

GLOBAL
BOYHOOD
INITIATIVE

The State of UK Boys

An Urgent Call for Connected, Caring Boyhoods

A Report for the Global Boyhood Initiative



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For more information about the Global Boyhood Initiative, please visit: www.boyhoodinitiative.org

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Introduction


Why this report?

From education and achievement to mental health and well-being to violence and aggression, the 'state of boys' has long been a feature of UK (and global) educational, societal and political debate. Against this backdrop, a raft of evidence-based research has not only contested the notion of a singular 'state' of boys, but also complicated the category of 'boy' and, therefore, what it means to be a boy today. Discourses about toxic and 'backlash' masculinities have also become increasingly prominent in popular culture in recent years, both in the UK and other Western countries – including #MeToo and debates about incel culture. Popular discourses on more positive masculinities are less salient, but nonetheless growing in prominence – including around the changing role of fathers. Understanding the multiple ways that boys, boyhoods, and masculinities are constructed and produced in contemporary societies, and how these relate to other gender formations, is fundamental if we are to support and respond meaningfully to the diverse experiences of boys.

About the Global Boyhood Initiative

The Global Boyhood Initiative (GBI) was co-founded and is co-coordinated by Equipundo and the Kering Foundation in partnership with Plan International and core global partner Gillette. It is designed to support boys aged 4 to 13 and the adults in their lives with the resources they need to raise, teach, coach and set an example for boys to become men who embrace healthy masculinity and gender equality. You can learn about the initiative at www.boyhoodinitiative.org.

This report, produced as part of the Global Boyhood Initiative, aims to build understanding of boys, boyhoods and masculinities in the UK today using a literature review and key informant interviews. For this assessment of the state of boys, we used 'gender and boys' and 'masculinities' as key variables and search terms, seeking out socio-cultural perspectives on gender that locate and contextualise research on masculinities to understand diversity and equity issues in this field. We also critically reviewed scholarship that focuses on the experiences of and practices with boys, children and young people aged 4 to 13. Much of this is UK-based, but we also drew on international examples when they contributed to deeper understanding and insight, just as some research with older boys shed light on the contexts into which younger boys are growing up.



An assessment of this broad topic cannot fully do justice to all of the issues it discusses (for longer version, see box). To supplement the research, we conducted 15 key informant interviews online and via email with experts on gender, masculinities and boyhood. (See Annex for a full list of key informants.) Our key informants' perspectives helped inform the structure and shape of this report, and their insights are also found in key quotes throughout the paper on the state of research, policy and interventions related to young masculinities.


Want to See More?

This report is a slimmed-down version of the full document (*The State of UK Boys: Understanding and Transforming Gender in the Lives of UK Boys*). It is intended for practitioners working directly with children and their families, nongovernmental organization staff and media. For a more detailed look at these results – as well as an expanded background section – see the [full report](#).


Context and Background

Gender is a category that is both analytic and everyday, taken for granted and contested, abstract and concrete, extensive and intensive, intimate and institutionalized.


(Thomson, Berriman and Bragg, 2018, p. 113)



Sociological perspectives on gender emphasise that it is not innate, nor something that one 'is' or 'has'. Rather, gender is something that is continually built through our everyday interactions, discussions and institutions. Being a boy or a man is a position into which individuals are 'summoned' and which can be taken up, refused or negotiated in different ways. That is, there is no one way of 'doing boy' (Renold, 2001; Swain, 2005a; Connell and Pearse, 2015). Multiple possibilities of masculinity can happen within the same institutional, cultural and social setting (Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2006): in school, for example, high achievers, sporty types, nerds and cool/popular boys. Gender is about more than individuals, since all aspects of society are gendered and gender is an organising principle of society: the dominant patterns of that organisation are society's normative 'gender order' (Connell, 2005). But gender also comes in and out of visibility: when, how, why and by whom gender is named or identified and when it remains un(re)marked are highly significant for the politics of gender.



Recent research also notes rapidly changing gender transformations in society and that gender diversity is increasingly a condition of children's gender identities (Hines and Taylor, 2018, Bragg *et al.*, 2018, Allen *et al.*, 2022). In the UK and beyond (Peltola and Phoenix, 2022), gender is highly complex, constantly shifting and encompassing many categories beyond a binary boy/girl dichotomy. For instance, Bragg *et al.* (2018) found young people aged 12 to 14 using 'expanded vocabularies of gender identity/expression'; in a survey by Renold *et al.* (2017), 69 per cent of 13- to 18-year-olds disagreed or strongly disagreed that 'there are only two genders', and 85 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that 'people should be free to choose their genders'. There is little data yet, however, about the extent to which these changing understandings of gender are present in younger children in the UK.



Studies show how children participate, negotiate, contest, subvert and comply in constructing their genders and regulating the gender of their peers and others (MacNaughton, 2000; Osgood and Robinson, 2017). Masculinities and femininities are, however, also always in process, never fully achieved or secure – which can help account for the anxieties and rage sometimes provoked in the struggle to be a 'proper' boy or by those who do not fit into traditional categorisations of boyhood or manhood (Rose, 2016; Walkerdine, 2007; Hickey-Moody, 2019).

So, contemporary thinking about gender suggests that instead of one fixed 'boyhood', we have boyhoods that are multiple, plural, fluid and changing. They always emerge relationally – that is, in relationship with and to others – other genders, adults, contexts, institutions, spaces and places. Boyhood cannot be treated as an undifferentiated or unitary category; we need to specify 'which boys' are being considered at any moment. Intersectional factors – related to race, age, social class, geographical location/space, sexuality, ethnicity, (dis)ability, nationality, looked-after status (that is, children who are in foster or institutional care) and so on – all shape gendered experiences, definitions, norms and ideals in different ways. Without acknowledging the diversity of boys' experiences, we risk centring white, middle-class notions of boyhood as a norm against which others may be measured and deemed failing.

Don't discuss differences in pockets; discuss all bodies as different or all experiences of gender as different. Centre diversity across all these intersections and all these characteristics of marginalisation. We need to talk about not just differences but markers of hierarchy that can be the basis of discrimination.

Vanita Sundaram

But despite their fluid nature, gendered qualities are also hierarchical, with ideal 'masculine' qualities positioned as more desirable and valuable than 'feminine' ones. This helps explain how some boys may invest in masculine norms as a route to status and pleasure – how it is seductive for some boys, even if it can be oppressive for others.

The academic concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' helps explain how specific versions of manhood come to be seen as the dominant and legitimate ones – not just through physical force or political control, but by being more highly valued and accepted even by those (arguably the majority) who do not attain them (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity attempts to capture what 'proper' masculinity looks like in particular times and places (Connell, 2005) – which although mutable, mostly involves demonstrating physical, sexual and intellectual prowess, self-reliance and heterosexuality, as well as being of the dominant ethnic group and social class. It relates to patriarchy: that is, to a male-dominated social order that justifies the subordination of women and of other marginalised ways of being a man (of other social classes, ethnicities and sexualities). The concept is flexible enough to allow for understanding how masculinities are impacted by, for instance, changing work patterns for men (and women), or newly negotiated spaces and voices for women and LGBTI+ individuals, and indeed, the insecurities and identity confusions that such social shifts may provoke.

But since at least the 1980s, another conversation has simultaneously been happening in popular culture and politics. It portrays men and boys (specifically, white, heterosexual ones) as in crisis, victimised by feminism and social justice movements and now suffering 'reverse discrimination' compared to women and racial and sexual minorities. We have seen an alarming increase in 'men's rights' activism online, with social media influencers like Andrew Tate capitalising on the idea of male victimhood (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). Ignoring the intersectional complexity of race, class and gender, this backlash against equality is a misreading of social inequity and an expression of defensive or recuperative masculinity.

These polarised discourses – between a critical analysis of "hegemonic masculinities" and the harm they create on the one hand and a "crisis of masculinity" perspective on the other – tend to leave little creative space to explore the potential shape of new, more positive and gender-transformed masculinities – and how men and boys (as well as others) would benefit. This may, in turn, make it harder to positively mobilise boys and men to aspire to and actively support a gender-transformative and gender-just perspective.

