

# **AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

**Submission to the House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Employment, Education  
and Workplace Relations**

## **THE EDUCATION OF BOYS**

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## Introduction

Boys, who cares? The media has been a recent battleground concerning the question of is there a crisis of education of boys. The lines have been drawn around the representation of the issues as 'the continuum has swung too far and girls have been given too much of an edge' to 'the increasing numbers of single mothers and the detrimental effect on boys of fatherless families'. The focus in the media and the reporting of studies such as the Centre for Independent Studies and the American debate between Christina Hoff Somers and Carol Gilligan all seem to ignore the fundamental question of who really cares for boys, as the debate appears to be an ideological contest.

In this submission, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) will focus on available research, programs and case studies of work with boys and their families by practitioners, and recommendations from the experience of our members. The Association has been overwhelmed by its members wanting to contribute to this important issue. Our members see it as a major issue confronting society; it is not about an ideological contest between girls and boys, but about improving the educational opportunities available to all young people in Australian society.

The AASW wants to make very clear that many boys are doing poorly but this has not been because of girls doing better but as a result of fundamental changes affecting Australian society which have provided differential opportunities for young men and women. The battleground is not about winding down equity programs for young girls or about cutting back funding for programs that promote equity but about developing new programs that cater for the needs of young boys and girls.

The AASW has over 6000 members many of whom are professionals working in educational institutions and non-government agencies providing services to schools. There is considerable practice and research knowledge that the AASW draws upon for this submission.

The overwhelming question in this debate about boys in schools is whether all boys are doing poorly and the corollary to that, are schools failing boys? In the following section we begin to examine the available evidence and draw some conclusions from the material. It is the contention of the AASW that the issue of gender often masks the effects of low socio-economic status and English as a second language.

## **Are boys really doing poorly?**

The unmistakable impression that is drawn from the media and academic and popular press is that boys are in serious trouble. Popular books such as Steve Biddulph's *Raising Boys* as well as more academic work such as Rob and Pam Gilbert's *Masculinity Goes to School* and Epstein et al's *Failing Boys* paint a very depressing picture of boys struggling in school and the system unable or unwilling to deal with the issues of boys' education. In particular, Jennifer Buckingham's *Boy Troubles* has ignited a media debate on the nature of boys' education in Australia. In this book Buckingham focuses on three key issues facing boys in Australia – crime, suicide and educational experience.

In relationship to crime Buckingham notes the overwhelming gender imbalance of juvenile offender statistics with something like over 90% being boys. This however, needs to be put into historical context. Since the first establishment of children's court in 1900s boys have always been more likely to offend and their offending behaviour has typically been petty offences – break and enters, street fights, property crimes, etc. Girls until recently were involved in the juvenile justice arena for 'morality' offences such as being in moral danger. Over the last decade, young women are increasing in the juvenile offender statistics often for violent crimes as well as offences typically carried out by boys. Historically the statistics have shown that juvenile offenders both male and female have typically come from lower socio-economic groups. Many theories have been suggested to explain this, the most powerful is the official 'gaze' that is focused on working class and poor neighborhoods, that is, they are policed more frequently and the court systems tend to deal with them more harshly.

There is no doubt that suicide rates have increased dramatically over the last thirty years for adolescents and young adults. Australia has had one of the highest rates for youth suicide in the world for the last ten to fifteen years. The Commonwealth Government has provided considerable amounts of monies in research, prevention and support programs over the last five years. Unfortunately the rates have not dropped and this indicates an entrenched social problem. With over 500 young people committing suicide each year, which is more than deaths from road accidents and a similar number to those dying from drug overdoses, there is a strong perception that for many young people life is not worth living.

The official statistics indicate that suicide has increased dramatically for young men in this period. The rates for young women however, have slightly decreased over this 30-year period. Explaining the dramatic increase in young male suicide has been problematic. There is a link between depression and suicide as well as drug abuse and suicide. The increasing abuse of drugs by young people has become widespread in our society, in particular the abuse of drugs by young men. Buckingham links these trends into a connecting spiral of increasing drug use; high incidence of substance abuse disorder; substance abuse and suicide;

and increasing male suicide rates. The explanation for the increase of substance abuse amongst young males is itself problematic. It is very difficult to determine the causative factor in this spiral of connecting trends.

A number of researchers have commented on the disparity between young male and female suicide rates. Male rates are six times that of female rates while with attempted suicide the reverse is true with female rates six times those of young men. One explanation put forward is that the difference can be attributed to the method of suicide employed by males who are more likely to use violent methods, such as firearms or hanging, while females are more likely to use pharmacological substances. However, the research on deliberate self-harm argues that it is a separate though linked phenomenon to suicide and needs to be explained in its own terms.

