



CEIEC Equity Issues Paper 2

Boys who like to be different - what's the fuss?

A Children's Services Advisor asked the CEIEC for some easy to read information for a parent who was concerned about her son. The Advisor said, 'His behaviour is not stereotypically male and he spends most of his time playing with the girls. The mother is very concerned, she wants him to be like all the other boys. The family is from Africa, so she may also be concerned about attitudes from her own community'. As we investigated the issue, it became clear that early childhood staff often meet parents and colleagues worried by boys who act in non-traditional ways. This Paper describes some common concerns and suggests ways to respond.

SOME COMMON CONCERNS

“Why can't he be just a normal boy?”

Some people think that traditional, 'macho' and aggressive boys and men are normal and that for them to behave differently is abnormal and 'wrong'. However, as we look around us, we usually see different ways to be male, some more macho than others. Boys, too, observe the people around them as they create their identities - including their own ways to be male. Consequently, as well as the differences between boys and girls, there are also differences *within* each gender. Boys can be boys in different ways and the same boy can be macho one minute and sensitive the next.

Some questions

- Should we actively promote alternatives to traditional ways of being a boy?
- Should we support boys who like to act in non-traditional ways?
- Who gains and who loses if we do?

“Playing 'girls' games' will make him gay!”

Many people – especially fathers – believe that boys who play 'girls' games' risk growing up gay and they try to prevent it by, for example, preventing their boys from wearing dresses and keeping them out of the home corner. However, research shows that boys who play with dolls or wear dresses are no more or less likely to grow into gay men than any other boys. Indeed, research has found no final explanation of how anyone develops a particular sexuality. Boys play with dolls just because they like playing with dolls – ask any manufacturer of 'action figures'. Further, even 'macho' boys play with girls' toys ... when they think that no-one's watching them! So the difference between these boys is not in kind but in degree; and nowhere on that scale do boys somehow become gay or straight.

Some questions

- What can boys learn from 'girls' games' such as playing with dolls and dressing up?
- Should we value 'boys' games' and 'girls' games' equally?
- Who gains and who loses if we do so?

“Does he need more father figures and male role models?”

Some people argue that there should be more men in early childhood services, because boys need a father figure to teach them how to be masculine. This assumes that becoming a man is a strange and mystical process that only men can understand and transmit to boys. However, children observe everyone around them - men and women, boys and girls. Boys don't learn only from men, nor do girls learn only from women. As children observe the people around them, they learn that in any culture, different people express their gender (and their sexuality) in different ways and there are no 'normal' gender roles and rules to follow. Of course, in any culture, some ways of being a man are more widespread than others and so they're often described as 'normal' or 'traditional'. However, normality and tradition are always open to challenge on the grounds that they benefit some people at the expense of others and 'traditional' ways to be male are no exception. Thus, any culture – regardless of how many men care for its children - can always ask, “Who benefits and who loses from our dominant ways to 'be a man' and are we happy with that?”.

Some questions

- As a group, are boys in childcare any more or less 'traditional' than other boys?
- Are there aspects of 'being a man' that only a man can know?
- Is increasing the number of men in early childhood services more or less important than increasing the number of ways to be male that children encounter in these services?

“He's a typical boy – nothing wrong with that!”

Many people think that it's acceptable for 'typical' boys to make a boisterous presence and to react aggressively when they're angry, frightened or threatened. Consequently, they encourage boys to see sadness, uncertainty or fear as 'soft' and to hide these feelings. In their early years, 'typical' boys' boisterous and aggressive behaviour can pose problems for the people around them, including girls, teachers and, of course, 'non-traditional' boys. Later, 'typical' boys who can't express their feelings readily can become teenagers who are depressed – sometimes to the point of suicide – and then men who find it hard to sustain relationships with others.

Some questions

- Should we accept boys' aggression?
- Should we support less aggressive boys who express a broader range of emotions?
- Who gains and who loses if we do?

“It's alright to be sensitive, but I don't want him soft!”

The contrast between boys who are 'hard' and 'traditional' and those who are 'soft' and 'non-traditional' can often be false. For example, traditional boys are identified as strong, brave and outgoing, but 'non-traditional' boys are generally strong, brave and outgoing, too – they have to be, in order to create identities that challenge the norm. They must be strong to pursue what to them is the 'right' way to be a boy, despite its associated problems; they must be brave to withstand other people's reactions to them, which can vary from curiosity to outright hostility; and they must be outgoing because they must continually assert their particular masculine identity as different from many

others. These boys can't be pushed around. They won't necessarily stop (e.g.) playing with dresses and dolls just because they're told to – they'll just do it in private, sharing their secrets only with adults and children they trust to accept them. They may not be as outgoing, but they'll continue to be strong and brave.

So the real difference between boys can be how they express those qualities of strength and bravery, which, again, is a difference in degree, not in kind. 'Traditional' boys tend to be more aggressive and self-centred, while 'non-traditional' boys tend to be less physically imposing on those around them. However, a boy can move between those categories at different times, undermining that contrast between 'hard' and 'soft'.

Some questions

- Can boys be strong and brave *only* by being aggressive and imposing themselves on the people around them?
- How can we encourage boys to be strong, brave and outgoing, yet sensitive and responsive to other people's needs?
- Who gains and who loses if we do so?

SOME WAYS TO RESPOND

Adults can respond to concerns about boys who want to be different by:

- Recognising and respecting different ways to be male
- Offering opportunities to try-out a range of ways to be male and encouraging those in which boys respect themselves and others.

Recognise and respect different ways to be male

- Encourage concerned parents and colleagues to express their concerns about 'non-traditional' boys. This can be a difficult discussion and it needs each person to respect other people's views, however strange they may seem.
- Note the extent to which children's behaviour is linked with their gender and ask them what they think about such gender-linked play. (For instance, ask children to group pictures of boys and girls according to who might play together.)
- Provide games, toys, stories and costumes that are 'open-ended', rather than gender-linked. These materials are generally much more creative and flexible than gender-linked materials.
- Avoid words/phrases that stereotype masculinity, such as "boys don't cry", "pink's a sissy colour" or "don't be a mummy's boy!".

Offer opportunities to try-out a range of ways to be male and encourage those in which boys respect themselves and others

- Discuss stereotypes of masculinity in (e.g.) books, comics, movies and games with children and ask whether these men are always worth copying.
- Use puppets, dolls, images, etc. to challenge gender stereotypes and ask children whether they would like to be like them. (For instance, male nurses and female engineers.)
- Give boys experience with home-making tasks and looking after younger children.
- Encourage boys to express the full range of their feelings and to solve problems through negotiation, not aggression.

- Support and encourage children to playing all sorts of games, including 'boys' games' and 'girls' games'. Participate in a wide variety of games to show children how enjoyable they are and to encourage them to try them, too.
- Assure a boy who likes to be different that his behaviour and identity is acceptable and 'normal' and that you support him playing as he wants to. Give him the language skills and the confidence to challenge other people's attitudes and actions towards him. Talk to him in his first language - this will reinforce your expression of support.
- Ask a boy who likes to be different what games and other things he enjoys and support and encourage him as he plays these games.
- Present a boy who likes to be different as an example of how to experience the pleasures associated with different ways to be a boy.

RESOURCES, REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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FURTHER INFORMATION AND/OR IDEAS

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