It is within this context – the heated debates around hegemonic masculinity and 'masculinity in crisis' – that boys and boyhoods in the UK today are formed.




Evidence on the State of UK Boys

Violence as Normalised in the Lives of Boys

Men's violence – against women and against other men and minority groups – is an endemic problem in all societies, one that is underreported and inadequately addressed as gendered in policy and practice. Scholars highlight how understandings of masculinities and femininities contribute to this picture of sexual- and gender-based violence, as well as how a complex, intersectional picture of masculinity helps us understand how young boys learn masculine norms involving dominance, violence and homophobia (Burrell, Ruxton and Westmarland, 2019). For example, Lombard's (2015, 2016) research with 11- and 12-year-olds in Glasgow shows how children construct their understanding of violence through gender, childhood, space and time. They normalise violence as a biological – and, therefore, natural – difference between men and women. This lets boys distance themselves from any violence in the present, in that they see violence (particularly male-on-male violence) as an almost-inevitable part of being an adult man and part of the transition to adulthood.

Meanwhile, normalising violence makes it seem like an *individual* problem rather than a broader *structural* problem related to norms of masculinities. Lombard's work found that children understood 'real violence' as involving men, physical acts of violence in an outdoor setting and some form of consequence. But that meant they struggled to perceive or name other acts as being 'violent', like violence between peers/siblings or emotional or sexual violence in schools or homes. Alongside this, research with older age groups (Sundaram, 2013, 2014) – and even with preschool-aged children (Brown, 2010) – has found that a proportion of both practitioners and children justify male violence in heterosexual relationships through notions of men's possession and ownership of women and appropriate behaviours by women.



Girls told me [about] a multitude of experiences; of being pushed, shoved, kicked, followed, called sexualised names from their male peers. These examples did not fit the standardised constellation structure of 'real' violence: age (adult); gender (man) space (public) action (physical) and crucially, are generally without official reaction or consequence. Time and time again the girls – when they approached teachers or those in authority were dismissed for telling tales, ignored because of the 'trivial' nature of their complaint or relayed that old adage, 'he's only doing it because he likes you'. Thus their experiences were minimised and the behaviours, normalised.

(Lombard, 2014)

Even at 11, 12, 13, the young people with whom we are facilitating [relationships and sex education] workshops [to address gender and sexual violence] already have quite highly developed ideas about sexuality and relationships, consent, boundaries, what's normal, what's acceptable, what's desirable. We encourage young people to think critically about the norms that they have internalised and to centre ethics in how they conduct themselves. To identify what their values are and to behave according to them in these contexts.

Ruth Elliot

Another issue is how society tends to continue to reinforce gender binaries without reaching the root cause of violence in the first place – harmful ideas and norms related to masculinities (Widanaralalage *et al.*, 2022). Our interviewees provided examples of even very young boys repeating such myths: for instance, the case of actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, who had recently been involved in a high-profile US trial involving allegations of intimate partner violence. Despite a UK libel case having previously upheld the claim that Depp used violence against Heard, public opinion and influencers online undermined and disbelieved Heard and positioned Depp as a male victim of female extortion. Such popular misogynistic discourses rooted in 'rape culture' figure in youth sexual cultures in ways that need to be recognised and addressed in gender equity education (Ringrose *et al.*, 2021).

At the same time, however, research has documented the social taboos around reporting male-on-male sexual assault in particular. An intersectional approach that goes beyond a male/female binary can draw out how gender and sexual minorities are more likely to be victims of sexual assault and present a nuanced picture of why boys' and men's experiences of violence and abuse are under-reported. By contrast, 'gender-neutral' conceptions of violence do not help us – and can even be damaging – in either understanding or preventing violence (Burrell, 2018).

In sum, prevailing norms often make violence seem normal in men's and boys' lives, make excuses for men's violence (and claim that women extort men or over-report violence by men), while also making invisible certain kinds of violence, such as men's and boys' experiences of sexual violence from other men and boys.

● Family and Friendships

Mother, to son: I'll buy you something, what would you like? How about this? (standing in front of car racing track)

Son (around age 3–5): (runs up to toy kitchen stuff) I want this!!

Mother: No, you can't have that girly cake mixer. Choose something else. Look over here.

Son: (now grabbing it and hugging it) But I want this!

Mother: Well you can't, stop being silly. Otherwise you can't have anything else

(Price, 2017, p. 12)

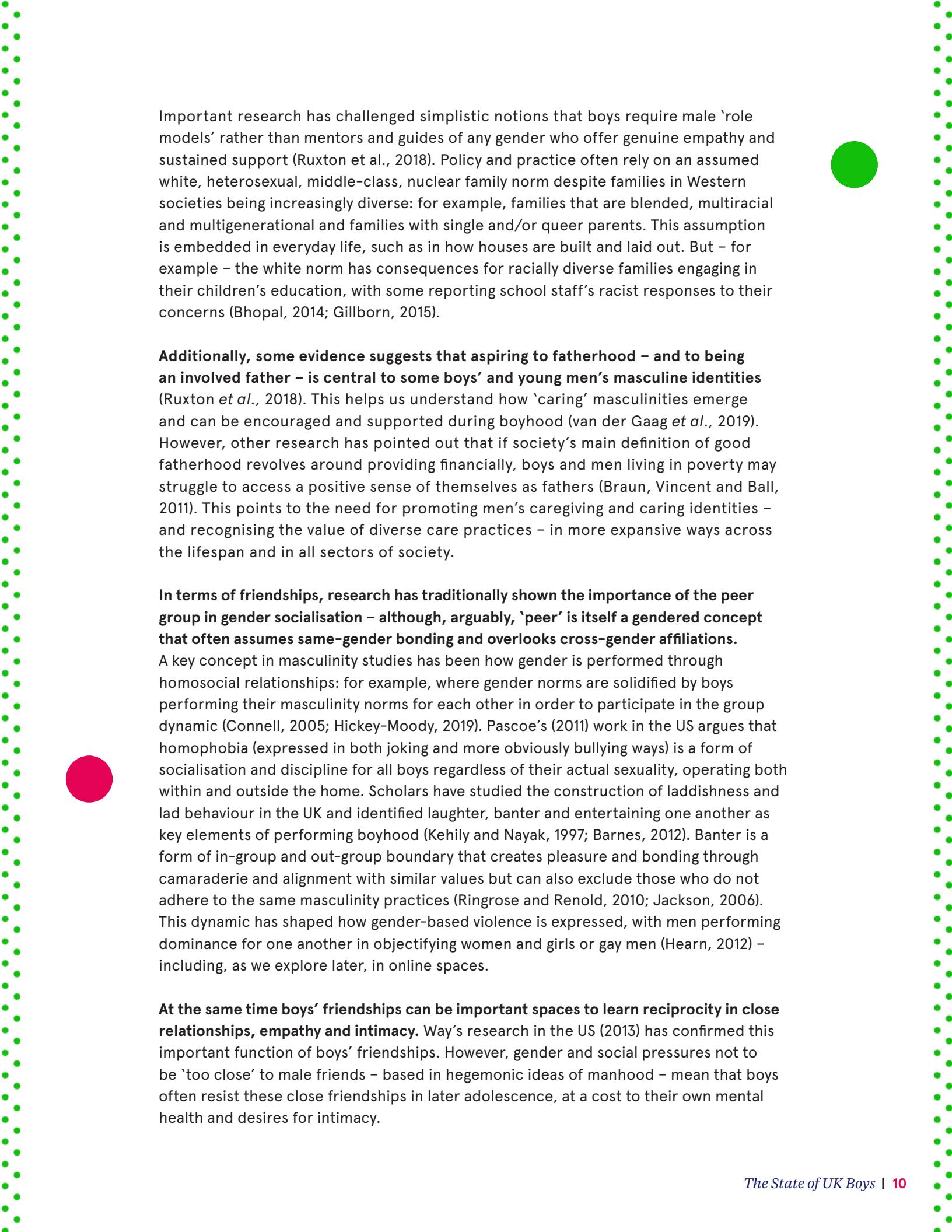
Families are prime sites for learning about and enacting gender identities and roles – sometimes even framed as gender and heterosexuality 'factories' (Stacey, 2021). Parents may begin gendering their children even before birth, including through elaborate 'gender-reveal' parties and a stream of purchases along gender lines (Kane, 2006; Price and Tayler, 2015). While the family is a place of nurturing and support for many children, it can also be where gender and sexuality are regulated and policed, as many of our interviewees and much research suggest.