The rates of young men also need some explanation. The rates have increased dramatically in two areas. Firstly, the rates of rural young men are much higher than in urban areas and secondly, and of course linked, indigenous rates of young men are the highest in Australia. This significant change indicates a serious issue for rural and remote communities.

It has not escaped a number of researchers that in the past thirty years there has been a collapse in the youth labour market. Youth unemployment rates are correlated strongly with the youth suicide rates. It is however, not sufficient to argue that unemployment causes suicide. There is clearly a relationship but the number of suicides are numerically very small and while the rates are high they are subject to considerable variation. A number of authors have commented that unemployment taken with increasing misuse of drugs and a sense of alienation from the world has created an environment in which a number of vulnerable young people with particular individual stressors lead to suicide. The data that is available does not allow for predicting suicide. It is still unfortunately easier to explain after the event.

There is no doubt that the restructuring of the labour market has made it more difficult for young men to enter the workforce if they do not have educational success. Schooling is now more important than ever. The increasing participation of young people in the educational system has led to genuine concern about boys' school performance. There appears to be evidence that boys are performing poorly at school. The argument presented by researchers such as Buckingham and others is that girls are outperforming boys because of two factors. These are that schools, through their equity programs, are 'advantaging' girls, and secondly, that the effect on boys of the absence of a father has a greater impact on school performance than it has for girls.

The statistics routinely quoted do indicate that girls are outperforming boys on a number of key variables. Their UAI scores are higher, they stay longer at school, more go onto University, and they appear to be more mature and confident of

their place in the world. While all the indicators provide a seemingly telling picture they often hide more than they illuminate. The UAI scores for instance have changed over the decades, with girls outperforming boys. This can be partially explained by how tertiary entrance scores have changed over the last two decades. The previous emphasis on science and mathematics saw these subjects scored more highly than English and humanities. This favoured boys, as they then and now tend to do more science-based subjects than humanities. Explaining the gender gap in terms of subjects evokes a debate on whether girls are naturally better at literacy than boys or whether the emphasis on boys being active explain their interest in science.

There is considerable literature on the issue of literacy and gender. The research on literacy and language indicate a preponderance of boys who have specific learning difficulties. The reading disability evidenced by boys indicates declining performance, that is, boys are performing worse than girls are and the trend seems to be that this will continue. There is widespread research evidence to confirm this trend. However, in a study by Shaywitz et al (1990) it was noted that boys are referred for assistance two to four times as often as girls are with a reading disability by schools. The evidence would appear to confirm the view that boys are more likely to experience a reading disability. But on closer analysis of the data, it appears that schools are more likely to refer boys for assessment and treatment of reading disability. On research identification only, they found no significant differences in the reading disability of boys and girls. They hypothesize that the reason boys were referred more frequently than girls was because of the poorer behaviour of boys in schools, which included hyperactivity, increased inattention and disruptive behaviour.

The nexus of socio-economic status and schooling has long been a feature of educational research. There is considerable evidence that the lower the socio-economic group a child is in, the poorer the educational outcomes. The explanation for this has ranged from inadequacy of the parents (so called 'victim blaming'); the inadequacy of schools to deal with lower socio-economic groups; the notion of social capital; and the different codes of language in schools. The evidence as Buckingham notes is that the lower the socio-economic group the lower the educational outcomes. She also notes that there is a gender gap associated with this. So the lower the socio-economic group the poorer educational outcomes for boys with the gap narrowing as the socio-economic status increases.

It would appear that low socio-economic status has a greater negative influence on boys' education than on girls'. Buckingham argues that the most important family variable other than income that affects education is the absence of the father in the family. This, she argues, affects boys' education more than girls. This appears to be more speculative than clear evidence. The very small gender gap in the higher socio-economic groups would suggest that income is the key variable in educational outcomes, since absences of fathers is not a prerogative

of low socio-economic families. Buckingham acknowledges that there is very little empirical research relating to the effect of the absences of fathers. This has not however, stopped commentators in the public media commenting on the absence of fathers and the effect that has on boys. Just a quick review of the media shows an emphasis on female headed families as a social problem (later in the submission we will directly comment on this issue).

The question posed at the beginning – are boys doing poorly? – needs to be answered in a more nuanced way. Some boys are doing poorly as are some girls. The key variable is family income. The less resources available to families the more detrimental the effect this has on educational outcomes. Poverty is a key underlying factor that can not be ignored in this debate. As many researchers note the data is not available to address serious questions in relation to the effect of the absence of fathers on boys' and girls' education.

