

What is a man – what is masculinity?

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Part 1: Practical Guidance and Didactical Approach

Background and Keywords:



Physical self-esteem is a construct that has captured much interest in the realms of sport and exercise psychology, but it appears that the physical self plays an important role in developing self-esteem. It was James (1890) that envisaged the infant developing from one big blooming buzzing confusion to the eventual state of adult self-consciousness. It is this self-consciousness that leads to the individual developing an idea of who they are in society. Development of physical self-esteem in young children is perhaps the foundation point for enhancing and promoting positive self-esteem in later life. Body image is often seen as an issue that affects girls. However, boys do have body image concerns, and these should be addressed in order that boys hold a healthy perception of the physical self.

Keywords: masculinity, body image, males, media, roles, physical self perception

Similar topics:

Stereotypes



Materials:

- Gender and masculinity advertisements video clips
- Games
- Magazines



Duration:

60 minutes

Number of participants:

20 boys

Age:

7 to 11 years old boys



Aims:

- to get boys to consider and understand the contextual nature of these terms
- what masculinity and 'ideal' body might mean in different times and cultures

(Short) Explanation:

This game enables to boys to think about the way in which masculinity is portrayed through the media, their peers and families. It enables boys to consider what a healthy

body image means and questions their preconceptions of physical self esteem in relation to their own body image.

Ask the boys to think about the men they know and the men they see portrayed on the television, in adverts, TV shows, magazines etc.

- Who do you think are the most masculine men?
- How do they look?
- Is it possible to be masculine and not look like this?
- Is it possible to look like this and not be masculine?
- Do men you know look like your ideal?
- Do you think they are masculine?

You can use magazines, photos or boys can design their own artwork, eg (collage, computer or clay) a 'perfect man'.

Once the boys have completed a picture or model of what they think is the 'perfect man' you can discuss their ideas further.

- What do masculine men do?
- What about a male nurse, ballet dancer?

This can be explored in many ways through the use of different media. For instance, from an array of different photos, nominate men of different professions; the athlete, doctor, nurse, cook.

Why did they choose each photo?

You can then ask the boys to explore the types of personalities that go with this image.

To conclude discuss with the boys how they might start to challenge the media's 'ideal man' and the way in which we construct masculinity in our culture.

Reflection:

- Had you thought about masculinity before this exercise?
- How do you feel about your own body?
- What does it really mean to be a man?
- What are the important things for you as you grow up?
- How might you challenge the stereotypes of what makes a man?

Variations (Continuation):

Put the boys in the 'shoes' of the opposite sex. What would they like to look like, do, who would they want to have as friends, idols, what would they like their boyfriend to look like, how should they act?

Ask the boys how they feel about these things.

How have they determined these ideas?

Do they feel constrained and would they like it to be different?

(Students could create and survey other boys and girls and use the actual data for discussion).

You could use the activity with girls to explore their ideas of masculinity.

Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

Body image is often seen as an issue that affects girls. However, boys do have body image concerns, and up to the age of about 10 boys and girls show similar levels of weight concern and perceived pressure to lose weight (Ricciardelli et al, 2003). Self-esteem is considered to be a psychological benefit of participation in physical activity (Sonstroem, 1984), and perceptions of self-concept in the physical domain are considered to be an important factor in determining levels of global self-worth (Fox, 1992). Even from as young as 4, boys are concerned about their muscles (McCabe et al, 2003). By 8 years old boys tend to think more about and engage in muscle gaining behaviours (Ricciardelli et al, 2003; Drummond, 2003; Grogan & Richards, 2002).

Much of a child's early learning is accomplished through physical activity and therefore success and failure in physical and motor pursuits are important in shaping the feelings about the self. Gender differences in body image tend not to become fully apparent until after the age 10 or 11 (Ricciardelli et al, 2003). These differences suggest that from the middle primary years, taking a different approach to the subject of body image and healthy weight for boys and girls would be beneficial. Having gender specific classes and using different topics and methods for each sex can mean better engagement for both boys and girls.

Tackling the issue in gender specific learning environments can be effective, as research has shown that boys are not affected by the media and peer interaction in the same ways as girls and receive different messages from parents and siblings (McCabe et al, 2003; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). For that reason, teaching boys and girls separately during discussion on these topics allows the use of more specific and targeted methods and activities. Nevertheless, for either sex, accepting and feeling good about your body, how it looks and what it can do, are pivotal to a healthy body image. Additionally, it is also important to accept and value others and not judge them on the shape or size of their bodies. Therefore, these core principles need to be central when teaching about body image, for boys and girls.

Generally, boys want the body type often epitomized by footballers, big and muscular and lean 'with a six pack' (Grogan & Richards, 2002). At puberty, boys' bodies tend to change toward this desired body type. Boys' body image concerns seem closely associated with concepts of masculinity and what it means to be a man, with young men strongly linking masculinity with stereotypical ideals of male bodies (Drummond, 2003; Grogan and Richards, 2002).

In addition, traditional notions of the ways men should act and how they use their bodies, as well as boys' understanding of sexuality in relation to masculinity underpin many of their beliefs about men's bodies, and hence, how they should be! Although similar gender issues are important in body image for girls, these are linked to issues of appearance and bodily comparison in more complex ways than for boys (Tiggemann & Slater, 2003). Therefore, lessons that are specifically tailored for boys can address these individual differences more effectively.

According to EFTO (Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario), negative body image can have a significant impact on the developing child.

Negative body image may result in:

- Poor self esteem;
- The desire to be "fixed";
- Less participation in physical activities;
- Withdrawal from other life activities;
- Barriers to learning;
- Limiting food choices;

- Extreme weight change;
- Disordered eating, e.g. binge-eating or dieting;
- Dangerous cosmetic surgery; and/or
- Anxiety, depression, and in some cases, suicide.

(www.etfo.ca/IssuesinEducation/BodyImage/Pages/default.aspx)

The Children's Health Development Foundation (2003) suggests that we can aid boys in developing a healthy body image by de-constructing stereotypes and examining the media. Learners are constantly constructing their identity and sense of self, and it is important they gain the capacity to see beyond popular culture and established norms. An important aspect of this is broadening boys' concepts of masculinity. This may involve identifying a wider range of male role models, body shapes and behaviours. It is also important to promote boys' self-esteem and appreciation of their own bodies.

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