Traditionally, families have been seen as the most influential force shaping younger children's gender-related behaviours, but changing patterns of childcare, work and parenting styles – as well as a recognition of the subtle ways children themselves negotiate gender norms – may be creating a more complex picture. For example, Roche's interviews (2020) document trans children from 7 years old expressing a sure sense of knowing their gender identity, overcoming initial hesitations or resistance from family and school, and highlighting the significance of parental support.

Early childhood spaces are generally much more liberal and open-minded spaces where children can experiment with gender in ways that aren't policed. But for some children, in some homes, that gets shut down – so, a boy child in a tutu will run out of nursery and the look on the parents' face is horror, whereas it's not been an issue all day while they've been playing in the nursery.

Jayne Osgood

Policy and popular debates often misleadingly blame mothers generally (and especially single mothers), non-heteronormative families and the absence of fathers as reasons for boys failing or being 'in crisis' (Sandretto and Nairn, 2019). Research, such as a recent study of trans parents in the UK (Imrie *et al.*, 2021), suggests this hand-wringing is unfounded. Issues such as poverty and racism are more significant to outcomes than family structure alone.



Important research has challenged simplistic notions that boys require male 'role models' rather than mentors and guides of any gender who offer genuine empathy and sustained support (Ruxton et al., 2018). Policy and practice often rely on an assumed white, heterosexual, middle-class, nuclear family norm despite families in Western societies being increasingly diverse: for example, families that are blended, multiracial and multigenerational and families with single and/or queer parents. This assumption is embedded in everyday life, such as in how houses are built and laid out. But – for example – the white norm has consequences for racially diverse families engaging in their children's education, with some reporting school staff's racist responses to their concerns (Bhopal, 2014; Gillborn, 2015).

Additionally, some evidence suggests that aspiring to fatherhood – and to being an involved father – is central to some boys' and young men's masculine identities (Ruxton et al., 2018). This helps us understand how 'caring' masculinities emerge and can be encouraged and supported during boyhood (van der Gaag et al., 2019). However, other research has pointed out that if society's main definition of good fatherhood revolves around providing financially, boys and men living in poverty may struggle to access a positive sense of themselves as fathers (Braun, Vincent and Ball, 2011). This points to the need for promoting men's caregiving and caring identities – and recognising the value of diverse care practices – in more expansive ways across the lifespan and in all sectors of society.

In terms of friendships, research has traditionally shown the importance of the peer group in gender socialisation – although, arguably, 'peer' is itself a gendered concept that often assumes same-gender bonding and overlooks cross-gender affiliations. A key concept in masculinity studies has been how gender is performed through homosocial relationships: for example, where gender norms are solidified by boys performing their masculinity norms for each other in order to participate in the group dynamic (Connell, 2005; Hickey-Moody, 2019). Pascoe's (2011) work in the US argues that homophobia (expressed in both joking and more obviously bullying ways) is a form of socialisation and discipline for all boys regardless of their actual sexuality, operating both within and outside the home. Scholars have studied the construction of laddishness and lad behaviour in the UK and identified laughter, banter and entertaining one another as key elements of performing boyhood (Kehily and Nayak, 1997; Barnes, 2012). Banter is a form of in-group and out-group boundary that creates pleasure and bonding through camaraderie and alignment with similar values but can also exclude those who do not adhere to the same masculinity practices (Ringrose and Renold, 2010; Jackson, 2006). This dynamic has shaped how gender-based violence is expressed, with men performing dominance for one another in objectifying women and girls or gay men (Hearn, 2012) – including, as we explore later, in online spaces.

At the same time boys' friendships can be important spaces to learn reciprocity in close relationships, empathy and intimacy. Way's research in the US (2013) has confirmed this important function of boys' friendships. However, gender and social pressures not to be 'too close' to male friends – based in hegemonic ideas of manhood – mean that boys often resist these close friendships in later adolescence, at a cost to their own mental health and desires for intimacy.

School


School as an Institution That Regulates Gender and Makes Manhood

Schools are crucial places for exploring and understanding boyhoods. They are where boys learn and act out gender identities, masculinity cultures, heteronormativity and acceptance of gendered violence. Sexuality and gender saturate every aspect of formal and informal schooling. Historically, schools have operated in ways that reinforce binary gender identity and expression: think boys' and girls' school uniforms, toilets and sport (Bragg *et al.*, 2018). Many practices – some explicitly advocated by policymakers – rely on this gender binary, such as lining up as girls and boys and seating students in boy-girl arrangements to manage behaviour or promote literacy. Importantly, though, significant evidence exists of schools, particularly primary schools, moving towards less gendered practices in some areas, including school uniforms (Thomson, Bragg and Kehily, 2018).

Schools can also reinforce gender hierarchies – ideas that boys and masculinity are more valuable than girls and femininity – by centring certain masculine ideals in the curriculum, policies, uniforms, grading systems, and teaching and learning methods. Gender hierarchies can be reinforced through patterns of authority and discipline, with more men historically in secondary-school leadership positions (Swain, 2005b). Historical accounts show how schools have privileged boys and men from white, upper- and middle-class backgrounds for centuries, either through excluding girls and working-class boys from educational settings or neglecting girls' educational needs within and/or outside the classroom. Despite some progress towards more egalitarian practices in the later decades of the 20th century, some scholars are now noting trends towards 'increasingly masculinized' school environments (Keddie and Mills, 2009).


At the same time research has shown how gendered notions of learning can hurt boys' engagement with school (Taylor, 2021). A study of 11- to 15-year-olds in London secondary schools showed boys who actively distanced themselves from girls and qualities regarded as feminine (like softness, schoolwork, emotional literacy and maturity) were considered 'real lads' by their peers (Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, 2002). Research has also explored the possibilities of performing boyhood differently or 'improperly'. For example, Renold (2006) depicts how 'boy-ness' is defined in opposition to femininity, girls or being 'girly' and how alternative ways of being masculine are considered inferior. Yet a small but increasing group of boys in their research still choose to invest in alternative masculinities – for example playing fantasy/computer games instead of football, showing emotional literacy and having pro-school attitudes – even in the face of bullying by other boys (Renold, 2004).

An important component of all of these conversations is how masculinity and schools interact with race, which has been an increasing focus of policy and scholarly attention given the persistent evidence on racial disparities in attainment, exclusion and discipline (Gillborn, 2005, 2008). Caribbean British pupils (particularly boys) are three times as likely as their white peers to be permanently excluded (Crenna-Jennings, 2017). Connolly's (2002) research with primary school-aged boys highlights how Black boys' behaviours are often racialised and subject to racism.



Black children are also often perceived as 'adult-like', less innocent and less vulnerable than their white peers, notions that have deep historical roots in slavery and colonialism (Bernstein, 2011; Walton, 2021). Services may overlook their needs and disregard their legal rights to be supported, protected and safeguarded, making schools traumatic rather than safe spaces for Black children. Additionally, the beginning of the so-called 'War on Terror' in 2001 and the UK government's 'Prevent duty' are of particular significance. Under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, the Prevent duty requires all registered early childhood providers and schools to demonstrate the steps they have taken to prevent students' radicalisation. However, it has been criticised for disproportionately targeting Muslim boys, seeing them as dangerous and vulnerable to being radicalised by terrorist groups. For example, an 11-year-old primary school student, a Muslim boy, was referred to the Prevent programme after his teacher heard 'arms' when the boy expressed his desire to 'give alms to the oppressed' (Taylor, D., 2021).

