

Gender Norms: A Key to Combating School Drop-outs and Push-out Policies in At-Risk Communities



TrueChild is an action tank of leading authorities that promotes gender transformative approaches to reproductive health, educational under-achievement, and gender-based violence. Gender transformative approaches are those which highlight, challenge and ultimately change harmful gender norms. TrueChild is especially interested in the challenges faced by at-risk youth, like those who are of color, LGBTQ, or in disinvested communities. To achieve our goals we conduct four activities: 1) Create white papers and other intellectual collateral; 2) Conduct trainings on gender norms; 3) Partners with community organizations to develop model “best practice” programs; and, 4) Convene policy-makers and leading authorities so that research begins to inform practice.

THE CONNECTION

Almost two decades of research—often originating in US colleges and universities—have crystallized strong links between academic under-achievement, Zero Tolerance and similar “pushout” policies, and narrow codes of masculinity.

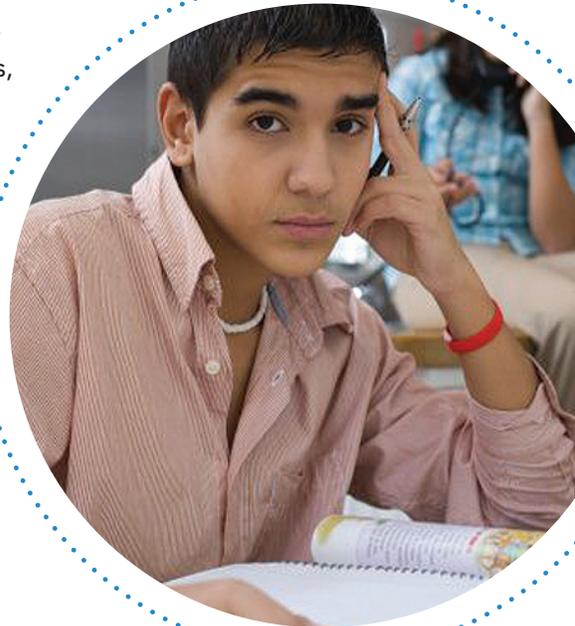
RITE OF PASSAGE

Learning to enact traditional codes of masculinity is a major rite of passage for nearly every adolescent and teenage boy. Yet this imperative often puts them directly at odds with school disciplinary systems, especially in urban environments.

TRADITIONAL MASCULINITY

Unfortunately, boys don’t display masculinity by sitting quietly in class, being respectful of teachers, obeying adult authority figures, observing all the rules, and turning in homework regularly—a set of behaviors, which, taken together, are a pretty good prescription for ostracism, bullying or harassment at many middle-schools.

On the contrary, boys learn to impress peers, establish dominance hierarchies, and create social status by exemplifying traditional masculine attributes of strength, toughness, individualism, and aggression. In practice this means being boisterous, taking risks, breaking rules, defying adult authority figures, withstanding punishment silently, and generally disdaining book-learning as weak, feminine, or gay.



A Gender Dictionary

“Gender” is used in multiple contexts. Here’s a quick guide.

Gender Transformative
A term coined by leading reproductive health authority **Geeta Rao Gupta and the WHO**—refers to approaches that highlight, challenge and ultimately change harmful gender norms and beliefs.

Gender Norms

Socially-constructed ideals, scripts, expectations for how to be a woman or a man; in sex—as in partner violence—they determine who does what, to whom, when, and how.

Gender Expression

How we express feeling feminine and masculine through dress, hair and adornment .

Gender Traits

Physical or personal characteristics commonly considered feminine or masculine (e.g., hairy chest or hourglass figure)

Gender Roles

Social and behavioral norms for how men and women are expected to act: being a doctor or nurse, being martial or maternal.

