Boys and Identity

INTRODUCTION
While there is considerable research focusing on understanding the developmental needs of girls, and less attention has been paid to boys. Research regarding boys and identity is important to youth development, because it enables youth practitioners to have a better understanding of needs specific to the boys in their programs. In spite of physical characteristics that define the sex of an individual, both boys and girls are confined by sets of unwritten rules that dictate how one is to act and behave. This research brief explores how the unwritten rules regarding boys and their gender roles impact their development. Before beginning this discussion, it is important to understand the difference between the terms sex and gender. Sex is determined by the physical characteristics of one’s anatomy, i.e. female or male reproductive organs. Gender roles are social constructs of behavior that are deemed masculine or feminine (Resource Center for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention, 2009).

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS
1. Boys generally function according to a “Boy Code” which can hamper their development into being fully functioning adults.
2. Boys’ identities are shaped and the “Boy Code” is reinforced through programs, curricula and interactions with teachers, peers and other adults in their lives.
3. Extracurricular activities such as clubs and sports are tools through which youth workers are able to assist in the positive development of boys.

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS
Boys generally function according to a “Boy Code” which can hamper their development into being fully functioning adults.

On a regular basis boys hear comments such as “Boys will be boys,” “Boys don’t cry,” “Tough it out,” and “Act like a man.” These comments embody the ideas and beliefs of how a boy should act and are at the core of the “Boy Code”. In Real Boys (Pollack, 1998) explains how the Boy Code creates a “straight jacket” for boys that can have a detrimental effect on their development. The four main rules that make up the Boy Code are:

- Boys must never show weakness.
- Taking risks and acting violent is part of being a boy.
- Boys must achieve status of dominance and power.
- Boys are prohibited from any feminine qualities.

Ridicule and competition can reinforce the Boy Code through boy culture, “where peer groups reinforce many aspects of the code, often with unfortunate results” (Cronan & Witt, 2005, p. 427). The Boy Code often creates a disconnect between boys and adults,
because the ideas of Boy Code are also reinforced by adults. For example, adults frequently demand that young boys to show their manhood through aggression, physical altercations and rough play in sports and other recreation settings, but are punished when getting into fights at school. In addition, boys are taught at an early age to suppress any emotions that are viewed as feminine and to “toughen up” not only in their interactions with peers but also with adults. This lack of emotion results in many boys feeling emotionally separated from their parents and other adults before they are developmentally ready. These feelings are further reinforced and lead many boys to not feel comfortable talking to or expressing concerns to adults, if those concerns are perceived to break the Boy Code. Recognizing the code is important, since boys who break the code often feel ashamed, and this ultimately affects their confidence and self-esteem well into adulthood (Pollack, 1998).

Even when boys appear sad or afraid, in most cases our culture lets them know that they had better “tough it out” by themselves. Repressing their feelings can lead to Attention Deficit Disorder, serious conduct disorder problems, and depression—and when they are older, problems with alcohol or drugs. Indeed, the same kind of shame that silences adolescent girls from expressing their true voice affects boys as early as ages five or six (Pollack, 1998).

**Boys’ identities are shaped and the Boy Code is reinforced through curriculum and interactions with teachers and peers, and other adults.**

In general, boys are underperforming in schools (Pollack, 1998; Weaver-Hightower, 2003; Reichert & Kuriloff, 2004). Youth spend a large portion of their day at school, socializing and learning. Reichert & Kuriloff (2004) found that “boys developed their self-concepts based in part on how they saw themselves reflected in the mirror of the school’s social relations” (p. 564). Thus, it is important to understand how schooling affects boys and how it may contribute to their academic performance (Howard, 2003). Weaver-Hightower (2003) suggests, “placing teachers front and center” (p. 488) and urge researchers to better understand teachers and their training in relation to ideas regarding masculinities. In other words, teachers and youth leaders must begin to address issues regarding language, both verbal and nonverbally, and the different way boys and girls learn.

**Extracurricular activities such as clubs and sports are tools through which youth workers are able to assist in the positive development of boys.**

Programs, such as coed sports, can help to break the Boy Code and other gender stereotypes by giving boys a “wider set of expectations about what it takes to become a man” (Denner & Griffin, 2003) through more developmentally appropriate activities. A positive and cooperative environment in sports can contribute to social success and positive peer relationships. Allowing youth to be too competitive is linked to numerous negative social outcomes such as violence and aggression that can help reinforce boy code (Fraser-Thomas, 2005).

**CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

While boys may face challenges due to the Boy Code, as youth practitioners, it is important that we help boys to break free from the “straight jacket” imposed by the code. In general, youth need supports, opportunities, programs and services, which enable youth to grow to be healthy and fully functioning adults (Witt & Caldwell, 2005). Emotional support systems created by caring adults provide encouragement and motivation, as well guidance throughout the developmental process. Pollack (1998) encourages us to help boys unlearn the Boy Code by helping them to enjoy close, emotionally rich relationships. Practical solutions include avoiding teasing and taunting; encouraging expression of the full range of emotions; expressing empathy and caring openly; and providing models of masculinity that is broad and inclusive. Supporting boys and breaking the Boy Code helps boys to develop internal assets such as positive values as well as positive identity through increasing self-esteem and a positive view of the future (Search institute, 2008). Assessing boys’ needs and incorporating intentional programming, practitioners can outline program goals, atmosphere, and activities to help meet the needs of the boys they serve (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). For boys, providing them with enriching opportunities, as well as programs and services are essential to helping them to overcome or be free of Boy Code.
**AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED**

As demographics continue to shift in the United States, a better understanding of Boy Code and ideas regarding masculinity specific to racial and ethnic groups is needed. For example, it is useful to understand the perception of cool in African American males (Lee, 1991; Bailey & Paisley, 2004) and machismo in Hispanic/Latino males (Villereal & Cavazos, 2005) and their impact on gender role development. Second, research regarding the effects that mentors have on the development of boy identity is needed. In general youth receive support and opportunities through establishing a positive relationship with a caring adult (Jekielek et al., 2002), which can help foster positive youth development. For example, literature on African American adolescent males, places heavy emphasis on Black male role models and leaders to be included in education and other programs to assist in their development (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Lee, 1991). Finally, as family dynamics continue to change, research regarding how family structures affect boys’ identity is needed. We need a better understanding of how being raised in varying family situations (i.e., single-female headed household), effects boys given that fathers make unique contributions to the growth and development of their children (Jones, 2007).

**REFERENCES**


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Youth Development Initiative (http://www.ydi.tamu.edu/)

Raising Boys, PBS Parents (http://www.pbs.org/parents/raisingboys/index.html)

Supporting Our Sons Website: (http://www.supportingours ons.org)

Dr. Peter Witt serves as Editor for the YDI Research Brief Series

More briefs are currently in development. If you have a particular topic that you would like the YDI to address feel free to email us at ydi@ag.tamu.edu