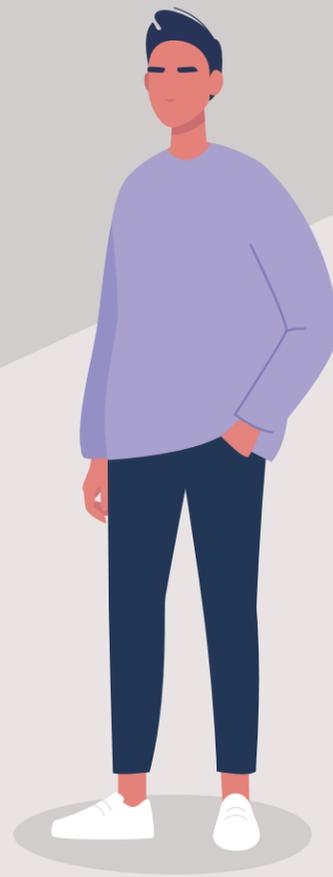


The Learning Team

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A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education

BOY
OH
BOY



Complex changes
Finding a way

PART THREE OF A THREE-PART SERIES
focused on challenges faced by LGBTQ2S+ youth, girls and boys

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Boys need our help... desperately

Three-part series focuses on challenges faced by LGBTQ2S+ youth, girls and boys.



Cory Hare
Managing editor
The Learning Team

My son has always loved roughhousing. Ever since he was old enough to walk, he's been trying to wrestle me down and pummel me. During the first five years of the boy's life, I discouraged these pugilistic tendencies. I wasn't that way myself as a boy, so I didn't understand the appeal. Plus, how often does a grown man need to wrestle or throw punches these days? Confrontation is to be avoided at all costs in our society, so the boy might as well learn it early, I thought. So for years I quashed my son's every attempt to express his donnybrooking desires.

My message to him: "Settle down ... behave ... yada yada."

As time went on I noticed something—my boy stopped trying to engage me in combat. But he didn't stop trying altogether. His uncles and cousins became his favourite partners and, unlike me, they were happy to engage with him. Over time I began to feel that I was missing out on a lot of innocent fun, so one day I gave up. If this form of physical expression is part of who he is and it's not hurting anyone, why stifle him?

That was a few years ago. My son is now 11 and it's now part of our regular routine to wrestle, box, grapple and body slam whenever the mood strikes us. Sometimes I initiate these shenanigans by taking a pot shot at him when he least expects it. Inevitably, his eyes ignite, he springs to life and it's on.

My view is that, on a societal level, boys are still being bombarded with the same message that I used to inflict upon my son: "settle down ... behave ... yada yada."

Last year I came upon a book that made me glad I made this shift. *No More Mr. Nice Guy* by American psychologist Robert Glover posits that preventing a boy from expressing part of his natural self makes him doubt every aspect of himself. The result is that he comes to feel ashamed of who he is, starts hiding his true feelings and tries to get his needs met by being what he thinks others want him to be. In other words, he becomes a "Nice Guy."

This isn't to be confused with a good man; in fact, they are polar opposites. Where a good man is authentic, confident and strong enough to be vulnerable, caring and compassionate, a Nice Guy is fake from every angle, because his self-worth is tied up in the approval of others.

And according to Glover, Nice Guys share some other common traits: they are chronic underachievers in their careers, often struggle with vices like alcohol and pornography and are unable to form healthy relationships with members of the opposite sex.

I recognized a lot of myself in Glover's description of a typical Nice Guy, and my greatest fear for my boy is that he'll grow up to be one as well. Why do I fear this? Because such men are docile, limp-wristed creatures who live scaled-down, sanitized versions of real lives. They live lives ruled by fear—fear of taking risks, of not being liked, of acknowledging who they really are, of taking the lead, of failing and even succeeding.

I have a daughter too. She is 13, the very age when girls often begin to struggle with confidence and social acceptance. Yet I'm less worried about her than I am about my son. Why is this? One reason is that it seems that our education system and our society in general has our girls' backs.

Messages like "Girl Power" and "The Future is Female" signal to me that our society is aligning itself to encourage girls to accept themselves for who they are, to eschew narrow and outdated societal expectations and chart their own course.

Are we doing the same for boys? Do we even recognize that boys need encouragement too? I have my doubts.