Gender Identity

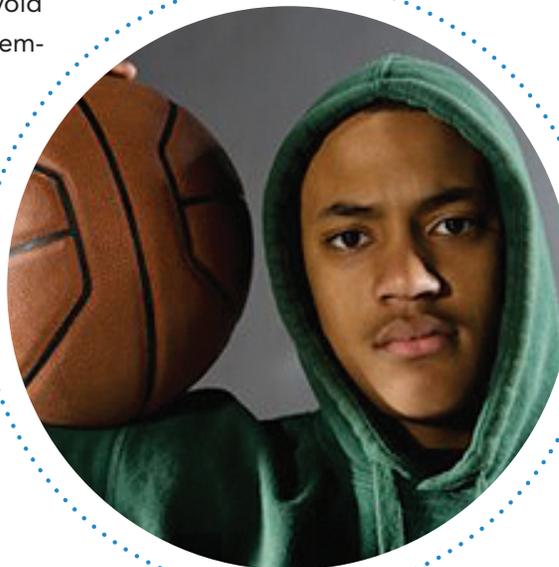
An inner sense of being male or female, useful when discussing transgender individuals who feel a conflict between their sex and gender identity.

CLASS

This can be especially true in disinvested communities, where young boys are less apt to be able to flaunt a new iPhone or car to display status and power, and must work with the material they have—risk taking, adopting a “cool pose,” acting tough, and displaying strength, aggression or athleticism.

Moreover, in under-resourced communities codes of manhood are apt to be especially narrow or harsh, (Ford Foundation, 2005) with the result that young men of color are more likely to “deny, devalue and actually forgo intellectual interests to avoid ridicule and shame that arise from academic success” (Harris, 1995).

In fact, although boys of color do as well as or better than their White peers in early grades, by the “gender intensification” years of late adolescence and early teens, grades begin to plummet and drop- and stop-out rates begin to climb. And students with lower GPAs and/or attendance problems are even more likely to be viewed as potential troublemakers.



CONFLICT AT SCHOOL

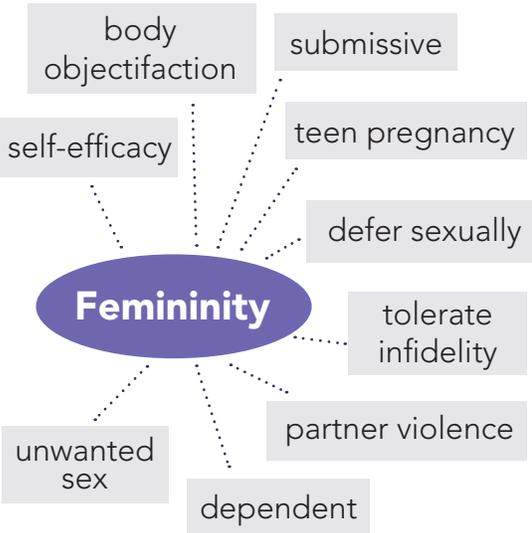
What this means is that young boys in under-resourced environments establish masculinity and display manhood through precisely those behaviors most likely to bring them in conflict with school disciplinary systems and also result in lower academic achievement.

RACE

In addition, a wave of recent studies have established that educators often reflexively view lower-income African-American and Latino boys as potential troublemakers (“Bad Boys: Public School and the Making of Black Masculinity,” Ferguson, 2001), responding with increased surveillance, stricter regulation and harsher punishment (Skiba, et al., 2010, 2011; and Skiba, 2000, 2002)

Even masculine fashion plays a role. A study perceptively titled “Tuck in That Shirt!” documented how hallway displays of contemporary urban manhood among young men of color—lowered and baggy pants, untucked shirts—had a profound impact on teachers. They immediately perceived the boys as oppositional and threatening, and responded with even more focus on bodily discipline, regulation and punishment (Morris, 2005).

Gateway Belief System



DISPROPORTIONATE PUNISHMENT

Perhaps if punishment were at least evenhanded, a case could be made for stricter discipline. But Skiba, Ferguson and others have conclusively shown through extensive analysis of school records that urban Black and Latino middle-school males are not only consistently punished more often than their White and Asian-American peers, they are also punished more harshly for identical infractions.

ZERO TOLERANCE

This disproportionate punishment is particularly harmful in school districts that have adopted Zero Tolerance and similar push-out policies, which proactively work to separate difficult students from school.

