

A New Vision of Masculinity



Photographs by Chuck Boudes

The "he-man" mentality adopted by boys in our society stresses toughness and excludes such "feminine" values as nurturance and cooperation.

I was once asked by a teacher in a suburban high school to give a guest presentation on male roles. She hoped that I might help her deal with four boys who exercised extraordinary control over the other boys in the class. Using ridicule and their sta-

tus as physically imposing athletes, these four wrestlers had succeeded in stifling the participation of the other boys, who were reluctant to comment in class discussions.

As a class, we talked about how boys got status in that school and how they were put down by others. I was told that the most humiliating put-down was being called a "fag." The list of behaviors that could elicit ridicule filled two large chalkboards; the boys in the school were conforming to rigid, narrow standards of masculinity to avoid being called a fag. I, too, felt this pressure and became very conscious of my mannerisms in front of the group. Partly from exasperation, I decided to test the seriousness of these assertions. Since one of the four boys had some streaks of pink in his shirt, and since he had told me that wearing pink was grounds for being called a fag, I told him that I thought *he* was a fag. Instead of laughing, he said, "I'm going to kill you."



DENNIS THE MENACE



"EVERYONE IS CREATED EQUAL
BUT THEN BOYS GET BETTER."

DENNIS THE MENACE (R) used by permission of Harte-Ketchum and © by News America Syndicate

He obviously didn't and I wonder in retrospect if what I said was appropriate. But, in that moment, I understood how frightening it is for a boy to have his masculinity challenged, and I realized that the pressure to be masculine was higher than I ever would have expected. This was, after all, a boy who was a popular and successful athlete, whose masculinity was presumably established in the eyes of his peers; yet because of that single remark from me, he experienced a destruction of his self-image as a male.

Equally distressing was my realization that these boys defined masculinity by what it isn't—a set of "prohibited" feminine behaviors. As I studied their list, it became clear that "fag" was used to describe behaviors stereotypically attributed to girls and displayed by boys who were perceived as feminized males. The targeted behaviors were almost never sexual, so the reference was to sex roles, not sexual orientation, with the not-so-subtle message that gay men ("fags") are feminized males. The other message was clear: being masculine means avoiding all "feminine" behaviors. The

unfortunate consequence of this view is that it locks out a whole range of behaviors from the male experience.

Traditional masculinity stresses attributes such as independence, pride, resiliency, self-control, and physical strength. To some extent, these are desirable attributes for both boys and girls. But masculinity tends to take these attributes to the extreme, and turns them into dominance, toughness, aggression, and even violence in some settings—qualities that are the antithesis of traditional femininity. In this definition of masculinity, there is no room for positive, traditionally feminine values such as nurturance, cooperation, emotional expression, and resolving conflicts in nonaggressive, noncompetitive ways.

Women Scored

I have come to believe that this one aspect of masculinity—"avoid anything feminine"—accurately summarizes all other values associated with masculinity and directly supports two critical socializing forces in boys' lives—*homophobia* and *misogyny*.

Homophobia is the fear of being perceived as homosexual (in boys' experience, being feminized) as well as the fear and hatred of homosexuals. Misogyny is the fear and hatred of women. The two forces are targeted at different classes of victims, but they are really just the flip side of the same coin. Homophobia is the hatred of feminine qualities in men, while misogyny is the hatred of feminine qualities in women. The boy who is called a fag is the target of other boys' homophobia, as well as the victim of his own homophobia. While the overt message is the absolute need to avoid being feminized, the implication is that females—and all that they represent—are contemptible.

The pressure of homophobia and misogyny in boys' lives is poignantly demonstrated to me each time I repeat a simple yet provocative activity with students. I ask them to answer the question, "If you woke up tomorrow and discovered that you were the opposite sex from the one you are now, how would you and your life be different?" Girls consistently indicate that there are clear advantages to being a boy—from increased independence and career opportunities to decreased risks of physical and sexual assault—and eagerly answer the question. But boys often express disgust at this possibility and may even refuse to answer the question. In her reports of a broad-based survey using this question, Alice Baumgartner of the Institute for Equality in Education, Denver, Colorado reports the following responses as typical of boys: "If I were a girl, I'd be stupid and weak as a string"; "I would have to wear make-up, cook, be a mother, and other yukky stuff like that"; "I would have to hate snakes. Everything would be miserable"; and "If I were a girl, I'd kill myself."