The past thirty years has seen a revolution in most advanced industrialized countries. The dramatic shift in economic systems has seen a move away from an industrial base to a service economy built on advanced technology. The development of e-commerce has seen the economy rapidly expand and demand more flexible working environments. The skills needed in this economy are IT and personal relationship skills. There are now new winners and losers. The key to the economy is a highly skilled workforce, which is flexible and able to work any time and in any place. This necessitates a different workforce, one in which IT and other comparable skills are paramount, and an emphasis on increased educational participation as the new jobs demand continual personal skill development. All this in a work environment that can be twenty-four hours, fifty two weeks of the year. This has changed social relationships dramatically.

Accompanying this economic revolution has been a demographic revolution. The population is aging rapidly with an increased number of people living on their own, smaller families, increase in divorce, a drop in the number of people marrying, drop in the number of women having children, and so on. These shifts are worldwide trends and not peculiar to Australia. The experience of children in families is extraordinarily diverse. There are still children in traditional nuclear families and extended families but there has been a growth in single parent families and gay and lesbian families. There has been a huge growth in so-called 'blended families'. Families are dynamic and changing constantly. Single parent families are not static; families form and dissolve and they also regroup and form new partnerships and relationships.

These dramatic changes, which occurred in families during the 1980s and 1990s, are still to be properly evaluated in terms of what effect the changes had on children. There is no doubt that not all the changes, demographic, social and economic have been of benefit to children and perhaps boys have been most adversely affected by these multiple complex changes. However, the evidence is

not clear at present and we have to be careful not to blame girls and others for the seeming 'poor' educational outcomes of boys.

The evidence would suggest that boys who are doing poorly are those from low socioeconomic groups, new migrants, indigenous, and rural and remote communities. It would appear those groups have experienced the most change and have fewer resources to cope with these changes. Girls are similarly doing poorly within these groups and we have to be careful to develop programs, which will not further disadvantaged those girls.

In the next section we will focus on the factors that have been identified in the literature that may adversely affect boys' educational experience. From the literature seven key factors have been identified; these are school environment; developmental issues; learning styles; violence in the family and society and media; breakdown of community infrastructure; and materialistic hedonistic society.

### **What factors negatively impact on boys learning and social development?**

#### *A. School Environment*

Schools are the key to any understanding of the educational outcomes of boys. The expectations on the school system have grown enormously as have the responsibilities on teachers. Schools are complex organisations and have become important enterprises in local communities. They are expected to be run efficiently, use resources appropriately and provide for specific educational outcomes, which can be benchmarked. Teacher education has become more focused on curriculum design and development, as well as classroom management and the use of technology. Teachers, while viewed positively within the community, do not constitute a profession that is highly remunerated. It is a profession dominated by women though its senior practitioners tend to be men.

The size and complexity of schools and in particular high schools has raised the issue of whether schools need to be smaller. The organizational and administrative justification for large campuses has been that the resources can be used more effectively and that the range of subjects schools are required to provide has needed a large resource base. However, technology has changed some of the dimensions of size, with specialized subjects able to be provided through the web or video-conferencing and other distance education technologies. It does seem that the very large school campuses are very alienating and those boys who are not academically minded, or have learning difficulties, are lost in the system. For teachers, such environments require a



constant battle to keep any order both in the classroom and outside it. For many teachers this can be one of the more frustrating aspects of their everyday work.

Smaller schools reduce the problems of alienation and are more of a human scale. Schools need to be part of their local community and their history and traditions are important aspects of the local community's identity. This helps develop a sense of belonging, commitment and establishes and reinforces mores and values. It can be argued that public policy must model the behaviours we are trying to develop in young people.

It is important to recognize the centrality of schools in our local community and their impact on both children and their families. For many children and their families, schools are alien environments. Children and young people spend almost a third of their time in important social groups formed within the school environment. Schools are natural social environments for children and adolescents and students reflect their diverse social backgrounds, personalities, talents and vulnerabilities within the school environment.

Schools are ideal sites in which to work at a preventive and early intervention level with boys and girls. The school environment has now to be more than just classroom teaching. Schools need to begin a meaningful process of dialogue with parents about the kind of values that should be developed in boys. Schools need to become parent/family resources centers and encourage greater participation of parents in the school both during and after schools. These parent/family resource centers should not be just the responsibility of education departments but rather a collaborative effort between various state departments such as Community Services, Juvenile Justice and so on. The Centers need to be staffed by a variety of professions. Schools need to be seen as community sites and social workers, adult educators, nurses, and other professions with specialized skills and knowledge need to be involved in these significant development sites.