Educational processes often have baked-in assumptions of this 'ideal student', against which all students are measured but some fail. Historically, the ideal learner has been male. Contemporary ideal characteristics include perceived 'intelligence' and 'good humour', closely associated with middle-class boys. Middle- and working-class girls are positioned against an ideal female pupil, who takes on a supporting role by creating an environment that facilitates boys' learning. While middle-class girls are seen as moderately successful in approximating these characteristics, working-class girls are often positioned at the bottom of the classroom hierarchy (Hempel-Jorgensen, 2015). Francis (2006) argues that at secondary school, working-class boys are demonised as wasting resources and failing to be neoliberal subjects for not taking responsibility for their own achievement or failure. Studies recognise the challenges for working-class boys in negotiating contradictions – between the values of their communities and the individualistic or neoliberal ones propagated by schools, for example – and how uncomfortable the space of school can be for them as a result (Stahl, 2018; Ingram, 2009; Reay, 2002).



In classrooms today, we can see how conversations about the 'ideal student', gender and masculinity are playing out. Research in primary schools depicts boys as young as 8 who are perceived as both popular and academically successful engaged in 'boysplaining' – a younger version of 'mansplaining' (Schiffrin-Sands, 2021). This involves practices such as physically controlling a specific area of the classroom, dominating equipment, and disregarding the needs of other students, as well as verbally (for example, interrupting girls when they are speaking, correcting or shaming girls, or going, "I know I know" when others explain things to them). Other research in a Welsh primary school notes that despite decades of feminism and gender equality discourse, members of school communities continue to use gender-binary thinking informed by 'biological' theories to explain alleged gendered differences in classroom behaviour, subject attainment, curricular preferences and future life choices (Hamilton and Roberts, 2017). Within this context, how schools respond to incidents of harassment and abuse plays a key role in communicating messages about boyhoods and sustaining or challenging gender-based violence.

We heard how difficult it is for young people to challenge behaviour when teachers don't challenge it. Children notice what you do. Sometimes, it feels like brushing over something is better, but children internalise that, and then they tell us it makes it harder for them to engage with their peers on that topic or issue....It's often young women who tell us they feel silenced when teachers ignore sexist banter.

Katherine Gilmour


As previously noted, the peer group is an important feature of school experiences, and there is some evidence that boys 'do' friendship differently from (their perceptions of) how girls do this (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2012). Yet the same researchers note that intimacy and emotionality should not be understood 'as an individualised psychological dynamic; instead, it is important to connect it to the contextual institutional dynamics' in school (p. 488). These dynamics shape possibilities for how friendship can be performed, and the researchers argue that boys' friendships in particular may be experienced and practised differently from the conventional understanding of adult masculine relationships.

When all boys are together, you've got to be quite a brave boy not to conform; that's one of the biggest challenges – how you can empower boys from very early on to feel that they can both stand up for the boys that are not feeling boyish enough, and also that they can call out overly negative boy-like behaviour. I think that's the biggest challenge.

Olivia Dickinson

While relationships and sex education has been a statutory part of the English curriculum since 2020 (with direction to ensure it is LGBT-inclusive),¹ conversations about 'maintaining childhood innocence' continue to dominate relationships and sexuality education practice. Indeed, discussions around sex and sexuality are deemed an optional part of the curriculum (Morgan and Taylor, 2019; Johnson, 2022; Atkinson *et al.*, 2022).

¹ This is particularly significant given Section 28, a notorious measure introduced in the 1988 Local Government Act by the then-Conservative UK government to prohibit the 'promotion of homosexuality' by local authorities. It was repealed in Scotland in 2000 and in England and Wales in 2003, but its malign influence in terms of inhibiting schools from addressing issues of LGBTQ sexuality continues to be felt. See: Lee, C. (2019) 'Fifteen years on: The legacy of Section 28 for LGBT+ teachers in English schools', *Sex Education*, 19(6), pp. 675–690.




In terms of LGBTQ inclusion, school discipline often involves homophobia for discipline, as described in research where a primary school teacher 'jokingly' accuses two boys of same-sex love to get them to stop messing around (Atkinson and DePalma, 2008). Additionally, some have noted that if LGBTQ issues are addressed only in relation to risk (of bullying or poor mental health), it can undermine attempts to identify and speak about broader issues (Gilbert *et al.*, 2018).

However, research in primary schools shows children are capable of comprehending and developing complex messages about gender and sexualities. Hall's (2020) research with 6- to 11-year-olds in two Greater London primary schools, for instance, demonstrates children's nuanced responses to equalities education. Within 'formal' spaces like classrooms, students engage with inclusive narratives around gender, sex and sexuality. However, in informal spaces like corridors, the playground and the toilet, heteronormative discourses of gender, sex and sexuality that are commonly available in their everyday lives (e.g., home, family, preschool), and masculine, heterosexual prowess once again become the norm – as one boy explains:

JH [Joseph Hall]: Have these words been banned (pejorative use of gay and lesbian)?
Callum [focus group participant, age about 9]: Yeah, we're not allowed to say gay or sissy
JH: Do people still use these words?
Callum: Not as much...gay's used
JH: In the playground?
Callum: Yeah, but if you told a teacher they would be in Chris's office (deputy head teacher)
JH: So you would be in trouble?
Callum: Yeah but no one tells, that's the problem....the word gay has been banned but people use it in the boys' toilets whenever you go in.

(Hall, 2020)

Children can also see the benefits of an affirming environment from an early age. Research demonstrates how creating an affirming environment for trans children can offer opportunities for schools to become aware of how curricula, policies and practices rely on cisnormative, gendered understandings and create environments that broaden possibilities for *all* students (Payne and Smith, 2014; Neary, 2021). Atkinson's (2021) research in two schools, one involved in proactive sexualities pedagogy and one not, suggests that whilst homophobia persisted across both schools, children's understandings of its acceptability differed markedly according to their involvement in equalities pedagogy, with institutional silence interpreted by many as equivalent to school-sanctioned homophobia.



Are (White, Working-Class) Boys 'Failing'?

The 1970s saw campaigns to improve girls' participation in maths and science. Subsequent policymaking has been dominated by a moral panic about whether boys are 'failing', positioning boys as the 'new disadvantaged' who require intervention. Our informants pointed to an underlying assumption in some of these responses that boys 'should' be attaining at higher levels than girls, and that if girls attain at a higher level, it is a problem. Generally, scholars argue that presenting data in simplistic, binary terms – 'male versus female', as though they are two homogenous social categories – renders invisible the bigger differences and variations in performance within groups of girls and within groups of boys. Ethnicity, social class, disability, location, sexual identity and religion must be addressed to bring about change.

Elwood (2015) argues that allocating all students to binary categories of boys and girls reinforces binary notions of gender instead of understanding gender diversity (see also Bragg et al., 2018). It means these binary categories are interpreted as 'causes' of gender differences that are then often explained through stereotypes. By contrast, viewing gender as socially constructed, multiple and diverse as well as cross-cut by other power relations (such as race and class), means we have to look for more complex reasons for differences in educational performance and discourage simplistic comparisons between universal categories of boys and girls (Ringrose, 2007). By changing the conceptual framework, we can understand that differences observed among the genders are not fixed, but open to change in relation to the social, cultural and historical contexts in which people live and learn (Elwood, 2015).

In recent years, politicians and the media have identified white, working-class boys as the most underperforming and, therefore, disadvantaged of any group in the education system, a misleading claim so widespread that it deserves to be unpacked in detail. Crawford's (2019) work highlights that these projections are inaccurate and sheds light on the racialised implications of the (mis)use of statistics. For instance, in the UK, eligibility for a free school meal (FSM) is used to assess levels of poverty or social disadvantage. When politicians and the media claim that white, working-class boys are particularly disadvantaged, they are actually referring to the one in ten who claim FSM. However, the 60% of the white British population who identify as 'working class' may well assume that the claim refers to them. In reality, white boys *not* receiving FSM are achieving significantly ahead of some other 'minoritised' groups in terms of obtaining five 'good' General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) (Gillborn, 2008, p. 56). And the rhetoric obscures the fact that Black Caribbean, Black African and Bangladeshi students are more likely to claim FSM than white children (at rates of 23.5%, 35.1% and 44.6%, respectively) (Crawford, 2019, p. 7) and also confront educational challenges such as exclusions, as previously noted.