The costs associated with this view of masculinity are enormous, and the damage occurs at both personal and societal levels. The belief that a boy should be tough (aggressive, competitive, and daring) can create emotional pain for him. While a few boys experience short-term success for their toughness, there is little security in the long run. Instead, it leads to a series of challenges that few boys ultimately win. There is no security at the top when so many other boys are competing for the same status. Toughness also

leads to increased chances of stress, physical injury, and even early death. It is considered manly to take extreme physical risks and voluntarily engage in combative, hostile activities.

On the other hand, nurturance is not a quality perceived as masculine, and thus is not valued. Because of this, boys and men experience greater emotional distance from other people and fewer opportunities to participate in rewarding interpersonal relationships. Studies consistently show that fathers spend very little time interacting with their children. In addition, men report that they seldom form intimate relationships, a reflection in part of their homophobia. They are afraid of getting too close and don't know how to take down the walls that they have built around themselves.

As boys become older and accept adult roles, the larger social costs of masculinity clearly emerge. Most women experience male resistance to an expansion of women's roles; one of

the assumptions of traditional masculinity is the belief that women should be subordinate to men (a different facet of misogyny). Consequently, men are often not willing to accept females as equal, competent partners in personal and professional settings. Whether the setting is a sexual relationship, the family, the streets, or the battlefield, men are continuously engaged in efforts to dominate. Rape may be the fastest growing crime in the United States, and that it is men, regardless of nationality, who provoke and sustain war.

Resocialization for Males

Masculinity, like many other human traits, is determined by both biological and environmental factors. While there is extensive research indicating biological factors as significant in shaping some masculine behavior, there is undeniable evidence that cultural and environmental factors are strong enough to override biological

impulses. What, then, could we be teaching boys about being men?

- To accept their vulnerability, express a range of emotions such as fear and sadness, and ask for help and support in appropriate situations.

- To be gentle, nurturant, cooperative, and communicative, and, in particular, learn nonviolent means of resolving conflicts.

- To accept those behaviors and attitudes that have traditionally been labeled "feminine" as necessary for full human development—thereby reducing homophobia and misogyny.

Courage, physical strength, and independence, are indeed positive qualities for males, provided they are not obsessive traits nor used to exploit or dominate others. It is not necessary to completely disregard or unlearn what is traditionally called "masculine." However, what is needed is a broader view of masculinity, one that is healthier for all people.

Where will this resocialization occur? Much of what boys learn about masculinity comes from the influence of parents, siblings, and role models portrayed on television. Even the school curriculum and environment provide powerful reinforcing images of traditional masculinity—through course content, teacher roles, and extracurricular activities, especially competitive sports.

School athletics are a microcosm of the socialization of male values. While participation in competitive activities can be enjoyable and healthy, it too easily becomes a lesson in the need for toughness, invulnerability, and dominance. Athletes learn to ignore their own injuries and pain, and instead try to inflict pain on others in their attempts to win, regardless of the cost to themselves or to their opponents. Yet such lessons are believed to be vital for full and complete masculine development and as a model for problem solving in other areas of life.

In addition to encouraging traditional male values, schools provide too few experiences in nurturance, cooperation, negotiation, nonviolent conflict resolution, and strategies for empathizing with and empowering others. Schools should become places where boys have the opportunity to learn these skills; clearly boys can't learn them on the streets, from peers, or on television.

Resources on Male Roles

Curriculum Materials

Unfortunately, there are few written curriculum materials designed specifically for exploring and challenging traditional male behaviors. Two exceptions are:

- *As Boys Become Men* by D. Cooper Thompson. Available from Resources for Change, 67 Mt. Vernon St., Cambridge, MA 02140.

