

CENTACARE

ARCHDIOCESE OF CANBERRA AND GOULBURN
PO BOX 3167 MANUKA ACT 2603

28 August 2000

Dear Sir

Thankyou for the opportunity to submit to the inquiry into the education of boys.

The Student and Family Counselling Service provides counselling services to Catholic primary and secondary schools throughout the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn. The service is staffed by social workers and psychologists.

The attached submission includes some points we believe are important in any consideration of the issues involved in the education of boys.

Yours faithfully

Beth Gibson
Acting Co-ordinator
Student and Family Counselling Service

INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS

Factors or Issues that we have observed

Comments should not be seen as only referring to boys.

1. It is often considered 'normal' or 'appropriate' for small children to be quiet and still. This may be an unreasonable expectation, and places great stress on small boys in particular.
2. Early 'failures' at school can lead to a sense of disconnectedness from the classroom and school in general. This in turn diminishes the student's resilience, and ability to cope with life's challenges.
3. In relation to the first two points, noisy and active behaviour is often interpreted as 'naughty', both at home and at school.
4. Alternatively, the label 'ADHD' can be too readily attached to noisy, active children. Medication seems too often to be seen as a first response rather than a last resort. In our experience, ADHD is best managed by school, family and professionals working with the child to manage their behaviour. This behaviour can also be indicative of other underlying emotional issues, such as trauma.
5. In a multi-cultural setting, such as Canberra, it can be seen that there are cultural aspects to behaviour, and these need to be considered when interpreting and responding to behaviour at school. Such an awareness should never compromise the safety or well-being of students.
6. At times, it has been suggested that more male teachers are essential. In our experience, it would seem more important that teachers are able to cater for a wide variety of learning styles in the classroom.
7. Education is not just about what happens in the school classroom. There is a need to see education in broader terms. Families are the first educators of their children, so programs or services that strengthen families have an impact on learning.
8. Important to find the balance between affirming the 'natural' talents of boys and encouraging them to develop skills and ways of thinking that will enable them to function in the 'real' world.
9. Boys are both victims and perpetrators of violence. Whole school programs that address this issue seem to be most effective, especially if done in Years 7-8. Boys need to learn the difference between assertion and aggression to be better equipped to deal with the challenges they face. Obviously, whole school programs designed to help deal with these issues can also be run effectively in primary schools.
10. The idea of 'mentoring' has become popular. Staff/older students/dads/community members are invited to spend time with and take a special interest in vulnerable students.
11. Male staff in schools need to take some responsibility for 'soft' issues, such as relationships, so boys learn a variety of ways of dealing with people.

12. A range of 'role models' needs to be presented - not all sporting heroes. Some boys will never reach that potential, and once again give up. Other boys have no interest in sport. Just as we have tried to educate girls about having a range of life choices, so boys also need to be encouraged to explore an array of possibilities.

13. Schools need to find ways to nurture and celebrate boys' level of activity and strength when displayed in non-violent ways.

Strategies which schools have adopted to help address these factors

1. Inviting fathers/male caregivers into schools

- Mothers are not always the first option to call, for example when a child is sick or in trouble.
- Letters are sent to both parents in separated families.
- Parenting groups. Centacare, with funding from the Federal Government ran several PACE programs (8-week parenting course) in which approximately 50% of participants were fathers, often coming on their own. The programs taught fathers an awareness of social needs, gender construction and the importance of emotional literacy; looked at options that differed from their own experiences of being a parent.
- Father/son groups. Centacare, in conjunction with Marymead Children's Centre, ran a 4-day (over 8 weeks) Father & Son Adventure Program. The emphasis was on fathers developing better relationships with their sons by spending time with them. Combined with physical activity and challenge (bush walking, abseiling, rock climbing and playing games), there were also sessions that looked at communication, self-esteem, conflict resolution and social skills.

2. Schools are a valuable site for the prevention of violence, and the development of awareness of social needs.

Our counsellors have assisted schools with the following ideas/programs.