In recent years, books like *The Boy Crisis* have pointed out that, as boys progress through adolescence, their risk of academic failure and suicide skyrockets compared to girls. What's more, boys' old sense of purpose—being a warrior, a leader or a sole breadwinner—are fading, leaving many

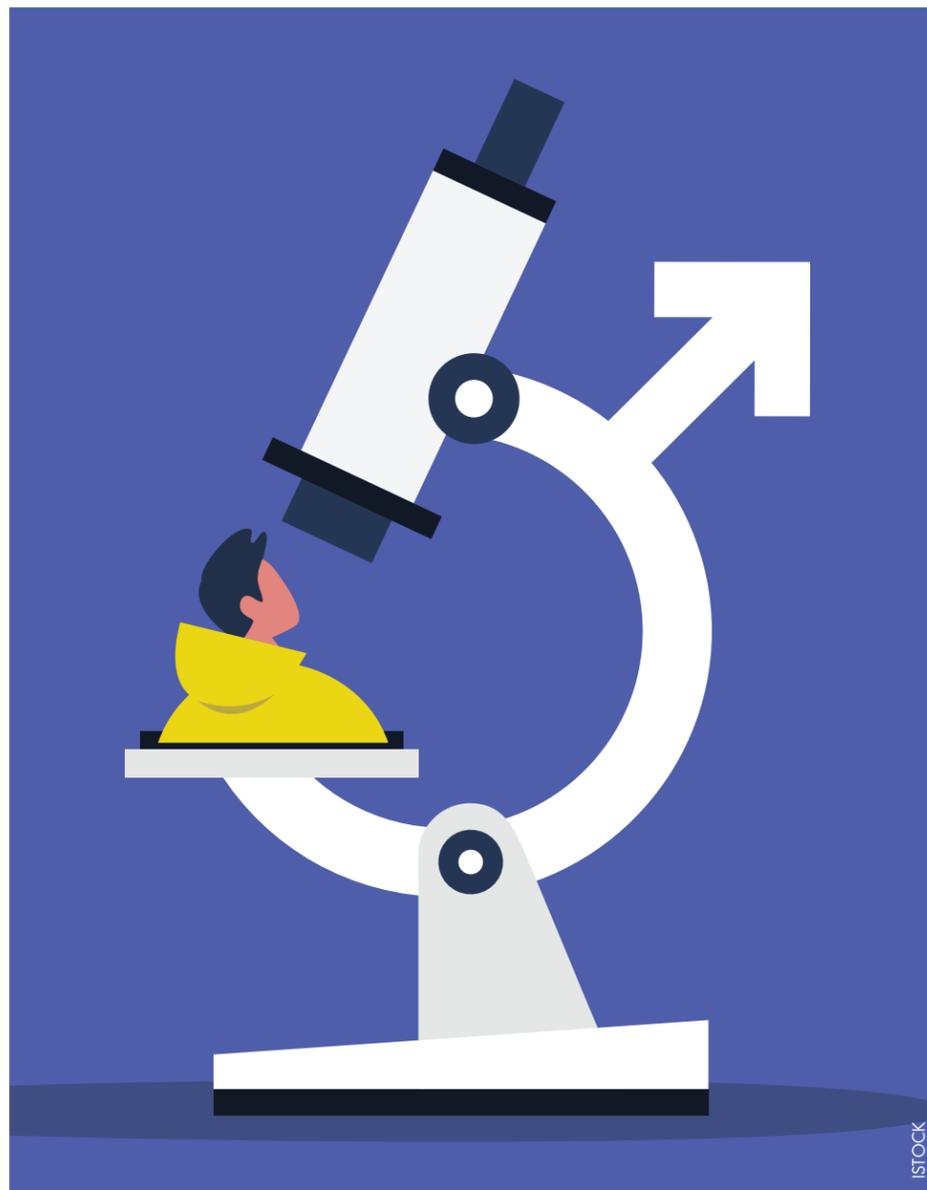
bright boys feeling alienated, withdrawn and addicted to immediate gratification. My view is that, on a societal level, boys are still being bombarded with the same message that I used to inflict upon my son: "settle down ... behave ... yada yada."

This issue of *The Learning Team* provides a glimpse of the challenges faced by boys these days. I urge you to consider the ideas conveyed within these pages and to engage in reflection and conversation with and about the boys in your life. Their lives and future happiness are at stake.

Cory Hare is an award-winning journalist and recovering Nice Guy.

