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What are young men made of?
What are young men made of?
Sighs and cheers, and crocodile tears
And that are young men made of.
What are young women made of?
What are young women made of?
Ribbons and laces, and sweet pretty faces,
And that are young women made of.

Introduction

This old nursery rhyme suggests that boys and girls are somehow made differently. One of the great debates in psychology is the nature/nurture one. Are people born with particular personality or behavioural traits or do they acquire these through their processes of socialisation? In relation to the focus of this paper, do girls and boys behave in the ways they do as essential attributes of their biological state? Or do repeated parental peer and media images determine for them what it means to be a girl or a boy and accordingly, how they should act? Some discussion of the terminology is provided in paper 4.13

Overview

Whilst most people who come into contact with boys and girls in any capacity would attest to some differences in the ways they behave and in how they are responded to, the whole area of gender difference is not one that has been developed much in social work thinking. Part of the reason for this is understandable from an ideological standpoint. For much of history girls were seen as less valuable or able than boys. Families would invest in boys' education and development in ways they would rarely consider for girls. Expectations of girls often consigned them to a future of domesticity. Traditionally, education systems and institutions were set up to service the needs of boys and men.

Professions such as social work and education have rightly sought to promote issues of gender equality. Schools, for instance, are much more geared to the needs of girls that they were even 20 or 30 years ago. Girls in fact, over the past decade or so, have outperformed boys academically throughout the Englishspeaking world. However, in promoting the rights and needs of girls, we have arguably neglected the particular and different needs of boys. As Steve Biddulph (1997) says:

For 30 years it has been trendy to deny masculinity and say that boys and girls are really just the same. But as parents and teachers know, this approach isn't working.

Effective child care requires that practitioners work with the equal but different needs of boys and girls. In this, a balance must be struck between understanding difference (in order to help) and perpetuating stereotypes. Staff need to consider the individual needs and preferences of young people rather than responding to them solely as boys or girls.

• *From your experience as a parent, relative or carer, what would you say are the behavioural and personality differences between boys and girls?*
• *Do you think boys and girls are born different or do these changes emerge? Give some examples why you think this.*
• *To what extent does your unit acknowledge differences between boys and girls and how does it respond to these?*

Nature or nurture?

To return to the previous question around nature or nurture, the reality is that differences between boys and girls are attributable to the interplay of both. They start in biology and end in culture.

Gender differences are apparent in the ways girls and boys respond and are responded to, from a very early age. Girls generally appear more securely attached. Boys respond less well to being separated from their mothers in particular. Some psychoanalytic writers (see chapter 3) suggest that girls' identities are more secure because they seek to replicate that of their primary care givers – initially their mother, and then carers outside the home. For boys to be able to attain a secure sense of being a male, they need to separate from their mothers and construct identities around what they perceive to be male ways of being. They begin to do this from the age of about six when they start to identify more with father figures. This process of separation continues into adolescence when the focus is on finding male role models outwith the home that they can identify with.

Other biological influences on development are hormonal, particularly associated with puberty. In boys, testosterone levels increase 800 fold around age 14. This has obvious effects on physical appearance but also on mood and energy levels. Girls are also experiencing changes in their hormones and in the shape of their bodies. This can also have effects on mood and energy levels, as well as increase anxieties about weight and desired thinness. Just when their bodies are becoming rounder, many girls are becoming more acutely aware of the barrage of messages from family, friends and media surrounding the overriding importance of being slim.

The problem with boys

Boys both experience and present a number of particular difficulties growing up. Their relative educational underachievement has already been noted. In addition to academic difficulties, boys also account for more than 80% of school exclusions. In Scotland, over three quarters of those referred to the Reporter to the Children's Panel on offence grounds are boys. Involvement in crime can be seen by some boys as a way of 'doing masculinity' (see paper 4.16).

Mental health problems are far more prevalent for boys than girls. At the extreme end, suicide among 15 - 24 year olds is three times greater for boys than for girls (see paper 4.11). The number of suicides increased by 18% over the course of the 1990s. Diagnoses such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have also risen substantially in recent years, and again, those affected are almost all boys. Some commentators question whether conditions such as ADHD may in fact reflect social situations such as the lack of a father figure, or educational systems that are not geared for the ways boys learn.

So what's the problem with boys?

There are different schools of thought as to why boys experience some of these difficulties. William Pollack in *Real Boys* (1999) suggests that boys are pushed by societal pressures to subscribe to what he calls 'The Boy Code' − a set of expectations which lay down how boys are expected to behave. Features of the boy code require that boy are:

Sturdy Oaks - they must be stoic and unemotional in the face of suffering; the big boys don't cry syndrome;
give 'em hell - they need to make their presence felt through shows of physical prowess and a 'come ahead' attitude;
big wheels - they are interested in power and dominance and in being in control;
no sissy stuff - an essential aspect of being a boy is not being a girl and not being

seen to engage in 'girly' things. This fits in with other research
(Frosh, Pheonix and Pattman, 2002) which found that boys'
identities are described and constructed around not being a girl
rather than around concrete examples of being a boy.

