

Working with Boys in Maine

In a world that is generally acknowledged to be controlled by men, we are experiencing something of a paradox that some people call a “boy crisis.” Forty four percent of college graduates today are men. Thirty years ago, that figure was 58%. Some may cheer at this shift in numbers and applaud the growth of women in education, but the truth is that too many boys are not doing well in school. Boys are more likely than girls to drop out of school and three-quarters of the valedictorians in major U.S. cities are girls. If men are dominant in our society, why are they falling farther behind in schools?

Dr. Mark Tappan of Colby College in Waterville, Maine knows about some of these things that boys are going through. “Boys are sent the message that they should be tough and that they don’t have to do well in school to be ‘real boys.’” The study of boys and masculinity is one of his areas of research, but he also brings the issue close to home as a professor at Colby College. Every week with some of his classes he and his students spend time mentoring boys in the area.

“I divide my class into two person teams when we go into the middle school. The teams work with groups of half a dozen boys in the school for 10-12 weeks. Everyone meets for about an hour a week. I specifically have them generate discussion and conversation around the issues of masculinity.” The more boys are conscious about the conceptions that society has of what and who boys should be, the more they will be able to deny those ideas and create new images for themselves.

Professor Tappan looks to raise awareness and consciousness about media messages among both his students and the young boys that they mentor in an attempt to counteract some of the messages boys receive about who they should be. This necessarily involves fighting against the “boy code” that says that boys have to be tough in order to be “real boys.” In our culture today, the toughness factor has been juxtaposed against the smartness factor, giving boys the idea that they cannot be tough and smart at the same time.

“To get at this, here in Central Maine, we are, among other things, helping boys become more critical consumers of the messages they receive from the culture (particularly the media) about what it means to be a ‘real boy’ or a ‘real man’ and to resist or challenge those messages. We are trying, in other words, to help boys resist both the pressures and the privileges associated with the boy code. It's not easy, and it's not the whole answer, but it's a start.”

For more information on what is going on in the Waterville area with both boys and girls, visit these websites:

Boys to Men, <http://www.boystomen.info>

Hardy Girls, Healthy Women, <http://www.hghw.org/index.php>

Information for this article was taken, in part, from the Boys to Men Sept/Oct 2007 Newsletter.