Masculinity under a microscope

Boys impacted by gender discrimination, body image and toxic masculinity



The Learning Team Staff

Girls do language; boys do math. This is an example of the gender discrimination that has existed for decades within our schools, says Michael Kehler, a University of Calgary professor who studies masculinity and the intersection of education and gender.

Historically, amid the vast body of research on student achievement in various academic disciplines, strong attention has been paid to girls and their academic results in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), Kehler says. This has resulted in significant efforts to increase girls' participation and success rates in STEM.

However, only in the last 10 years has academic attention and the public conversation shifted toward addressing boys' longstanding underachievement in reading and writing scores.

"School and schooling are for girls, [while] boys go to work," Kehler says of the prevailing attitudes that are now starting to change.

Kehler is concerned that research focusing on differences between girls and boys tends to essentialize traits and stereotypes of what is feminine and what is masculine: for example, girls do language and boys solve mathematics problems. Thus, he is concerned that many students who do not "fit the mould" of what is male and what is female are left behind and their needs go unmet at school and at home.

"This binary view sets up a perspective that there may be something wrong with a boy if his interests are different than what is expected," Kehler says.

Ultimately, Kehler argues that boys are not bound by their biology, that masculinity is fluid, not fixed but rather negotiable, and that boys learn how to be in the world through their interactions with each other and the adults in their lives. Therefore, Kehler encourages teachers and parents to be aware of their own assumptions around gender and ask themselves how their assumptions impact and reinforce gender bias and gender stereotyping within their classrooms and homes.

"They need to nurture and not tamp down attributes typically assigned to men and women," Kehler says.

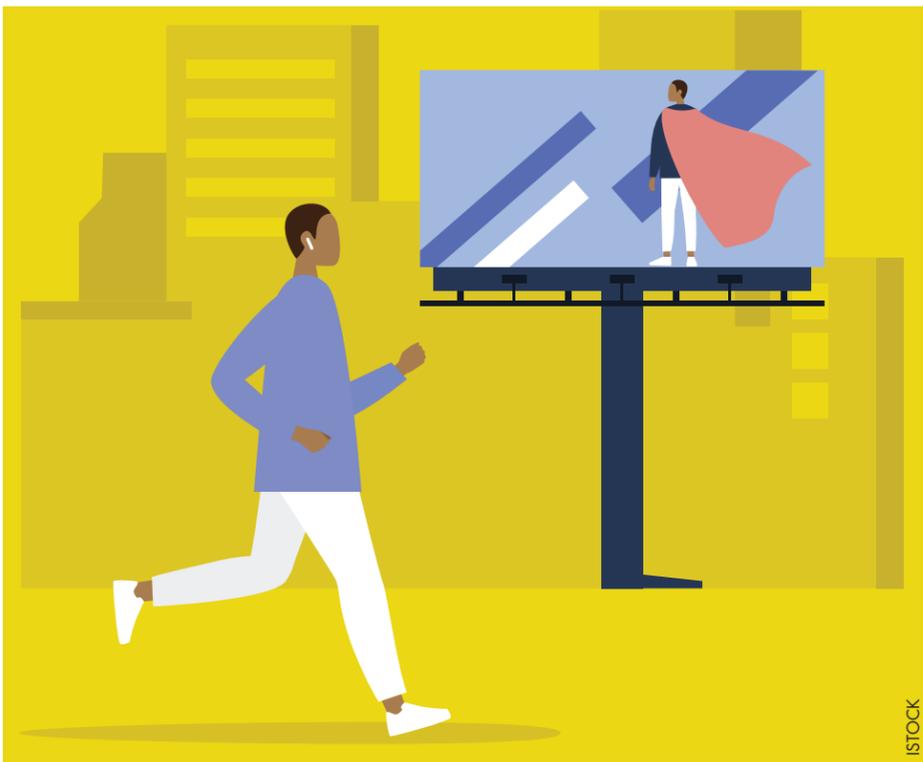
Examples of questions that parents and teachers can consider are

- Which activities do we push boys toward, and which ones do we discourage?
- How do we support boys being vulnerable and honest about their fears and uncertainties?
- Do we rely on humour to deflect serious conversations with boys about sexual relationships?
- When do we show the importance of touch and embracing boys to show public affection rather than hiding or suppressing feelings?
- When do we invite boys to do more nurturing, caring activities?