So, the discussion of white, working-class boys as neglected and 'failing' is both manufactured and actively misleading. We can read it as backlash instead of an accurate understanding of the intersectional dynamics of privilege and marginalisation. Some of our interviewees commented that such rhetoric is being exploited by those in positions of power who otherwise have no interest in improving this situation or in referencing any other intersections.

We need to understand the intersections in looking at boys and disadvantage. It's never just because they're boys; it will be boys and their socio-economic status, or they might be neurodivergent and not been diagnosed yet. It could be race and ethnicity. It could be based on the attitudes of particular teachers or the way a school captures data or their attitudes towards certain students, particularly neurodiverse or Gypsy Roma travellers.

Nic Ponsford

The challenge in these debates is that as they become polarised, the possibility of thoughtful, intersectional educational policies is also sidelined. For the many students who are struggling and facing adversities in school, and their parents, our challenge is to present the case for educational approaches that take into account how masculinities, structural disadvantages and individual realities intersect in order to create more liveable, affirming school environments for everyone.

Games/Sport

Organised sports and PE in and beyond school, as well as within families, are important environments for experiencing and performing gender. In the UK, this may be particularly notable for boys: Boys aged 8 to 15 spend significantly longer than girls on organised sports (40 minutes per day compared to 25) (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Research shows how discourses of sport, fitness, health and masculinity work together to produce pleasurable experiences for those who become popular by virtue of being seen as 'good' at sports and 'strong'. Sports participation is also associated with better mental health and friendships. Yet, these same practices can be associated with exclusion, humiliation, bullying and homophobia for those boys who do not measure up to athletic ideals (Drummond, 2019).

Even the popularity of sports heroes provides insight into contemporary gender relations. Earlier research with primary school students aged 6 to 7 in Australia demonstrates how figures like footballer David Beckham, are regarded as the 'manliest' by both boys and girls due to masculine traits, such as muscularity; famous female athletes are considered less 'womanly' due to their 'muscles' and 'strong body' (Bartholomaeus, 2011). It remains to be seen whether the English women's football team winning the Euros in 2022 has displaced any of these stereotypes.

Football in UK primary schools has often been a powerful space to produce masculinities since it supplies behaviours connected to hegemonic masculinity, like physical confrontation, violence and aggression (Connell, 2008, p. 140; Renold, 1997; Keddie, 2003).

Boys are more likely to be pushed by teachers towards sports like football that are seen as requiring 'toughness', to be coached by professionals and train during and outside of school hours, and to be discouraged from 'softer' activities like aerobics or netball, reinforcing their difference from girls (Flintoff, 2008). Masculinities are heavily scrutinised through physical skills and capability or incapability; coaches often criticise boys who fail to display aggression or skill as 'girly' or not 'boy' enough (Gubby, 2019, p. 751). Such approaches signal the limitations of some PE pedagogies and the need for curricula to tackle gender and equality issues.

Well-Being/Suicide

There is concern about the striking increases in the reported prevalence of long-standing mental health conditions among UK children and young people (Pitchforth *et al.*, 2019). Gender is relevant to this in terms of masculine norms, relating to being (for example) autonomous, in control, not expressing emotions or seeking help and relating to how problems might be expressed internally or externally (Gutman *et al.*, 2015). Recently, the American Psychological Association identified adhering to masculine norms as a risk factor for men and boys' mental health (Way, 2019). Research in early-years settings demonstrates norms of masculinity being established young: 'Crying and comforting soft toys are not allowed, and neither is sharing your experiences with other boys who may, in turn, police your gender. Boys are being strongly directed towards self-reliance' (Cooke *et al.*, 2022, p. 10).

With the greater exposure to discussions around gender and identity in popular culture, boys are now more willing and prepared to discuss these issues – including with researchers. Boys are generally more prepared to be open about mental health issues, though conventional expectations around 'bottling it up' or 'manning up' still hold sway among some groups and communities. [But] it remains true that directly raising issues around identity and relationships with boys is much less productive than indirect and creative methods of engagement.

Martin Robb

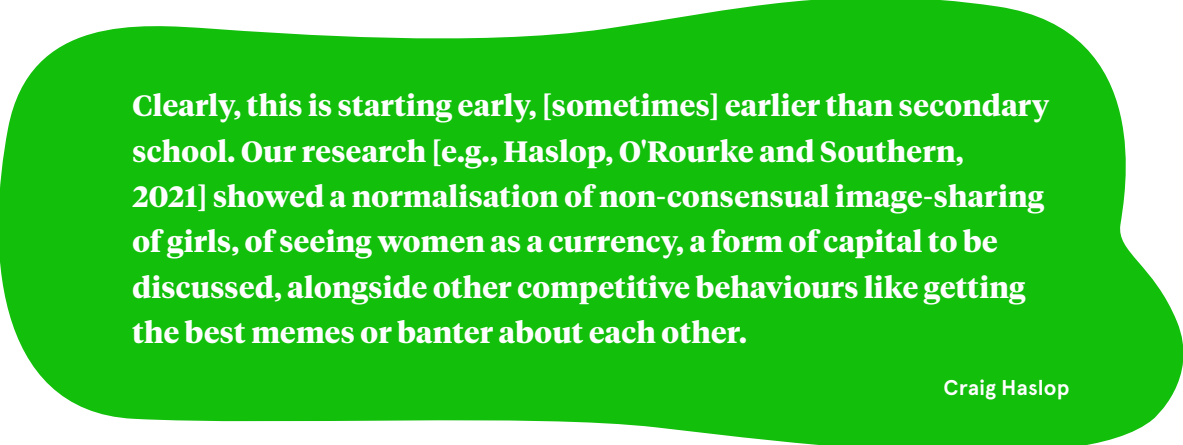
Research on mental health with 9- to 13-year-old boys in North East England has challenged the appropriateness of applying adult-defined understandings of men and masculinities to the attitudes and behaviours of pre-adolescent boys, arguing that we should rethink how we gender young boys. The institutional production and regulation of boyhood produce 'boyness' within certain emotional boundaries. For example, when discussing teacher expectations, the boys in one study shared gendered uncertainties around expressions of emotion – such as being unable to share fears and anxieties (Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2012).



Technology, Media and Markets in Children's Social Worlds

Young people are increasingly engaged with virtual worlds through digital gaming, messaging apps and social media, where they discover new strategies for communicating, expressing themselves and forming relationships (Danby *et al.*, 2018). Children and childhoods can no longer be conceptualised as separate from the digital. Childhoods exist in digitally mediated, networked and connected cultures of texting, chatting, gaming, sharing and learning (Ringrose and Harvey, 2017; Setty, 2021). The production, tagging and circulation of images through mobile online technologies help build and maintain particular norms of popular masculinity, which in turn, are strongly shaped by norms around class and race (Harvey, Ringrose and Gill, 2013). The role of social media intensified with the onset of COVID-19, although arguably, some of the 'risks' associated with digital intimacies have come to be seen as safer in some ways than face to face during and since the pandemic.


With the growth of online life comes concerns around cyberbullying, but some research suggests that cyberbullying does not create many *new* victims but does extend the bullying beyond school (Wolke, Lee and Guy, 2017). Research also flags that as in the physical world, aggressive online behaviour is often accepted as normal in ways that prevent addressing it, and responsibility for dealing with it often falls to victims rather than perpetrators. Looking at older students, research with UK university students suggests online harassment is gendered in nature, with those holding female and transgender identities more likely to be its targets (Haslop and O'Rourke, 2021). Moreover, there is evidence that this situation has much earlier roots: Girls report receiving unsolicited nudes like 'dick pics' from the time they join social media applications like Snapchat – sometimes at aged 10 or even below – and they report being pressured to send nudes (Ringrose, Regehr and Milne, 2021; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2019). Boys have been harassed with unwanted sexual content and porn in social media contexts and report feeling upset and distressed (Ringrose *et al.*, 2022).



Clearly, this is starting early, [sometimes] earlier than secondary school. Our research [e.g., Haslop, O'Rourke and Southern, 2021] showed a normalisation of non-consensual image-sharing of girls, of seeing women as a currency, a form of capital to be discussed, alongside other competitive behaviours like getting the best memes or banter about each other.