- *Open Minds and Equality* by Nancy Schniedewind and Ellen Davidson; also deals with female roles, racism, and ageism. Available from Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632.

Films

A number of good films are available, although most tend to be more appropriate for older audiences. They require previews before use with student audiences.

- *Gym Period*, available from Franciscan Communications, 1229 S. Santee St., Los Angeles, CA 90015.

- *Men's Lives and An Acquired Taste*, available from New Day Films, P.O. Box 315, Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417.

- *Men in Early Childhood Education*, available from Davidson Films, 850 O'Neil Ave., Belmont, CA 94002.

Books and Journals

There is a small but growing body of popular and research literature on male roles. Most of these materials focus on adult males, but all are useful in building an understanding of masculinity.

- *The Myth of Masculinity* by Joseph Pleck. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981.

- *A Choice of Heroes* by Mark Gerzon. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1982.

- *Men and Masculinity*, edited by Joseph Pleck and Jack Sawyer. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.

- *Black Masculinity* by Robert Staples. San Francisco: The Black Scholar Press, 1982.

- *Jock: Sports and Male Identity*, edited by Donald Sabo and Russ Runfola. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980.

- "Male Roles and the Male Experience." *Journal of Social Issues* 34 (1978): 1.

Organizations

The National Organization for Changing Men (NOCM) is a membership organization committed to men's and women's issues. NOCM publishes a quarterly journal, *Brother*. For membership and information, write to NOCM, P.O. Box 93, Charleston, IL 61920.

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Despite the pressures of men to display their masculinity in traditional ways, there are examples of men and boys who are changing. “Fathering” is one example of a positive change. Recent emphasis on child care has seen more and more men providing care to children, both professionally and as fathers. The Women’s Liberation Movement, too, has provided a stimulus for some men to accept women as equal partners in most areas of life. These are the men who have chosen to learn and grow from women’s experiences and, with women, to create new norms for relationships. Popular literature and research on male sex roles is expanding, reflecting a wider interest in masculinity and suggesting that positive changes are taking place in the home and workplace.

Teachers report that years of efforts to enhance educational opportunities for girls have had some positive effects on boys. They seem to be more tolerant of girls’ participation in co-ed sports and traditionally male courses, and to have a greater respect for women’s contributions to literature and history. Among elementary school-aged males, the expression of vulnerable feelings is gaining acceptance. In

general, however, there has been far too little attention paid to redirecting male role development.

A New Vision

I think back to the four wrestlers and the stifling culture of masculinity in which they live. In a new vision of masculinity, those boys would be able to express a full range of behaviors and emotions without fear of being chastized. They would be permitted and encouraged to cry, to be afraid, to show joy, and to express love in a gentle fashion. Extreme concern for career goals would be replaced by efforts to fulfill needs for recreation, health, and meaningful work. Older boys would be encouraged to tutor and play with younger students. They would receive as much recognition for artistic talents as they do for athletics, and value recreational activities as highly as competitive sports.

In a system where maleness and femaleness were equally valued, boys might no longer feel that they have to prove themselves to other boys; they would simply accept the worth of each person and value the differences. Few boys would boast about beating up another boy; name-calling would diminish. Boys would realize that it is

possible to admit failure. Relationships between boys would reflect their care for one another, rather than their mutual fear and distrust.

Relationships between boys and girls would no longer be based on limited roles, but would become expressions of two individuals learning from and supporting one another. Boys would seek out opportunities to learn from girls and women. Emotional support would become commonplace, and it would no longer be seen as the role of the female to provide the support. Aggressive styles of resolving conflicts would be the exception, rather than the norm.

The development of a new conception of masculinity based on this vision is an ambitious task, but an essential one for the health and safety of both men and women. Traditional definitions of masculinity will only lead to widening the gaps that currently separate men from women and men from each other. It is time to begin healing these wounds. The change can begin with a rethinking of how we teach about masculinity. □

D. Cooper Thompson is director, Resources for Change, 67 Mount Vernon Street, Cambridge, MA 02140.



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