

American males' latest woe: Peter Pan syndrome

By Diane Hofessa
staff writer

"To live would be an awfully big adventure." — Peter Pan

Once upon a time, American boys grew up and became men. And now? Not necessarily. Thousands of boys at the brink of adulthood are refusing to become men,

creating a serious social problem that psychologists and best-selling author Dr. Dan Kiley has called the Peter Pan Syndrome.

The average Peter Pan is a white, upper middle class male in his late 20s or early 30s. He is usually his parents' oldest son, said Kiley, a Chicago resident and author of the Peter Pan Syndrome.

Peter Pans are old enough to be men,

but behave like children. They are boys trapped in three-piece suits only pretending to be adults, said Kiley. Like Peter Pan, they resort to magical thinking.

"If I don't think about my problems, they'll go away," a Peter Pan tells himself.

The syndrome threatens the mental health of its victims, Kiley said. Peter Pans are lonely and unhappy with their

lives, are poorly adjusted to the real world and often resort to drugs and alcohol, he said. They are terrified of commitments to women and careers. They long desperately to be loved but are afraid to get too close.

These individuals cause unhappiness for women who try to love them but discover that the men they love are unable to make commitments. Because of their unreliability, Peter Pans let their

friends down, yet expect those friends to be dependable.

THE WOMEN'S movement brought the syndrome to a head, Kiley said. Many modern women are demanding teamwork relationships from men, expecting them to share household and child-rearing responsibilities. Many men aren't ready for these modern roles and become confused and frightened, Kiley said.

The high divorce rate also helps create Peter Pans, he said. They see the unhappy marriages of their parents and friends and respond by saying to themselves, "I won't let a woman love me because I can't pay the price." At the same time Peter Pans need desperately to belong to someone, Kiley said. Double-digit unemployment figures

also frighten Peter Pans, said Kiley. Because the workforce already has too many adults, some men don't see the point in making serious commitments to a particular career or company.

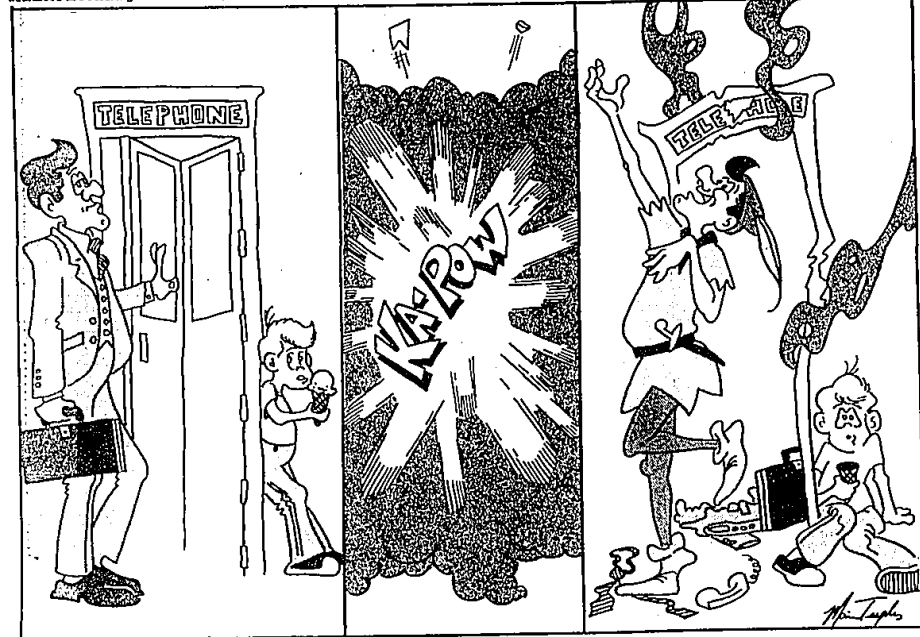
The Peter Pan Syndrome has been around for a long time, Kiley said, but it never included such a large number of men. The conditions that produce Peter Pans have never been so favorable, he said.

Kiley, who is a husband and father, said he gets about 20 letters a day from Peter Pans who have admitted to themselves they need help.

Kiley looked at a stack of letters in front of him as he talked.

"Two of them will probably say, 'I used your book and it helped me out.

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