Craig Haslop





Scholes, Spina and Comber's (2021) research with male primary school students points to gaming's importance for identity formation or recognition as a 'certain person' and for the social currency afforded by knowing the intricacies of the video game. This resonates with earlier work by Walkerdine (2007), who identified gaming as one key site for producing contemporary masculinities. Walkerdine's work on young boys and gaming draws attention to how the boundaries of masculinity are maintained and negotiated, such as disparaging girls' gaming abilities, and she questions the fantasy function of being an omnipotent action hero. Inclusive initiatives that seek wider gender equality in digital gaming (like girls' gaming clubs) remain precarious in challenging the status quo. Nonetheless, research also challenges the idea that participation in gaming is necessarily developmentally detrimental to boys and points to the gender experimentation and 'queering' possible within gaming experiences and the associated socialising.

Looking beyond gaming, much concern has been widely expressed about the broader 'commercialisation' of childhood. While there is not space here to explore this issue in depth, it is notable how boys have been brought into the world of consumption in different ways in recent years – for instance, in terms of body image and the notion of the 'six-pack' as a masculine ideal. Our interviewees identified positive changes in representation. For instance, as a result of the Let Toys Be Toys campaign, many retailers and publishers have committed to removing signs separating clothing, toys and books by gender. As another example, the Australian children's show *Bluey*, popular in the UK, has two sisters as protagonists and a stay-at-home dad who participates in his children's fantasy worlds. However, marketing often continues to target products at boys and girls in distinct ways.






How Can We Transform Problematic Gender Norms and Problematic Ideas of Manhood?

This section explores challenges and opportunities for transforming problematic gender norms and harmful masculinities. We build on our expert informant interviews and also refer readers to the work by the UK Government Equalities Office in 2019 (Burrell, Ruxton and Westmarland, 2019).

Problematic Approaches Informed by Backlash


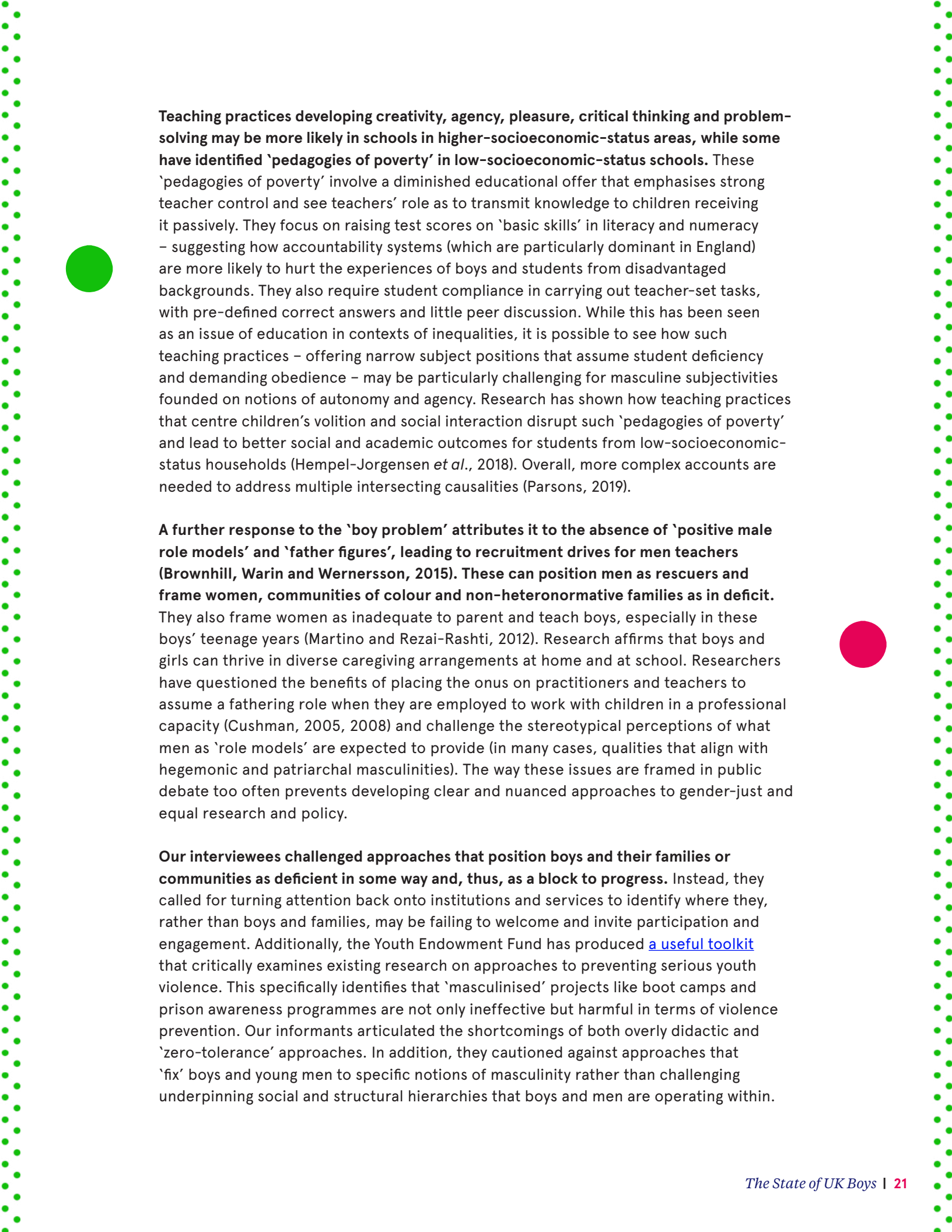
Popular discourse and practices can stoke rather than challenge misogynist ideas in the name of helping boys. This can include, for example, ideas that schools are overly 'feminised' environments or that girls and students of colour have benefitted from initiatives in ways that take away from and victimise boys in a zero-sum game. Our expert informants noted some dangerous trends around men's rights initiatives tied to regressive politics that do not align with gender equity.

Under scrutiny, some initiatives prove to be limiting – and, thus, damaging – in their assumptions about boys. For example, some anti-bullying programmes focus more on 'fixing' or punishing individuals than on tackling the systems and structures that allow or encourage it. Equally, efforts to raise boys' achievement or literacy rarely reflect complex insights from the research; instead, they can often be based on simplistic stereotypes, deficit models and assumptions about boys' interests that can hurt boys' self-understanding. For example, boys may be painted as disengaged, reluctant readers who are mainly interested in nonfiction. This could reinforce narrow cultural norms in classrooms and limit opportunities for authentic engagement and sustained learning. Hypermasculine nonfiction may be used in schools as 'boy baits' (Scholes, Spina and Comber, 2021), alongside problematic practices of gender segregation. In some economically marginalised schools, practices such as reading may be coded as 'feminine', and if resistance to the feminine provides working-class boys with a means of affirming their place in society, what needs to change is the coding – not the offer.




There are some very old-fashioned attitudes about masculinity and how we want boys to behave. The very ways that we often try to engage boys with education are the ways that put them off education, because if you always give them books about football and snot, then that's not saying reading is interesting.

Mark Jennett



Teaching practices developing creativity, agency, pleasure, critical thinking and problem-solving may be more likely in schools in higher-socioeconomic-status areas, while some have identified 'pedagogies of poverty' in low-socioeconomic-status schools. These 'pedagogies of poverty' involve a diminished educational offer that emphasises strong teacher control and see teachers' role as to transmit knowledge to children receiving it passively. They focus on raising test scores on 'basic skills' in literacy and numeracy – suggesting how accountability systems (which are particularly dominant in England) are more likely to hurt the experiences of boys and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They also require student compliance in carrying out teacher-set tasks, with pre-defined correct answers and little peer discussion. While this has been seen as an issue of education in contexts of inequalities, it is possible to see how such teaching practices – offering narrow subject positions that assume student deficiency and demanding obedience – may be particularly challenging for masculine subjectivities founded on notions of autonomy and agency. Research has shown how teaching practices that centre children's volition and social interaction disrupt such 'pedagogies of poverty' and lead to better social and academic outcomes for students from low-socioeconomic-status households (Hempel-Jorgensen *et al.*, 2018). Overall, more complex accounts are needed to address multiple intersecting causalities (Parsons, 2019).

