

Parliament of Australia

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Standing committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations

Inquiry into the education of boys

This is indeed a great opportunity to tell of our experiences with and our concerns for the boys and young men with whom we are working. It is also disappointing that on the eve of the closure of this submission it has been brought to our notice that such an exciting inquiry is happening.

The Coolbellup SPER Centre (Socio Psychological Education Resource Centre) is a service of the Western Australian Education Department which supports primary schools in the South Western Metropolitan area. Schools refer children with moderate to severe behaviour problems for cognitive behaviour intervention programs.

Reviewing the students we have worked with in the last ten years our statistics substantiate that boys are referred to us approximately at a rate of 20 males to 1 female. For some time this was thought to be that girls were less likely to act out and be a problem in the classroom than boys. It is true that girls display problematic behaviour in different ways to boys and therefore are less difficult to cope with in a classroom and therefore are less likely to be referred for a behaviour change program.

It is equally true that boys display problematic behaviour in different ways to girls. Boys become verbally aggressive, they develop work avoidance strategies, they often become physically aggressive, and the list goes on. It is not good enough to say "well they are boys". It is in this distressing situation that our service is requested. The behaviour of the young primary school boy has caused teacher stress, it has caused disruption to the smooth running of the school, parents of other children in this particular class express concerns that their child's education is suffering, and again the list is endless.

The behaviour change plan which we, in collaboration with the class teacher, implement, monitor and modify as needed, is built on a positive reinforcement basis. We give the referred student (almost always a boy) a sense of belief in himself, I can manage my own behaviour, I am a good person, I belong to this class, I can..... and the list of successful things goes on. So often we see the boy's behaviour change when he understands he doesn't have to be tough or aggressive or threatening. He learns, through the teaching of replacement social skills and successful experience that there are other ways to be successful, have friends, or just to be liked.

It is interesting that boys in the Aboriginal and Portuguese cultures (to name two of the multi cultural children we work with) are expected to be treated differently from their female peers within the family and yet in the school situation these boys are treated as equals with all other students. These boys are receiving mixed messages and it is no wonder that they become behaviour problems at a very early age in the school environment. This however we do not see as only an educator's problem but rather as a nation we must address the problem of boys social and cultural factors.

Perhaps it is time for the Australian image of the "tough male" to change and for our young men to show they are the caring, compassionate and empathetic people we see in our daily lives at home. Our Australian boys need role models in the community who let them know it is normal to feel anxiety and hurt and admit to a range of emotions. We need to teach them how to make wise choices and to understand responsibility and consequences, and most of all to know each person is a valuable member of his community.

This submission given time could be pages and pages, however the message would still be the same. Let us find a way to teach our boys to value their strengths, be assertive and not aggressive, as Ian Lillico asks the boys "take off the mask" be themselves, learn that it is normal to laugh, to cry to ask for help, to be successful, to follow your dream.

In Western Australia there are a large number of teachers striving to understand boys and give them the same positive message that the girls in the classroom are getting. This inquiry however needs to be mindful that in focussing strongly on increasing boys self esteem and motivating boys to improve their literacy and scientific skills that we do not put the boys and girls into competition but rather compliment each other.

Finally we recommend that resources be given to developing programs accessible to all parents when a child (male or female) is first registered for schooling to raise the awareness of parents to the difference in raising boys from girls (or vice versa), to give parents effective parenting strategies and to give parents a sense of working in partnership with the school, particularly with those parents who have had a "bad" schooling or childhood experience.

We thank you for the opportunity to express our concerns for our boys and congratulate you on the initiative to have this inquiry. We need to get it right for them. We need to give them the qualities that make them happy, healthy, good community members.

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