By imposing the maximum penalty of expulsion, such policies offer young boys just learning to “do” masculinity precious little margin for error in navigating the twin shoals of manhood and school disciplinary regimes.

Even for those boys who succeed at staying in school, educators are obviously less like to invest time, attention and encouragement on students whom they perceive as drop-outs-in-waiting or even future felons.

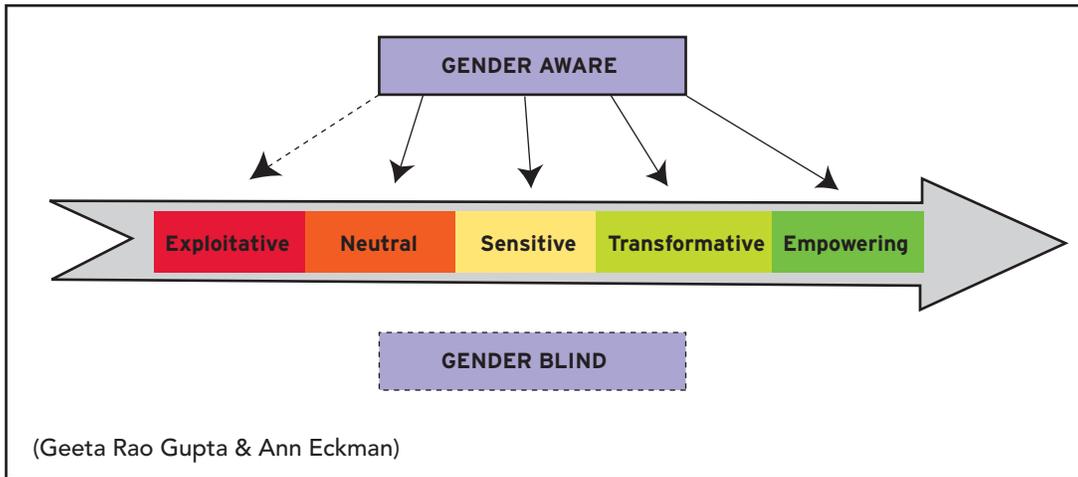
Summary

DISASTROUS COLLISION

Taken together, these findings point to two great systems in blind and often disastrous collision: an urban male “gender culture” which demands that adolescent boys master public displays of traditional masculinity, and school systems inclined to view precisely those displays as oppositional and threatening, a cause for constant surveillance and punishment, and markers of eventual failure or probable incarceration.

This huge and growing mismatch between youthful urban masculinity and school disciplinary systems is one reason so many boys of color are now punished for “defiant behavior,” and the American Psychological Association’s Zero Tolerance Task Force Report declared that such policies do not match the developmental needs of young people.

Gender Integration Continuum



The "Man Box"

"We're in this box, and in order to be in that box, you have to be **strong**, you have to be **tough**, you have to have **lots of girls**, you gotta **have money**, you have to be **a player or a pimp**, you gotta to be **in control**, you have to **dominate other men**, and if you are not any of those things, then people call you soft or weak or a p*ssy or a chump or a f*ggot and nobody wants to be any of those things. **So everybody stays inside the box.**"

—Byron Hurt
Beyond Beats and Rhymes

In addition, narrow codes of urban masculinity may require young boys to avoid intellectual achievement because schoolwork is seen as unmanly as well as to avoid ridicule that can accompany obvious academic success.

In fact, although boys of color do as well as or better than their White peers in early grades, by the "gender intensification" years of late adolescence and early teens, grades begin to plummet and drop- and stop-out rates begin to climb.

OUR WORK

Clearly this situation won't be improved until urban codes of masculinity become part of the dialog, because understanding masculinity is central to challenging the devastating and disproportionate impact of Zero Tolerance and school pushout policies on young men of color.

Yet despite years of strong research, and the growth of a robust movement opposing Zero Tolerance, few if any prominent policies or programs integrate a strong, specific focus on the impact of masculinity.

Research must begin to inform practice, by moving gender norms to the center of the debate. TrueChild is dedicated to leading and helping this effort.



Let Every Child Shine.

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