A further response to the 'boy problem' attributes it to the absence of 'positive male role models' and 'father figures', leading to recruitment drives for men teachers (Brownhill, Warin and Wernersson, 2015). These can position men as rescuers and frame women, communities of colour and non-heteronormative families as in deficit. They also frame women as inadequate to parent and teach boys, especially in these boys' teenage years (Martino and Rezai-Rashti, 2012). Research affirms that boys and girls can thrive in diverse caregiving arrangements at home and at school. Researchers have questioned the benefits of placing the onus on practitioners and teachers to assume a fathering role when they are employed to work with children in a professional capacity (Cushman, 2005, 2008) and challenge the stereotypical perceptions of what men as 'role models' are expected to provide (in many cases, qualities that align with hegemonic and patriarchal masculinities). The way these issues are framed in public debate too often prevents developing clear and nuanced approaches to gender-just and equal research and policy.



Our interviewees challenged approaches that position boys and their families or communities as deficient in some way and, thus, as a block to progress. Instead, they called for turning attention back onto institutions and services to identify where they, rather than boys and families, may be failing to welcome and invite participation and engagement. Additionally, the Youth Endowment Fund has produced [a useful toolkit](#) that critically examines existing research on approaches to preventing serious youth violence. This specifically identifies that 'masculinised' projects like boot camps and prison awareness programmes are not only ineffective but harmful in terms of violence prevention. Our informants articulated the shortcomings of both overly didactic and 'zero-tolerance' approaches. In addition, they cautioned against approaches that 'fix' boys and young men to specific notions of masculinity rather than challenging underpinning social and structural hierarchies that boys and men are operating within.

If it's not tackling the underlying, broader, gendered power imbalances and other structural imbalances, then it's only going to reinforce them.

Dan Guinness

Approaches that claim to be gender-blind or gender-neutral deny the relevance, complexity and diversity of gender identities and the role of gender in the issues boys are facing (Tembo, 2021; Chapman, 2022). They risk enforcing harmful, rigid, cisnormative understandings of gender and gender identity. If they overlook how boys of colour experience boyhoods differently, they tend to centre white boyhoods. Equally, gender-segregated approaches are inadequate in today's society, recreating a gender binary that does not correspond to many young people's understandings of their own and others' identities. They prioritise gender rather than other intersectional aspects of experiences and reproduce many of the problematic practices that take place around gender policing in and around schools.

Another issue raised in the literature is the limits of 'safe' approaches such as Stonewall's families approach – which, by emphasising and representing monogamous, childrearing, nuclear LGBTQ relationships and the similarities between gay and heterosexual family lives, risks creating new norms and 'disavowing lives that do not look like this idealised hetero-monogamous nuclear family' (Hall, 2021, p. 67).

Promising Approaches to Changing Masculinities


All of our expert informants talked about the need for and the importance of transforming masculinities. They cautioned against simplistic, binary explanations and fixes, but also pointed out ways forward. The challenge is to how to frame our solutions in ways that achieve equitable and healthier ideas of manhood, how to move from a 'zero sum' approach that pits groups against each other (as do the approaches previously described) to a 'sum of all' approach. As the research discussed in this paper demonstrates, *gender equity* must be centred rather than only *gender equality* (see box). Researchers and practitioners have used a range of terms to address gender equity in schools and more broadly: 'gender-just', 'gender-transformative', 'gender-expansive', 'gender-full', 'productive', 'gender-sensitive' and 'norm-critical'. Overall, these approaches and teaching practices aim to promote gender/sexuality inclusivity, diversity and justice. They create critical awareness around harmful forms of masculinities and support boys' critical reflection on these and on assumed norms, acknowledging their experiences of masculinity within spaces of social support and mutual respect. There is already some evidence that such approaches in relationships and sexuality education may increase contraceptive use and gender-equitable attitudes among sexually active youth (Lohan *et al.*, 2022).

Gender Equality vs. Gender Equity

'Gender equality' and 'gender equity' are often used interchangeably, but they refer to different, yet complementary, strategies. *Gender equality* refers to the idea that equal numbers of something will add up to a more equal society – for example, more women in parliament will create gender equality – and is measured in terms of ratios and parity. But this doesn't necessarily address the problem of gender norms enforcing ideals of gender that can be oppressive and problematic. *Gender equity* refers to a wider set of principles to create equity through practices of fairness and inclusion that take stock of background inequalities, meaning we do not all start from the same place. Given many years of sexism and sexual inequity in society, we need policies and practices in any institution that directly combat both overt and hidden forms of inequity.

An intersectional perspective is critical to enlarge the range of healthy masculinities available to boys and to strengthen diverse boys' capacity to resist and stop using distinct forms of social pressures. A complex approach that goes beyond individualised methods can help boys challenge hierarchies that distort, suppress and harm themselves and others. It can also help build commonalities: what young people have in common rather than only how they are different. Recognising how heterosexuality and fixed gender identities are presumed and, at times, encouraged is crucial, as is informed awareness of factors, such as class, race and (dis)ability, in such processes and their specific meanings in different times and places. Practices should centre young people's voices and experiences, including those who are marginalised, and tackle issues around homophobic and misogynist harassment and violence through an explicitly gendered lens (Reichert and Keddie, 2019). Importantly, however, they need to be 'whole school' rather than in pockets (Bragg *et al.*, 2022), and their perspective needs to be nuanced. They need to engage with the complexity and multiplicity of boys' social and emotional lives as boys in the present rather than for the adults they will become, not constructing them as future men or future perpetrators but with sensitivity to the intricacies of learning masculinity (Driscoll, Grealy and Sharkey, 2022; Kean and Kazuo Steains, 2022). In addition, families and communities need to be recognised and worked with as valuable resources that can be leveraged to achieve change rather than stigmatised and dismissed. Ideas for change need to be nuanced and clearly articulated to parents and policymakers.


Scholars stress the benefits to *all* children of understanding how the gender binary limits them, not just to those children who are gender-nonconforming. Gender-diverse, affirmative learning environments help identify how schools are already saturated with gender, amplify the existing diversity in schools and challenge the norms that limit children to enacting particular gender performances (Payne and Smith, 2012). It has long been argued – including by feminists in relation to work with girls – that such 'inclusive by default' frameworks improve settings such as schools for the whole community, not just targeted groups (Younger, Warrington and McLellan, 2005).



Action also must address gender-based violence given its significance in young people's experiences of school and their lives. Looking specifically at schools, Lombard (2016) suggests creating the space to name violent acts as violent so they can be validated as such and labelled as wrong by children from an early age. Lombard also argues that schools need to do more to address gender stereotypes that shape children's experiences and understandings of violence. Schools should reflect on the physical environment and the practices, processes and procedures that may inhibit rather than contribute to change. Again, it is crucial that these approaches should not be punitive, but rather restorative – and always promoting a critical awareness among all children about violence and engaging children in inclusive solutions.

Starting Early: Participatory Engagement with Children and Young People


Our informants emphasised the need to start early on work to challenge gender norms because children are aware of and actively engaged in gender from an early age: Even from birth, their gender identities are being constructed, imposed and navigated. Research shows how rigid, binary gender roles can successfully be challenged in non-discursive ways within nursery and early-years classrooms and by working with non-stereotypical representations, books, objects, toys and so on (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019; Spinner, Cameron and Calogero, 2018).



Currently, as we see the rise of gender diversity in the UK and internationally, discussions of the 'trans child' have become prominent in public debate. Young people's interest in questions of gender identity offers important opportunities for change and learning in relation to boyhoods generally. Our key informants, like many scholars, argue that adults need to be more cognisant of what is happening in children's lives and more confident in children's capacity to address and deal with it given the right support. They note how resources developed to support trans children – such as the [Genderbread Person](#) for understanding the concept of gender – could be useful for all children to break down ideas of masculinity and open up debate about boyhoods. They regretted how such resources have become mired in controversy.