Pollack argues that having to subscribe to the boy code inhibits boys from
expressing their more caring and emotional sides.

Christina Hoff Sommers (2000), however, gives another view. The title of her book,
How Misguided Feminism is Harming our Young Men says it all. She argues that
boys are suffering because Western culture devalues manhood and seeks to
feminise boys. Both these writers share a belief, from different ideological positions,
that the problem with boys is that they are not allowed to get in touch with their inner
selves.

*One camp wants to reform masculinity, the other to restore it; one
seeks to rescue boys from patriarchy, the other from feminism.*
(Young, 2001, p. 1)

• *Think of any specific difficulties faced by boys you work with. To what extent
might these be related to gender?*
• *Why do you think boys face problems growing up?*

The problem with girls
As is the case with boys, the problem with girls often has little to do with girls
themselves and more to do with the culture within which they are trying to grow up.
The literature on the difficulties faced by girls growing up predates that for boys. A
central book is Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent
Girls (1994).* Pipher identifies some of the characteristics and issues presented by
adolescent girls. They can be obsessed with complicated and intense relationships,
have confused and contradictory feelings towards the same people at the same
time, and get sexuality, romance and intimacy all mixed up.

Girls can be concerned to the point of obsession with their physical appearance,
especially their weight. According to Pipher, these concerns, as well as all sorts of
mixed messages such as 'be sexy but don't be sexual' are rooted in cultural and
media driven expectations about what girls and women should be like. Such
expectations split adolescent girls into true and false selves. There are some
general ways they can respond to these cultural pressures; they can conform,
withdraw, be depressed or get angry.

A more recent UK study (Reay, 2001) picks up on similar themes and places girls
into four categories according to their responses to cultural pressures. Girls can
present as *spice girls, nice girls, girlies* or *tomboys.* What was interesting about this
study is that while the children (both boys and girls) saw girls as harder working,
more mature and more socially skilled, all of the boys and most of the girls believed
it was better being a boy.

It is clear that girls also absorb many of our culture's messages to boys about the
importance of not being *like a girl*. The *nice girls* and *girlies* conformed to societal
expectations of feminism and were viewed by their peers as 'boring' and 'no fun'
(*nice girls*) or 'stupid' and 'dumb' (*girlies*). The *spice girls* and *tomboys* resisted
traditional definitions of how good girls are supposed to behave, but were seen as 'a
bad influence' and 'little cows' by their teachers (*spice girls*), or rejected and scorned
their own gender completely (*tomboys*). It seems that these girls and girls in
general, have little if any accepted and valued space for genuine expression of what
it is to be a girl.

Girls generally physically develop earlier than boys, and as a result staff may have unrealistic expectations for their behaviour. Their emotional and cognitive development, however, can often be still be at an immature stage despite the fact that they look (and often want to be perceived as) mature. Extreme and changeable emotions, egocentricity, concrete thinking, overreacting and emotional reasoning are often seen as deliberate manipulations or character defects, when in many instances they are a normal and necessary part of the developmental process.

• What are some media images of girls?
• What kind of conflicting pressures might these place upon girls growing up?
• How would you categorise the girls in your care? Why might they behave in the ways they do?
• How might you support girls' healthy expressions of femininity and challenge damaging ones?

Girls and boys in secure accommodation
Around three-quarters of young people admitted to secure accommodation are boys. The numerical imbalance in the gender composition in secure accommodation is compounded by generally different reasons for admission. Boys are generally admitted for behaviour that involves offending, girls on account of their vulnerability or moral danger. There are ongoing concerns around the placement of sexually vulnerable girls in the same unit as boys, some of whom may be placed there for offences involving sexual aggression. On the other hand, the social backgrounds, experiences of adversity and overall welfare needs are common to both sexes. Nevertheless, girls and boys in secure accommodation do have some distinct patterns of need. Girls are generally more academically able and require counselling or psychiatric help for sexual abuse or self-harming. Boys are more likely to be persistent offenders and absconders and to abuse alcohol and/or drugs. In contrast to the backgrounds of boys, over half of whom had come to the attention of specialist services before the age of eight, most girls had a relatively short history of social work involvement.