A number of AASW members raised the issue of the lack of male role models within the school environment. There is no doubt that within the school system the number of male teachers is decreasing particularly in primary and early high school years. The issue raised here is that school systems should not be just about attracting males but attracting males who have the qualities needed by schools. Male teachers need to be in the classrooms. Strategies need to be put in place to attract men into the profession but not at the expense of discriminating against better-qualified women. The teaching profession needs to be more highly valued in society. This has implications for better pay, conditions and flexible working arrangements.

Schools need highly qualified and committed male and female teachers. Teacher education programs need to be nationally reviewed. Issues of teachers' abilities to promote children's social and emotional development; communicate effectively

with parents; understand better children's roles in groups; recognize children's need to talk about problems and to effectively counsel them and know when to refer need to be thoroughly examined.

Schools have been captured by one profession – teachers. This reflects a rigid and one-dimensional view of the nature of schools in our society. Schools need to be opened up and attract a range of people into them. This will include male mentors and 'Big Brother' and "Big Sister' volunteers. Their roles within schools need to be recognized and these programs need to be adequately funded. The present education system is too geared towards university entrance. A lot of young people are looking to alternate pathways and this needs to be encouraged and supported. Our systems need to be more flexible and individualized without compromising significant standards such as the ability to read and write at sufficient levels.

Children and young people come to school often hungry, tired and cold. They have been witnesses and also victims of domestic violence. Their basic needs are often neglected. Programs that ensure basic health care, nutrition and safety are essential.

It has to be recognized that many children and young people experience parental separation and divorce. The impact on these children is considerable. Schools can not ignore this nor accept it as 'typical'. The emotional needs of these children while their families are undergoing considerable strain and distress can not be ignored. It is not always appropriate for teachers to take on this role as they struggle with maintaining a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. Mentors, whether male or female, are needed within the school system. Boys tend to externalize their feelings through disruptive behaviour and violence. Girls tend to withdraw and internalize their feelings. For both boys and girls these are very vulnerable situations and schools can be an environment in which their feelings can be legitimized and their resilience reinforced.

### *B. Developmental Issues*

There is considerable debate concerning the development of boys and girls with general agreement that on a range of developmental aspects girls mature earlier than boys. Certainly in relation to physical maturity girls develop at least one or two years earlier than boys. Again, in relation to language development, girls mature earlier than boys do. Many researchers claim that this accounts for the superiority of girls in language and literacy tests.

As previously discussed the issue of reading disabilities may not be as gender specific as previously thought. The biased referral practices by teachers may account for the greater number of boys receiving special assistance. Girls who have reading difficulties but who are not disruptive are often overlooked for

referral. The less disruptive behaviour by girls may see many of their needs being overlooked by schools.

The research is suggesting that reading ability for boys is more variable than for girls. The implications for schools is that boys may develop more slowly than girls and while experiencing reading difficulties at an earlier age, this may change over time. For girls, it would appear that the earlier the recognition of reading disability the better the intervention, as once they have a reading difficulty it is less likely to change over time.

There is no doubt that over the last decade ADHD has become almost an epidemic in our schools. While ADHD is not gender specific it does seem to be diagnosed more often in boys than girls. It is a controversial diagnosis and the use of medication to treat ADHD particularly the use of Ritalin and Dexamphetamine has divided many in the community. General practitioners as well as Psychiatrists increasingly prescribe it. The cause of ADHD is unknown and the use of powerful stimulants over long periods of time is an area that needs careful investigation. In many cases, medication has helped enormously and improved both school performance and general behaviour. For many families it is vital to their continued functioning. However, for many practitioners there is real concern that it is being used to deal with poor parenting skills and inability of schools to deal with difficult children.

There does not appear to be any consensus in the medical profession concerning the extent and incidence that can be expected to occur in a community. ADHD is a collection of symptoms and is part of DSM IV classification. The use of the classification to categorize children is quite problematic. Teachers and others, whose expertise does not involve an understanding and knowledge of DSM IV, diagnose many children. More research needs to be undertaken to examine the diagnoses of ADHD amongst boys. Outcome evaluation is also necessary to determine the best possible intervention strategies.

### *C. Learning Styles*

The primary school and early high school years are focused heavily on the development of language and literacy skills. This learning environment may account for boys doing poorly in comparison to most girls. The learning environment that is based around literacy and language may be a disincentive for many boys. Learning around activity and doing rather than around literacy and verbal skills may be a strategy important for many boys.