- Anger Management Groups. School counsellors have run groups for 6-8 boys over 8 weeks to address these issues. Where possible they have been run with both male and female workers as role models, and to demonstrate how adults get needs met within adult relationships.
- Boys' Groups. School counsellors have run groups for boys over 4 weeks to look at skills in challenging traditional forms of masculinity, stereotypes and images, feelings and options for behaviour. Again where possible groups were run with male and female leaders.
- Schools have invited community groups, such as Men Against Violence, domestic violence services, and human rights groups, to either work with groups of young people or address them around issues, e.g. bullying, harassment, anger management, student responsibilities vs. rights.
- Schools have worked at developing whole-school approaches to support individuals around bullying, discipline and consistent approaches to aggression and behaviour management, and developing policies and procedures and educating staff and students around these. For example, a primary school developed a program where the community was invited to the school to work with students around a range of activities, e.g. karate, vintage car building etc. to build self-esteem, positive view of

masculinity/femininity. This program was conducted on alternate Tuesday afternoons for two tenns, and had a marked impact on the school.

- Operation Saul, a program 'out in the wilderness' for five days, offering opportunities for young men to be extended with physically and emotionally challenging activities. It is run by army/police personnel.
- Bullying workshops run with Year 7 students to develop understanding of anti-discrimination and harassment, to promote the idea that it's okay to 'dob', to introduce discipline policy and behaviour management approaches, and to begin to challenge peer culture around put-downs and "cool to be a fool" ideas.
- Training playground Peace-keepers. The process is explained to Year 5 students and they nominate students they think will be good peace-keepers. 5 weeks' training in mediation and conflict resolution is undertaken before students move into the new role. This program is also used effectively in high schools.

3. Schools can have an impact on the social construction of masculinity.

- Increasing the variety of work experience and expressive curricula available to young men, particularly in the middle years, e.g. dance and body image workshops, music and drama, cooking and sewing. For example, the Rock Eisteddfod has been a positive experience for boys.
- Literacy programs for boys in high schools not associated with special education departments, e.g. reading recovery programs similar to those in primary schools set up by the schools which encourage parents, especially dads, to participate.
- Professional development of staff around dealing with young men in sensitive ways. Challenging the 'cool to be a fool' image and focusing on recreating social skills.
- Behaviour programs with school counsellor and teachers, e.g. Social Skills training in small groups over several weeks. These usually occur in Year 3, and around Years 5/6.
- It is often beneficial to use computers and the Internet for counselling students who struggle with the traditional form of verbal counselling. Internet sites can be made available by school libraries which have the ability to monitor and update them.

Some Recommendations

- The good work that many teachers/schools are doing with boys needs to be recognised and affirmed. Some teachers seem particularly gifted in this area and require more time and resources to be able to continue and expand their current practice.
- All teachers need to be encouraged to widen their teaching style to ensure they reach out to all their students, whatever the range of learning abilities.
- Here is a great need for boys to experience early "success" in school in order to foster a greater sense of connectedness. This requires a high level of awareness, sensitivity, and creativity on the part of teachers.
- Schools should be encouraged to look to their local area for assistance with mentoring programs and extra-curricula activities.

- Whole-school approaches in terms of appropriate behaviour, involving staff, students and parents, seem to create an environment where boys are more able to participate and benefit from the educational setting.
- In working with boys, school staff need to be aware that boys often take longer to engage in a process/program than girls, and this needs to be factored into any planning. It also seems that physical activity needs to be a key element of most work with boys.
- Our final recommendation is that it be remembered what a pivotal role family plays in the experience of children, both within and outside school. In looking at expanding choices for boys, it must be acknowledged that many parents lack the financial capacity to provide numerous experiences for their sons. This is especially true for single-parent families who form such a large percentage of Australia's poor.

It is essential that all families be supported in nurturing and guiding their sons, by having access to reasonable financial resources and to generous assistance in carrying out their parental roles.