Some research (O'Neil, 2001) suggests that young women placed in secure accommodation on welfare grounds do not fare particularly well from the experience, as the regime is geared towards the needs and demands of boys. The planned new all girls unit at The Good Shepherd Centre has been commissioned to take some of these concerns into account (see chapter 1). Indeed, the planned reconfiguration of the secure estate is set to introduce more single sex units than has been the case in recent years.

• What might be some of the arguments for and against single sex provision in secure accommodation?

Working with boys and girls
Many secure units might already run or have run groups to seek to address the specific needs of girls. It is less likely that they will have considered the specific needs of boys, perhaps assuming that the overall programme is geared around the needs of boys in any case. However, there are some particular differences in the ways boys and girls respond that might be usefully taken into account in the way any programme operates.

Care has to be taken in any generalisations around gender but, generally speaking, boys tend to respond better to a clear articulation of the rules, whereas girls can be appealed to on a more emotional level. That is not to say that just laying down the law will work for boys. They need to respect whoever is setting the rules otherwise they will drive a coach and horses through them.

The following table suggests some recommendations for staff from youth in custodial settings. (The study is Canadian but the ideas are transferable).

Are friendly and nice Talk and joke with them
Provide information that helps them with
their problems including counselling and
medication
Play sports with them
Listen to them and take time to talk Try to understand their feelings and
be fair
Are consistent and fair Don't hand out excessive
consequences
Cut them some slack and joke around with
them
Provide them with positive feedback at
the end of a shift
Make it safe for them to show how they feel
Are sensitive to them when they are
experiencing hard times
From Nicholson and Artz (2003)

While boys and girls need many of the same things, how these things are delivered might be different. Some helpful advice for staff in working across gender issues might be:
• Ask questions that encourage young people to think clearly;
• Congratulate young people on their maturity, insight, or good
judgment;
• Validate their autonomous, adult behaviour and support their
barely emerging maturity;
• Avoid panicking;
• Watch for trouble and convey the message that we are strong
enough to deal with it;
• Avoid taking behaviour personally;
• Reassure;
• Model respect and equality (use inclusive language);
• Give a message that appearance isn't everything.

• *Can you add to these lists as to how best to respond to boys and girls?*

Ensuring an appropriate mix of staff

Around two thirds of residents in residential child care generally are boys, yet only around one third of the staff are male. The gender balance on staff teams is likely to be more even in secure settings. As noted however, the resident population there is also more heavily skewed towards boys.

It is important to look beyond some of the superficial assumptions that can be made about the gender composition of staff teams. Men can be portrayed in some quarters as being employed, especially in secure units, primarily for their physical prowess in restraint situations. Men do have a role in managing behaviour but to be cast only in this role can be very uncomfortable for most men. It also undervalues their potential to model healthy images of masculinity which are not oriented around power and control to both girls and boys in their care.

Adolescent boys in particular need adult mentors outwith the home from whom they can learn how to be a man. As Biddulph (1997) says,

They (boys) need to download the software from an available male.

One of the difficulties agencies can face in appointing staff is that equal opportunities legislation may prevent them from developing a gender balance in the workplace that takes into account the particular gender needs of boys and girls in care for suitable role models. The lack of men in residential child care across the board is an area of increasing professional attention and concern. Kibble Education and Care Centre has recently secured a grant from the European Social Fund which acknowledges men as being under-represented in the social care workforce. The resultant *men can care* project seeks to address this by providing academic and on the job training to a group of trainees. Interest in this project suggests that with relevant recruitment strategies men can be attracted to this area of work.

The whole area of gender is one that should be discussed in staff groups. It is potentially contentious and in the absence of open discussion, myths can grow up around it. It is perhaps especially necessary to address gender in secure accommodation, where issues of control and the gendered assumptions that can go along with this are to the fore. Issues of how staff model particular images of masculinity or femininity are crucial.

• *What is the gender balance in your unit?*
• *Are male and female staff expected to fulfill different roles?*
• *What are the implications of this?*
• *How can you challenge gender stereotyping of staff and/or young people while still tuning into the unique needs of boys and girls?*

Conclusion
It is increasingly recognised that residential child care needs to respond to the needs of boys and girls differently. This is consistent with wider themes around valuing the individuality of each person. Staff who work in secure accommodation need to be aware of the different (and of course the similar) needs of girls and boys and to respond to these accordingly. The kind of gender relations that exist in staff groups will be important in modelling healthy gender roles.

Training links
SVQ:
Unit O2 *Promote people's equality, diversity and rights* (mandatory unit in the SVQ level 3 qualification *Caring for children and young people*).
Unit HSC 34 *Promote the well being and protection of children and young people* (mandatory unit for the revised SVQ level 3 qualification *Health and social care: children and young people*).
HNC in Social Care:
HN unit *Caring for young people in secure care settings*: outcome two (optional unit).