### *D. Single Mothers and Absent Fathers*

In the popular literature single mothers have been demonized in the current debate. The suggestion that is gaining credence in the community is that single

mothers are unable to control or provide an adequate environment for their children, in particular boys and this leads to poor school performance, more socially disruptive behaviour and violence by boys. This is a not-so-subtle blaming of single mothers. There is a push for getting men back into families but the strategies suggested are often imposing negative sanctions on women. The focus is on women, yet the issue is that these families are often fatherless because of the actions of men and no thorough analysis of the role of men in families is raised in the debate.

The AASW does not want to engage in any 'victim blaming'. It needs to be recognized that single parent families whether headed by males or females are doing it tough. For most families it is not only financially a difficult situation but emotionally as well. Certainly research is indicating that for children separation and divorce is emotionally very difficult and that they are offered very little support by the formal and informal community support systems. As one social worker commented

*I am thoroughly convinced that boys experience many problems when growing up in single parent households where there is no male. Naturally, there are exceptions. I am constantly being told about the behavioral problems of, and the police involvement with, sons of single women who are clients of mine. These lads almost always seem to be on Ritalin to control their behaviour. Their problems increase when the mother is suffering depression, where less attention is given them and instead they are often loaded with responsibilities of an adult. As the boys grow older and bigger and stronger the behaviour that was difficult to control earlier for the female, now becomes almost impossible. I then hear about the anger and frustration being taken out on the mother in a number of cases in the form of domestic violence. These women are also always in the workforce and have little or no energy left over at the end of the day. (Social worker in a Community Mental Health Team)*

*The majority of my referrals are, at the moment, related to working with boys, one of the common presenting problems being disruption in schools. Generally, I found the staff very willing to work with me however there appears to be an overall pathologizing approach to boys' behavior rather than understanding the context in which it exists. I find this also in the analysis of single parent mothers. I have found the majority of single mothers doing well in difficult circumstances, yet the professional gaze on them is one of blaming the individual mother as if she has some deficiency in rearing a son, rather than offering the support and understanding necessary to carry out this difficult parenting task. Schools, I find are also lacking in appropriate social skills training for boys, not enough emphasis on their nurturing role in families and society in general, also lack of analysis of aggression as a means of solving problems or being a boy. (Social worker providing therapy and child protection services)*

*As a sole parent, I am concerned that women on their own are seen as inadequate or less than the full 'bit' needed by boys. Do we feel this way when we talk about girls (daughters of single mothers) or are we perpetuating gender difference in the very discourse? We need to think historically here- men have always left women – for war, for work and for many other reasons. Women have frequently been the ones who raised the children – male and female. Why are we worried now? What is the difference – is it the lack of a sense of community or extended family that we should be addressing. We need to avoid men being considered the victims of single/sole parents. (Social Worker)*

Many of the arguments presented in the media about single mothers emphasize a return to two-parent families. It is becoming a cliché to say that permanent separation and divorce are becoming part of the social fabric of Australian society. The implications of this for politicians and policy makers however, have not been thoroughly considered. The traditional nuclear family will remain with a whole host of alternative forms of family relationships developing and we need to be able to support the children within these new forms of social living. It is not a moral statement that is needed but a recognition of the needs of vast numbers of people who need support and assistance in the important task of raising children.

It also needs to be recognized that single parent families cannot be treated as a homogenous group. They are as diverse as two parent families. The educational outcomes of children in both single parent families and nuclear families are similarly diverse. It is important to reiterate that poverty is the single most detrimental factor in the education of boys and girls.

For boys, the absence of father figures is noted by many of our practitioners as problematic. Many boys today are indeed vulnerable. So many of them live in environments where there is an absence of positive male role models, or sometimes any male role models at all. As one social worker commented:

*At the school, there is a part time male mentor who works exclusively with boys. He tells us some very sad stories of very lonely and confused boys who have formed very strong attachments to him because he listens to them, cares about them and supports them to make the most of their schooling experiences. Most of these boys are coping with parental separation and divorce (which these days is rarely defined as a social problem as it's not 'politically correct', and because it is so commonplace, we minimize its impact on children), parental disinterest – which is seen in families of all social classes; family discord and violence in a myriad of forms. I should point out that I am not 'bashing' non-traditional family forms, which is a common retort, but rather the increasing 'invisibility' of children and their needs in our consumer driven, materialistic society.*

The theme that cropped up time and again from our members was the issue of male mentoring and male role models. It was often expressed that there was a dearth of role models for young boys in the community. For many young boys, whether in single parent families or nuclear families males are often absent physically or emotionally. The view often expressed by members was on the importance of role models for boys but a rejection of the traditional macho authoritarian patriarchal stereotype.