Kehler adds that challenging our own narratives about what boys will excel at helps expand their potential beyond stereotypically male behaviours to nurture all facets of their humanness.

"Openness from adult leaders is needed to allow boys to express all aspects of their beings."

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Boys and body image

Through his research, Kehler has discovered a growing awareness that many boys struggle with body image.

“There is a higher concentration on the gaze on men’s bodies, for the purposes of marketing and consumerism, and that can lead to eating disorders, use of stereotypes and looking at one’s physique with a critical eye,” he says.

Ultimately, the intense focus of media on a stereotypical and idealized male physique impacts boys as they pass through adolescence. At the extreme, the pressure to be a particular way can lead boys to unhealthy behaviours, such as eating disorders or excessive exercise.

In his research studying boys and their perception of their own body image, Kehler found that many boys tend to withdraw from physical education classes around the time they get to Grade 9. While the reasons for leaving physical education are complex, Kehler notes that many boys feel that their bodies are increasingly scrutinized and judged by those boys who are able to perform well in the gym and locker room environment.

“The physical education space becomes very threatening for many boys and they are made to feel they are less than a man,” he says.

Young men who have a difficult time with their body image come to associate places like the locker room as threatening. Therefore, for parents and teachers, it becomes important to share multiple

perspectives on what constitutes good health and wellness in a wholistic way so young men learn to care for and accept their bodies and not engage in destructive behaviour patterns that endanger their health.

What is toxic masculinity?

Toxic masculinity, a commonly used term, refers to destructive stereotypical attitudes and behaviours that are associated with men.

Kehler says the term attacks a narrow version of masculinity, which can be polarizing.

“For some men, they feel under attack; for others it is liberating,” he says.

Kehler points out that toxic masculinity essentializes men in a binaristic way, for example, as competitive, unemotional and sexually aggressive. Attacking that narrow version of masculinity allows us to expand society’s conversation about what it means to be a man.

He also notes that, for boys and girls, being a member of a well-defined group is secure, so moving outside those constructs can be difficult. However, in order to expand our thinking about gender, we need to work together to address toxic masculinity when it occurs.

“There is huge potential in this time for change within and among men to see an alternative way of demonstrating a larger repertoire of masculinity,” Kehler says. “We can say, it doesn’t have to be this way – let’s break out of our binary structures.”

Further conversation

Read Michael Kehler’s article *Beyond the locker room: Coronavirus isolation is an opportunity to teach boys about toxic masculinity*. Visit <https://theconversation.com> and search the term “beyond the locker room.”

Talking to boys about body image

During their tween and teen years boys become more familiar with masculine traits and often try to look like the body image they see in media. Tween boys tend to feel pressured if they are “undersized” and they feel the need to gain muscle mass. As their bodies start to mature, the differences between their body shapes increase, which can put a lot of pressure on teens to avoid being either too heavy or too thin. They also tend to consume media – especially video games – that feature highly muscular and very tough, violent characters.

The following questions are possible ways to begin a conversation with your child about body acceptance:

- What are the male heroes like in the media you watch, read and play? How are they different from the men you know in the real world?
- How do the heroes in the media you watch, read and play solve problems? What are some other ways of solving problems or being a hero?

You can encourage boys to read about real-life heroes who embody the same values of courage and perseverance but who don’t use violence to achieve their goals.

<https://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/talking-kids-about-media-body-image>



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Program provides boys a safe place for risk-taking

Pam Krause, CEO of Calgary’s Centre for Sexuality, suggests that young people’s views on masculinity need to change. That’s why the Centre for Sexuality runs a program called “WiseGuyz,” for Grade 9 boys, designed to help them rethink what masculinity means – and what it should mean. Begun in 2010, WiseGuyz takes place weekly in participating Calgary junior high schools.

“The young men delve deeply into issues of masculinity,” says Krause. “They talk about what it’s like for them to be boys in society today, and how they envision being a man. It’s a safe place for them to discuss things that boys aren’t normally encouraged to discuss.”

The Centre for Sexuality partnered with Dr. Deiner Exner-Cortens, PhD, from the University of Calgary’s Faculty of Social Work, to create WiseGuyz as an evidence-based program and scale it across Canada. Krause says the impetus for the program came from the observation that school is often not a positive environment for boys.

