


Chapter 2

Counseling School–Age Boys: Influences and interventions

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ABSTRACT

As a subset of men, school-aged boys face a unique set of issues. There exists competing socialization pressures to adhere to feminist norms as well as adopting traditional gender roles to appease different groups. This, along with the ordinary challenges of growing up, can be very confusing for young men. The present chapter will focus on two topics: One, the social context for boys and young men. As they progress through different phases of gender identity development, they receive socialization from three main sources: parents, peers, and the media. In addition, this chapter outlines concrete counseling suggestions for boys in each level of grade school (elementary, middle, and high school). Intersectionality is also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

As a subset of men, school-aged boys face a unique set of issues. There exists competing socialization pressures to adhere to feminist norms as well as to adopt traditional gender roles. This, along with the ordinary challenges of growing up, can be very confusing for young men, which has led to numerous challenges for boys. One of these challenges has recently got more attention: their educational attainment. According to the Brookings Institution, boys graduate high school 6% less of the time than girls of their same age. This issue compounds when we look at the college enrollment and graduation numbers. In a single year (Fall 2020)

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male college enrollment declined by 5%, the worst decline in ten years of decline. That fall, only 41% of students enrolled in postsecondary education were men. The gender gap in graduation is also present, and especially bleak for Black and Latino males at 75% and 77%, respectively, 8 or 9 points lower than their white classmates (Reeves 2021).

Although education is one facet of growing up, it is only one piece of the puzzle for school-age boys. For example, boys complete suicide at a much higher rate than girls, mostly due to choosing a more violent method for the attempt. According to the CDC, in 2020, from ages 10-14, girls completed 204 suicides while boys completed 377 suicides, which is more than 1.5 times as many. When we go to ages 15-24 however, this gets much worse with boys completing four times as many suicides as girls - at 4,859 male suicides in 2020 while women completed 1,203 suicides. The picture is especially bleak for boys who identify as LGBTQ. According to The Trevor Project (2023), 14% of LGBTQ youth attempted suicide in the last year. When we disaggregate this data by gender, transgender men were most likely to both consider (56%) and attempt (23%) suicide. This data quite frankly, is alarming.

One of the hardest parts is that it can feel quite frustrating to attempt to connect with male clients, especially at the school age in the counseling office. One difficulty, if we assume that boys would rather work with male counselors, is that 74% of the school counselor workforce is female (Zippia, 2023). Some have said that counseling is fundamentally an intervention invented by men for women - interestingly, for school-age boys, this is now often the exact reverse position. This chapter hopes to clarify and remediate some of these problems, beginning with understanding social context. Boys receive socialization pressures from multiple sources beginning at a very early age; and these shift as they progress through different phases of gender identity development. For the purposes of this chapter, we will cover adults, peers, and the media. Specific counseling skills for boys at differing ages will also be discussed. By beginning to understand these pressures and honoring boys' developmental milestones, we can move toward making psychotherapy a more inclusive space for boys of all backgrounds.

ADULTS

Most children would indicate that the adults in their lives are “in-charge”. At the youngest age, boys are completely dependent on adults, and as they grow, they gradually become less dependent on adults and crave more independence and autonomy. Boys are bound to encounter a variety of influential adults as they grow up, including father figures, mother figures, teachers, coaches, and mentors. Each has a unique influence on a growing boy, and of course, influences will differ on a

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