*I would certainly agree that there are a lack of positive role models for young males. This pervades all areas of society. I don't agree that this associated with the predominance of female-headed single parent families. Many young males in two parent traditional families are without positive role models. Further, there needs to be a much bigger picture dialogue about adult males being positive role models. (Social worker disability services)*

*Men haven't yet learned to communicate, to project and express their emotions because they are not shown how to do this at an early age. Males have sport role models but they are not well balanced, and all they learn how to say is 'we played good, we played strong, we're tough guys'. Now I like football as much as the average male, but if that is the sole males we have for boys to model then it is a very small part of what they could be experiencing. Not that we want to be Nazis, but to give young males a wider perspective of models to choose from is an ideal situation. The challenge is how to get males to bond and connect with other young males throughout society. (Male social worker)*

*Also role models are a worry to me as they are inevitably drawn from popular figures who are somewhat 'mythical' and romanticised – the sports hero, the wealthy, success-by-one's-own-hands type, which usually on closer scrutiny doesn't do all by his own hands at all!! Why not have a much wider range of role models for both boys and girls – girls can admire the achievements of men just as boys can admire the achievements of women. (Social worker education setting)*

The issues raised in this section were single mother, fatherless families and male role models. The Association has strongly stated that in this current debate we have to be very careful not to 'blame' single mothers and fall into the trap that all female headed families who have boys are unable to raise them successfully. There is general consensus that for boys there is a lack of appropriate positive male role models. And as one member expressed it, perhaps we need to begin a debate about what is an appropriate male role model in our society. The role of men in our society has changed as dramatically as the role of women and for many the previous stereotypes that were considered appropriate role models for men and women were stifling for both.

### *E. Violence, in Families, the Media and Society*

Violence and boys was an issue touched upon by many of our members. While the AASW recognizes that there are important issues in regard to girls and violence, the purpose of this submission is to consider the variety of factors impacting on boys' education. It is necessary to recognize that young men are both perpetrators and victims of violence. Many boys live in a culture of violence. They have been subjected to violence within families and have seen how violence is used to deal with problems and issues. Alternative ways of expressing feelings of anger and disappointment are beyond their experience. They reproduce the behaviours they have learnt within the family home. It needs to be recognized that the family can be a site of considerable violence. Children are exposed to considerable violence by way of domestic violence. For these children the issue of safety is paramount, as it is for the mother. However, the consequences of living in an abusive environment can have considerable detrimental effects on children, both boys and girls. Supportive services are vital to young boys both in terms of providing needed therapeutic services and in demonstrating other more appropriate ways of dealing with anger and conflict.

The media presentation of violence can not be neglected in this debate. The media has a responsibility for demonstrating sensitivity to how violence is displayed both in news and entertainment formats. Boys are exposed to considerable violence via the media. The violence is portrayed often in a context free environment and little is acknowledged of the consequences of violence on communities and society generally.

It does appear that violence is increasing in our society and it needs to be recognized that many young boys and young men live their lives within an atmosphere of violence. Violence occurs within the school environment for example through bullying. They also experience violence in their communities.

*In some families boys establish their identity as they absorb promulgated violence as ways to solve problems. Violence in the media; violence at home; and violence at school. (Social worker in child and youth mental health)*

*From our work in the Project there is a clear correlation between men's violence in the home and their own experience of past abuse and also the impact of the men's violence on their own children. In the past six years over five hundred men have come to the project and been assessed for their abusive and violent behaviour. Of those men, over 70% state that they were victims of some form of abuse in their childhood. In addition, 77% of those same men identifies that they had children who were affected by their violence and abuse. Ours is only a small rural project but*

*the above statistics do seem to point to a correlation between men's violence and abuse and its effects on their male children. Often the men when growing up lacked role models for how to have respectful relationships with women, and how to give a disagreement without it becoming abusive and violent. (Social worker rural Victoria, referring to work in "The COOL Project")*

#### *F. Breakdown of Community Infrastructure*

Members of the Association voiced strongly that some of the problems experienced by boys were a direct consequence of the breakdown of community infrastructure. The changes that have occurred in our society as a result of economic and social transformation have led to a breakdown of community infrastructure. There is considerable need for rebuilding many of our communities and this can only come with a partnership between the local community and governments. There are gaps in services and the needs of individuals and families are considerable. Government and non-government services are struggling with the demand. Those who are most neglected are those who have little 'voice' and political influence.