“Many boys are really struggling at school,” says Krause. “In fact, young men are at a much higher risk for committing suicide.” So the Centre for Sexuality decided an intervention was in order. “It turns out, putting boys in a circle to have frank conversations was just what they needed,” says Krause. “These boys say when they come to WiseGuyz they take off their masculine face, become whoever they really are, and then when they leave, they put that masculine face back on.”

The WiseGuyz program helps boys articulate what they see as problematic about traditional masculinity, such as the inability to connect with their own feelings and the feelings of others. Program leaders help boys open up about why these traits are not desirable.

Thinking outside the “man box”

Krause hopes that programs like WiseGuyz will help create a population of boys and men who will step outside the narrow confines of masculinity. Krause calls this the “man box.” Inside that box are all the culturally acceptable traits assigned to men, such as dominance and stoicism.

“The man box is very real,” says Krause. “And it’s strangling those who live inside it.”

Getting boys, and particularly men, to step outside that box isn’t always easy.

“I think that at the root of the issue is fear,” says Krause. “Historically, many men have done well in our society. They don’t want to lose their power and their status.”

If the masculine pecking order needs to change, as Krause suggests, some men will see that power shift as a threat.

“The question this raises,” says Krause, “is instead of holding on so tightly to your power, what’s wrong with sharing that power?”



This is an excerpt from the article “Is there only one way to be a man? Rethinking masculinity as a rigid social construct,” published by the University of Calgary. Used with permission.

<https://explore.ucalgary.ca/rethinking-the-definition-of-masculinity>

Suicide rates compared between girls and boys

Before puberty



Age 10 – 14



Age 15 – 19



Age 20 – 24



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 58, no. 1 (2009); and *Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)*, 2010.

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PHOTOS: CORY HARE

All-boys program boosts confidence and leadership

Cory Hare
Managing Editor, *The Learning Team*

It can get busy and noisy in the hallways of Sir James Lougheed School.

The site is home to Calgary's only K-6 program that's just for boys, and one of the products of its single-gender focus is that it's legal to run in the hall ... as long as it's done safely.

This rule represents a different interpretation of compliance compared to mainstream schools, says principal Terry Baustad. Other boy-friendly rules are evident while touring the classrooms, where boys sit on counters or in cubbies, their hoodies pulled up around their faces or baseball caps down over their eyes.

"Boys like to turtle; they like to have that space that is theirs to learn," Baustad says.

Regular movement breaks are also part of the routine for the 100 or so boys in the program, as are daily physical education classes with a K-6 specialist.

But not all boys are the same, so creating a learning environment specifically for boys involves more than just allowing them to move around more, Baustad says. The boys are also taught how to recognize their own mental and physical states, and provided with strategies for getting themselves ready to learn.

"We need the boys to understand what their body is saying to them, and we give the boys the strategies to get back into the learning in really good ways," Baustad says.

Shining knights

One of the school's main focuses is to provide the boys a sense of belonging. Upon entry to the program, each boy is designated as either a blue knight or a grey knight. They wear shirts defined by their colour and take pride in being a blue or a grey.

Another overarching theme in the school is doing significant care in three specific areas: for themselves, for others and for the place. Whenever a boy demonstrates significant care in one of these areas, he gets a stone (either blue or grey) that he places in one of three jars that are prominently displayed in a high-traffic area within the school. The blues and greys compete to see which team has more stones in the jars, and there are regular rewards for individuals and teams.

Within this age group, it's typical to see girls leading the work with the boys trying to keep up, Baustad says, so the school works to instill in boys that they have the ability to learn as well. The school is also focused on helping boys develop skills in leadership, empathy and acceptance.

"We learn best when we are in environments where we feel we have a sense of belonging and we have a peer group that is cheering us on," Baustad says.

Editor's note: The interviews for this article took place in the fall of 2019. Principal Terry Baustad has since been assigned to another school.



Sir James Lougheed School

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The all-boys' program strives to create an environment where boys feel a sense of belonging and come to know themselves as learners.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Leadership development
- Books and curricular materials that excite boys
- Opportunities for boys to express themselves through the fine arts
- Mentorship networks with successful men
- Optimistic culture and encouraging learning environment where boys achieve their personal best
- Classroom environments that support male learners (movement breaks, tall desks, alternative seating, assistive tools)
- School uniform

KEY OUTCOMES

- Active engagement in a "boy focused" learning environment
- Enhanced self-confidence
- Development of caring relationships through coaching and mentorship

<http://school.cbe.ab.ca/school/AllBoys>



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