Our informants stressed the importance of ensuring that students participating in – for instance – relationships and sexuality education can contribute and take part on their own terms as much as possible, even if this means letting them disengage from the work. They noted the need to avoid shaming individuals for expressing particular opinions or beliefs (for instance, those that are victim-blaming) and instead to identify that these are widely circulated ideas and reflect on their sources and implications. Informants acknowledged that it is challenging to create spaces that could be both safe and non-judgmental while also countering problematic practices or behaviour. However, they argued that enabling peers to challenge one another supports critical thinking, reflection and curiosity – which is also why mixed-gender groups could be such an important element of work on transforming gender.

Additionally, PE lessons and co-ed or mixed sport can be used to shift binary social thinking by providing opportunities for equality, teamwork, integration, diversity and inclusivity (Messner, 2011; Gubby, 2019). Gubby's research (2019) proposes korfbal – a deliberately



mixed-gender sport that does not rely on physical strength – as a means to create equal interaction and participation, with 11- to 13-year-old boys and girls describing korfbal as an empowering athletic experience because it encourages girls to play with boys and have the same physical function and role as boys. The charity and awareness-raising organisation Movember is increasingly supporting work with men and boys on mental health, using organised sports as a site for action.


Informants encouraged scrutiny of extracurricular ‘offers’ and diverse creative subjects in the core curriculum. Whilst there are undoubtedly funding challenges to overcome, small acts and interventions can trouble unspoken assumptions about gender (DePalma, 2013, p. 4). For instance, a ‘dress-up box’ in nursery can include a range of materials, from hyper-feminine to hyper-masculine to ‘neutral’, such that children can exercise their imaginations and practitioners can observe and learn from them. Equally, informants said books with alternative, anti-stereotypical depictions of gender roles or where the protagonists’ gender is uncertain could potentially generate debate without being overly focused on individual children – provided such texts are treated as ordinary rather than as special and exceptional.

There is much evidence that young people are both willing and able to change with appropriate support. The literature and our informants mentioned a number of resources: [the Global Equality Collective](#), for example, and the [padlet of collated research](#) by Graham Andre on gender-neutral approaches in classrooms; Andre also appears in the BBC documentary *No More Boys and Girls*, which is available on YouTube. In relation to advertising stereotypes, <https://genderremixer.com/html5/> is a witty site that enables images and sound to be transposed from advertisements for ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ products, raising awareness of stereotyping. Frequently praised were EJ Renold’s [AGENDA resources](#), which contain extensive, arts-based ideas for working with children aged 7 to 18 on issues of gender equity, addressing sexual harassment, consent, healthy relationships and many other issues in schools. Indirect and creative methods of engagement were identified as much more productive than directly raising issues around identity and relationships with boys (Horvarth, 2019).

Ongoing Education for and with Practitioners



Our informants and the literature stress the need to shift the perceptions and understandings of adult practitioners, not just young people, to achieve lasting change. They also acknowledged that this task requires resources, support and time, as well as that such critical reflection and challenge will inevitably be uncomfortable. This sits uneasily with the eagerness of policymakers and politicians (and parents) to find simple, cheap ‘silver bullets’ for complex issues. However, real institutional change requires long-term work with teachers, youth workers and early-years practitioners so they can reflect on their attitudes, biases and areas of ignorance; become ‘critically aware’; and take risks and experiment. The gender equalities organisation Lifting Limits has demonstrated how its interventions in primary schools can raise awareness and confidence in challenging stereotypes, addressing gender inequalities and increasing acceptance of diverse gender roles across multiple groups, including leaders, staff and parents/carers, as well as children (Horvarth, 2019).



We work through forms of critical reflective practice. If you want to change it up to create more inclusive classrooms, it's not just about what you do; it's about why you do it, what your beliefs are, how you understand inequalities. The most powerful tool we can give you is an understanding and ability to think, critically reflect and then intentionally plan and act. Often in science, particular forms of behaviour get recognised in particular bodies as a 'good' science student – getting the answer right or assertive displays of muscular intellect. We need to recognise how science gets gendered, classed and racialised in and through the pedagogy and broaden that out. Value wider forms of doing science, value a wider form of science identity, stop science being tied to notions of very traditional, lab-based, professional science. There's science in everything, in cooking and dancing. Recognising that then opens up the range of students who can be recognised as doing science, as being a good science student. So that being a good student is not seen as about getting the answer right, but being curious, for example.

Louise Archer

A topic for debate is what teachers in school can do relative to the role of outsiders or specialists. Informants mentioned the importance of sustained relationships, including those found in long-term youth work. Even those who run workshops in schools recognised that having a more permanent presence – one distinct from a teaching role – could benefit young people. Resources are being developed to support youth workers such as Haslop's forthcoming #Men4Change:

For a long time, traditional open-access youth work, where you have relationships that span years, has been radically under-resourced and has almost disappeared. But now, we are starting to see interest in how youth work can tackle some of these challenges. Our partners tell us that radicalisation is a big issue for some of the boys and young men they work with, and how misogyny is a gateway into far more extreme white supremacy, far-right/alt-right. Seeing youth work starting to be recognised as a way into that is a real positive.

Katherine Gilmour



Conclusion

Gender is a category that is in flux and under constant revision and negotiation, and boys in the UK are actively navigating these shifting norms and ideals. Some persistent norms related to masculinities promote dominance, violence and otherisation, which can impact UK boys and others in negative – but sometimes also seductive – ways. Families and parenting practices both regulate and support shifting gender identities and norms and are also related to other institutional influences, such as early-years settings. Importantly, schools are sites of gender socialisation and, as always, infused with hierarchical dynamics of class and race that construct the possibilities for educational achievement in inequitable ways. Additionally, games and sport are key sites and practices for performing masculinities, and online spaces are where masculinities are digitally mediated and are actively being performed, reshaped and renegotiated.

How do we address harmful masculine norms among UK boys and promote more positive and inclusive social norms? Some of the teaching practices and educational approaches available for working with boys can be problematic if they re-essentialise masculinities. However, promising processes, practices and initiatives do exist, as our expert informants have seen first-hand in educational and intervention spaces. All practitioners and educators must have the proper training and tools they need to support all young people, including boys, towards the common goal of achieving gender equity in UK society. To continue breaking down harmful norms, participatory, creative and open-ended approaches are needed that engage and respect young people. Addressing these norms must start early, given gender socialisation is a process that begins before birth. Perhaps most importantly, we must note the potential gains for *all* young people when we work in gender-just and gender-transformative ways.

The politics and political polarisation of this work cannot be ignored. Too often, these discussions turn into polarised debates – of families of white versus racialised groups, boys versus girls, attention to men versus attention to women and so on. How can we frame this to be about gender equity, rights and well-being for all children, of all genders? How can we frame discussions about healthy masculinities and gender equity – understood within other social injustices – as necessary for all, while also acknowledging the specific disadvantages that specific groups face? How can we avoid the idea that (some) boys are deficient or at-risk and instead affirm what all young people have to offer? It is clear that boys, girls and nonbinary children are awaiting our thoughtful responses.

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Annex: List of Key Informant Interviews

1. Graham Andre, primary school teacher who appeared in the 2017 BBC documentary exploring gender roles in primary school *No More Boys and Girls: Can Our Kids Go Gender Free?*
2. Louise Archer, professor of sociology of education, Institute of Education, University College London's Faculty of Education and Society
3. Olivia Dickinson, children's media consultant
4. Ruth Eliot, School of Sexuality Education
5. Katherine Gilmour, Global Fund for Children
6. Dan Guinness, Co-Founder and Managing Director, Beyond Equality
7. Craig Haslop, senior lecturer in media, University of Liverpool
8. Mark Jennett, independent education consultant
9. Maria Lohan, professor of social science and health, Queen's University Belfast
10. Jayne Osgood, professor of gender and early childhood, Middlesex University
11. Nic Ponsford, Global Equality Collective
12. Martin Robb, senior lecturer, The Open University
13. Sarah Sternberg, social impact campaigns strategist, Movember
14. Vanita Sundaram, professor of education, University of York
15. Jon Swain, senior researcher, Institute of Education, University College London's Faculty of Education and Society



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