*The negative effects of economic rationalist policies on the social fabric are also evident in the streets and arcades of empty shops, the number of properties lying vacant for months, family dysfunction, and many other destructive symptoms in the area. (Rural social worker)*

*The national competition policy –CES closure, TAFE cuts, Bank closures – has eroded our locally based services and many people have already left town. Boys in the area who are not been very academically inclined have traditionally expected to leave school, possibly study at TAFE (now TAFE has to charge a 'competitive' price for its programs and it has made education inaccessible for many), then work on the farm or associated industry. Now the farmers are in trouble – often facing foreclosures on their properties – which will not sell in this economic climate – and there is no future for their sons on the land.*

*These boys are not well equipped for life other than farming. They are often skilled in the work on the land, have out of necessity developed quite tough attitudes to survival (living through cyclones is not easy). So in short traditional men of the land. They often lack compassion and understanding for others and are often sparing in their use of language. Action men – not talkers. So they often are not good at communication skills – and they need to be if they are to compete for non-farm work. (Social worker rural Queensland)*



### *G. Materialistic, hedonistic society*

This issue was echoed by many of our members. They questioned what values we, as a society, want to promulgate. Many practitioners work with families who are struggling, have little resources and often blamed for their situation, where via various mediums the world is presented in which to be truly human you need to consume constantly. The effect that has on young children who view happiness as a Macdonald hamburger mitigates against the development of values based on sharing, cooperation and community.

## **4. Strategies**

### **▪ Collaborative, multifaceted approaches:**

The strategies for improving educational outcomes for boys, including the development of emotional and social development, depend on a multifaceted approach. It involves the community, governments, schools, business and families working collaboratively.

### **▪ Recognition of the needs of all young people in Australian society:**

There first of all needs to be a recognition that services for boys is not about cutting back services for girls. That is, it is not a sea-saw where boys doing well means girls doing poorly or vice versa. As a society we need to move away from such a patriarchal model and move towards a win-win environment for all young people, so that each child's potential can be realized. Resources need to be available to help young men and women find their place in contemporary society and become the future leaders of our society. We need to move away from the cliché of 'children are the future' and do something constructive that leads to young people experiencing hope and their possibilities encouraged and supported.

### **▪ Schools to become community resource centers:**

The major strategies should revolve around the school-community interface. Schools are central agencies in the lives of children and families as well as communities. Schools have to become community resources. This means changing their focus from just teaching a curriculum to children, to one that considers the needs of the whole child. It involves a social transformation in which schools become resources to their communities. This means seeing themselves as a welcoming environment for parents and community members. It means also providing a range of educational and life services including social and emotional development.

- **Adequate resourcing of school centers:**

Responsibilities for teachers are becoming overwhelming. They are expected to teach, to be mentors, to be counsellors and guidance officers as well as nurses. Schools should be expected to provide all those services in cooperation with other government and non-government agencies. This has implications for the use of specialized services and other professionals within the school system and seeing these as important parts of the school system.

- **Capacity building within the teaching profession:**

Teacher education needs to be reviewed. The recruitment of people into teaching also needs to be carefully examined. Many of our members expressed the view that there needed to be more males in the classroom. If, as a society we want to demonstrate that men and women are able to work effectively together and display appropriate and equitable relationships, then modeling that in schools is vital.

- **Evidence based practice to underpin school programs:**

There need to be more courses in schools focusing on conflict resolution, peer support and personal relationships. It is important that these programs be rigorously evaluated and updated if they are to remain relevant to the needs of young people and the community.

## 5. Program Examples

At present there are many exciting examples of programs that are being implemented in schools. The following is just some of the work being undertaken by social workers.

### *A. The COOL project*

This project developed out of work done in the Gippsland area of Victoria by social workers that had been involved in the Self-Help Ending Domestic Violence (SHED) Project. It was a collaborative effort between the local community health service, the alcohol and drug service, and the education department. It started as pilot program for secondary students, both girls and boys, called the Control of One's Own Life (COOL) Project. Components of the program were communication, self-esteem, aggression and violence, racism and sexism, sexual harassment, alcohol and drugs, family background, emotions, male socialisation and relationships.

The program was an opportunity for girls and boys in their early and middle high school years to be part of an experiential group learning process to look at, discuss, reflect on, and do exercises on self-esteem, communication, emotions,

etc, in a non-threatening and fun context. In such an environment, 'responsibility' is learnt and choices are recognized. Basically respectful ways of relating (to oneself and other) becomes possible in such an environment. The COOL project provides an opportunity for young people because it was part of the curriculum not just for 'problem students'. It involved teachers co-facilitating groups with counsellors and social workers.

### *B. Emotional Intelligence Training and Curriculum Development*

Development of programs aimed at social and emotional competencies of children in the early and middle schooling years. Based on the work of Daniel Goleman, a number of social workers have been involved in running programs with an emphasis on awareness of self and others' feelings and how they effect our behaviour, recognition of personal values, healthy conflict resolution strategies and development of emotional literacy. The sessions are meant to be fun and interactive and use a range of media.

