight-forward essays and organize their time to research their own cutting-edge ideas. In essence, males evolve by their mid-20s to become much more responsible.

This is an argument to delay putting our boys into university by a couple of years after high school, and then encourage them to choose to complete their first degree in the humanities and social sciences.

Take the pressure off them to go to university at age 18. Learn other languages. Learn about the classics like Aristotle, Descartes, Goethe, Leibniz and Plato. Explore 19th-century English literature, Marcus Aurelius and even the Stoics.

Let them socialize and mingle at university with girls who are a few years younger than they are. Don't force them as teenagers into colleges to specialize in a trade. Your son can probably fix a basic toilet, but that doesn't mean plumbing is his future career path.

After teaching a combined total of almost 20,000 students at the University of Cambridge, Carleton University, the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Toronto, Western University and Uppsala University in Sweden, we know female students are more likely to race toward their finish lines with an eye on the perceived biological imperative of starting their families before age 35. Meanwhile the boys take their place at the starting gate, muddled and limping, almost nonchalantly.

But life is not a game with winners and losers and short finish lines. Boys and girls born in Canada in 2000 are expected to live to be 100. A century from now is a long time. It will pay off well for our society in 2100 if we first equip the next generation of adults with strong backgrounds in what is often called the classics, including ancient and modern languages, literature, philosophy, art and music.

Like those Renaissance humanists in the 1600s, they should learn methods that are primarily critical or speculative and have a significant historical element — as distinguished from the mainly empirical and technical approaches of business and the natural sciences.

We won't teach them medieval swordplay — which is what they avidly watch these days on Game of Thrones — but we will teach them about grammar, logic, metaphysics and moral philosophy.

And learning to think better in egalitarian terms will prepare them much better for taking distinguished places as ethical and independent-minded members of our democratic society.

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