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WORKING

Next year, sons can officially join the daughters' day in the sun

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Take Our Daughters to Work Day turns 10 years old on Thursday, and next year it will gain a little brother.

After much debate, Take Our Daughters to Work Day will add a sibling program, Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day, in 2003.

Some businesses can choose to stick to girls-only; others can opt for boys too, with the Ms. Foundation's seal of approval.

Few challenge the benefit of showing girls, ages 9 to 15, what happens in workplaces. A third of all Americans, or about 71 million people, have participated in some form in Take Our Daughters to Work Day, according to a RoperASW survey.

So why not include boys? Among the most vocal proponents of that addition has been California resident Joe Manthey, who sued his county in federal court early this year for supporting Take Our Daughters to Work Day, claiming the event discriminated against boys.

"This day sends a message that [girls] are only special because they're victims," Manthey said. "Separation is the opposite of diversity."

Some businesses already have been inviting boys on the same or a separate day. The Ms. Foundation, which originally started the day, has always argued that girls get more out of it if it's just them, and some in the professional world agree.

Rebecca Gordon at the University of Illinois at Chicago is one. As director of the Office of Women's Affairs, she hosts as many as 200 girls each year for the day.

"I know a lot of corporations have gone to 'take our children to work' day," but when boys are included, the same dynamics seen in classrooms are likely to transfer to the workplace, Gordon said. Boys are selected first to answer questions, and push to the front of the crowd, especially when new technologies are featured. At the same time, girls are pressured to not be



A scene from a 1996 Take Our Daughters to Work Day, in which girls joined the usually male-dominated floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange in an exercise of trading "pizza futures." AP file photo

smart, so they dumb down their talents, she said.

"That's why we've stayed true to the original vision," Gordon said, adding that next year her department plans to stick with daughters, rather than adding sons. "I think it's an excellent program."

But Manthey argues on behalf of boys, as part of a campaign he calls Kid Culture in the Schools (kulture.com). "The No. 1 social problem facing America is the lack of male role models for our sons," he said. Manthey also says boys are academically weaker than girls and need the boost.

While Manthey takes credit for the Ms. Foundation's inclusion of boys next year, Marie Wilson, president of the Ms. Foundation, said the alternate day has been in the works for a year and a half, after attempts to have men's groups organize a similar day failed.

And including boys harks back to the foundation's creation 29 years ago. The foundation was inspired by Marlo Thomas' "Free to Be You and Me"

television program, book and record. The program told children they could hold any job, regardless of gender.

"Our foundation is about girls," Wilson said. But "if you'd rather do children, don't just add boys and stir."

While the format for boys next year is still in the making, the foundation likely will encourage businesses to show boys career opportunities in fields in which they are underrepresented, such as nursing and day care, Wilson said. Other potential components include encouraging boys to ask companies if fathers can take parental leave, because, she said, if men's options don't expand, women's options won't expand.

For this year, parents who want to mentor sons on Thursday can find a career brainstorming exercise for boys at takeourdaughterstowork.org.

The site also features potential all-girl activities, meant to empower. Girls can practice being loud, and learn it's OK sometimes. In another exercise, each girl puts her fist in the air and

names her favorite attribute ("I am strong!").

Girls across the country also will continue getting messages about fields in which they are underrepresented. They will visit women such as Brenda Berkman, a lieutenant firefighter for New York City. In 1982, Berkman successfully sued the city so she could become its first female firefighter. In May, the Ms. Foundation will award Berkman the Gloria Award, named after Gloria Steinem, co-founder of the Ms. Foundation.

"We want the girls to see women firefighters, and there are so few," Berkman said. "Not only will it encourage them to enter the fire service, but enter other fields they may not have not been thinking of."

So what does Berkman think of including boys next year? Fine on principle, she said, but she also sees potential problems. "Unfortunately sometimes girls are [worried about] how they'll look in front of the boys. ... It should be [a day] that makes sure that girls are comfortable doing the activities."