### *C. Creating Better Futures*

This is a program undertaken by social workers in Melbourne. The program consisted of five elements:

- Two day personal development Workshop
- Week of work experience
- Counseling session offered with the visiting social worker or student welfare coordinator
- Opportunity of community service
- Three day outdoor adventure Camp

The program was developed for at risk young men. It involved the School and the parents. The results were very positive in terms of lowering the risk of early school leaving.

### *D. Leadership program for Young Men*

A program developed by social workers in Queensland in a small number of schools has addressed the issue of leadership. It is aimed at Year 11 boys which incorporates teaching staff, fathers/guardians, father figures, etc and addresses issues of male socialization, rites of passage, sexual relationships and so on. This program has recently been emulated and adapted for year 11 girls. Other programs include a modified version for Year 9 boys and a program for year 8 boys concentrating on masculinity, power and bullying.

### *E. Anger Management Program in School Settings*

A program developed by social workers from school and mental health settings. The workers recognised the benefits of using a therapeutic group work program to address the problems of a large number of boys who present to the school counselor for 'anger management'. The structured program is ideal for boys from 5<sup>th</sup> Grade to Year 8. It is a closed group for 6 weeks. The group program draws directly on the boy's experience and examines cycles of violence and alternative strategies. The advantages of group programs over individual psychotherapy for boys in this age group are that; it can powerfully harness the dynamics of the peer group; boys often feel safer in groups; boys more powerfully learn from each other in groups. Evaluation of this program has found significant improvements in boys' ability to control their anger, decreases in the amount of trouble they get into at school and increases in work performance after completing the program.

## **6. Future action and research**

The conclusion that can be drawn from the literature and members' professional experiences is that some boys are doing very poorly at present. They do need programs implemented that will lead to better educational outcomes. The examples drawn from the practice experience of practitioners working in schools have suggested that action needs to be undertaken in the following areas:

- ◆ Develop a program that facilitated schools beginning a real process of dialogue with parents about the kind of values that should be developed in boys.
- ◆ Develop strategies to attract men back into the teaching profession.
- ◆ Conduct a national review of teacher education programs, particularly the ability of teachers to – promote children's social and emotional development; communicate effectively with parents; understand better children's roles in groups; recognize children's need to talk about problems and to effectively counsel children and know when to refer.
- ◆ Have schools establish parent/family resource centers in each school to encourage greater involvement of parents in the school both during and after hours.
- ◆ Have these centers jointly funded by a number of government departments and staffed by social workers, adult educators, and so on.
- ◆ Fund male mentors in schools and legitimize their roles.
- ◆ Mandate the teaching of human values via the school curriculum.
- ◆ Increase funding for social workers in schools some of whom could develop special projects for boys and adolescent males.
- ◆ Set up research units to examine issues concerning boys' social and emotional development.

- ◆ Ensure that 'Big Brother' and 'Big Sister' programs are adequately funded and expanded in each state and territory.
- ◆ Advocate for a greater inclusion in television media that portrays non-sexist non-violent male role models.

There is too little that we know about boys' experience of growing up in today's society. Too often we listen to the so-called experts and rarely consult young people on their needs and views. We need to know more about the importance of fathers not just when they are absent but their effect on families of all kinds. We also need to move away from 'victim blaming' and provide resources for careful investigation of key questions about boys and masculinity. The following quote from a practitioner sums up the issues of rural decline, the changing nature of masculinity and the issues of differences (sexuality, disability, family background or cultural background).

*I am hearing of concerns from parents and educators regarding the schooling and development of boys, particularly as it relates to their social and emotional development. It seems to be that much more difficult for the young person and their family if they are living in a small country area because of a wide range of socio-economic variables: culture of the town, attitudes towards the roles of men in families and in society, cultural and economic development and I am sure there are many more. In difficult social and economic times and with technological changes there are added pressures for young people and young males in particular. Many traditional ideas and notions about being a male and 'masculinity' have been debunked through recent processes of social and economic change. Young people who are different in any way (disability, sexuality, family or cultural background, etc) are very often made to feel isolated and alienated from their peers. Being alone at critical times in one's life and without an appropriately skilled person to access emotional support is something I consider to be a major risk factor in terms of mental health of young people and young men in particular. I am particularly aware of the struggles of young males who have intellectual disability and the difficulties these people have with social life, making friends, formal learning and behaviour. All too often many of the young men I work with display a range of aggressive and violent behaviours of which their families, peers and educators are at a loss in responding to. (Social Worker rural Queensland)*

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