What about the boys?

Stephen Fisher assesses three approaches to boyswork.

"WHAT about the boys?" This was an often-heard phrase at the first National Boyswork Conference held in Canberra in June. This simple expression proved to be much more loaded, complex and rich as various workshop presenters encouraged keen and thorough debate.

The meaning (and politics) given to boyswork can be understood depending on which words of the phrase are stressed. The discussion at the conference contained three different interpretations.

The first, and perhaps most common, interpretation is, "What about the *boys*?!" In other words, "The boys have needs too!"

A second emphasis, and perhaps contrary to the first, is, "*What about* the boys?" Or, "Who cares about the boys; the girls still need all the help."

The final reading gives a more inquisitive rendering of the phrase: "*What* about the boys?" This cuts through the defensiveness of the previous positions to ask, "What is it about boys that we should know to reduce gender inequality and encourage respectful relations between people?"

While this last position is the most intelligent approach to a complex issue, it must incorporate some of the real concerns of the other two opposing views. I want to critically expand on these three views of boyswork and suggest that the final approach is crucial to developing a progressive, respectful and politically aware practice.

Boys have needs too

IT has been almost ten years since the release of the *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* in 1986. There have been a series of further affirmative action initiatives and policy directions in that time and we now have the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993–97*. In practice this has meant "girls only" sessions in schools (in areas such as career education, self-defence, confronting sexual harassment, developing self-esteem and sexuality education), while the boys were out playing footy or in the library reading *Hot Rod* magazine. While this hasn't felt very satisfactory, (unsupported, female) equal opportunity officers have focused on the needs of girls.

Any view supporting boys' needs must be seen in its broad political context. Firstly there is the danger of competing with others' demands for ever scarce resources. It is very likely that state support of boys' programs would entail a drain of funds away from girls' programs (or even worse, from disadvantaged and relatively voiceless groups such as Aboriginal and non-English-speaking-background students.)

Secondly, a "men's rights" agenda is being actively promoted in Australia, with ramifications far beyond the school fence. The slick marketing and catchy phrases of "Fatherly Farrell" have given voice to many men's deeply felt antagonism towards women. Warren Farrell specifically uses statistics about boys' pain to support his position. Many new groups are springing up to reassert men's privilege, and some may influence the shape of boyswork. They are able to play on men's uncertainty as traditional gender relationships shift and are dismantled. In particular, we should watch carefully the activities of PEN (People's Equality Network), Men International Inc and the Lone Fathers' Association, for any influence they may assert on the boyswork debate.

Role theory treats all boys as the same, sees boys as the passive victims of socialisation, and leaves out power dynamics.

The advocates for boys have four sets of arguments.

(1) *Educational outcomes.* Many of the education department policies on girls have rested on girls' poorer educational outcomes relative to boys. The recent evidence concerning the Year 12 results of girls would seem to indicate that these policies have not only born fruit but that now we need to redress in favour of the boys. Unfortunately this is not the case. Some spokesmen's choice to use this one, rather arbitrary indicator clouds the reality that girls still remain educationally and, more importantly after Year 12, economically disadvantaged. For example, "Between 1982 and 1992 the proportion of women aged 15–69 years with post-school qualifications increased from 26 percent to 37 percent. Over the same period the equivalent proportion of men increased from 38 to 47 percent." (*Survey of Labour Force Status and Educational Attainment*)

(2) *Poor social and emotional skills.* This lack of skill may take the form of low self-esteem, inability to express emotions or difficulty in resolving interpersonal conflicts. Programs focused on building boys' self-esteem may have dire consequences for girls in the light of some recent research findings. Some American research has found that boys with the highest self-esteem and confidence in approaching girls also ranked as the greatest sexual harassers in the school. At the same time, however, we cannot ignore the high levels of male teenage suicide in Australia and the very real inability among boys to appropriately express feelings, listen with empathy and make requests assertively.

We must be wary however of falling here into two of the boyswork traps. We should avoid *generalising* about men's experience in a homogenising way, and *individualising* problems such that we ignore the context of these behaviours.

(3) *Sexual assault of young males.* Recent Australian conferences on childhood sexual assault have brought to light the previously unrecognised high levels of abuse suffered by boys. That feminist activists have mobilised resources to support female survivors, and that boys have been particularly reluctant to disclose their assaults, means that we are now faced with a situation in which *even more* funding is needed to help survivors.

The relatively small number of people working with male survivors recognise that their needs and experience are distinct from those of female survivors. The current ad-hoc approach to funding means "not only a severe restriction on places for male survivors to access, but also a lack of continuity for those who are providing the services. Thus it is difficult for workers to develop an appropriate level of experience, skills

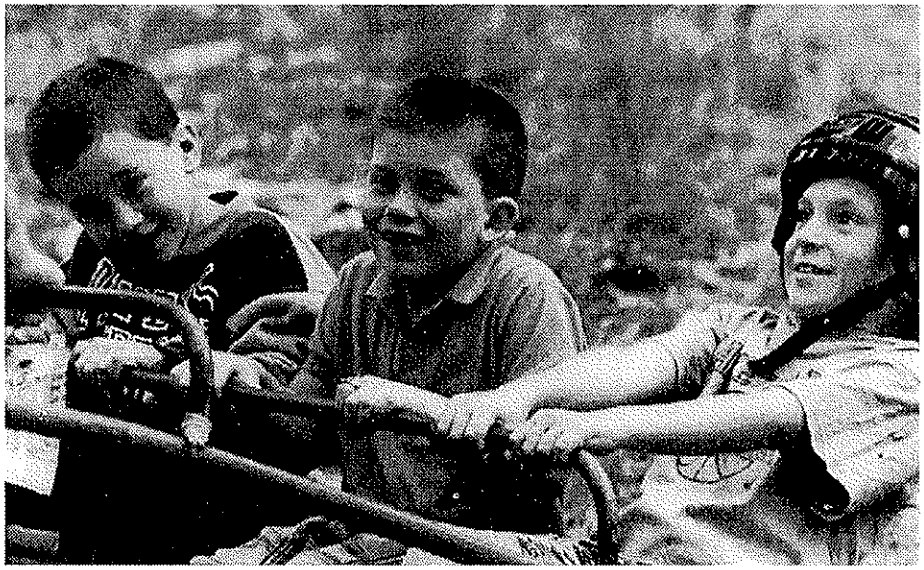

Photo: Michael Flood

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and knowledge." (MASA report on male survivors support group, 1994) Any work with boys must place great emphasis on this dire issue.

(4) *Restricted by narrow roles.* Many of the current programs for boys are based on socialisation and role theory. While this model has been valuable in the development of some practical approaches to gender relations, it easily and often leaves a few important factors out of the picture.

Firstly, sex role theory generalises and treats all boys as the same in terms of their beliefs, behaviour and the pressures they experience. Secondly, it wrongly assumes that boys are the passive victims of the forces of socialisation. While boys may be relatively powerless in some situations, they also actively participate in their own gender construction and in resisting the forces they meet.

Thirdly, socialisation and role theory can teach the view that "sex roles" are complementary to each other, and leaves power dynamics out of the picture altogether. This *egalitarianises* gender relations by saying that boys and girls are equally oppressed.

Finally, sex role theory may come up with the dangerously simple solution that all boys need to assist them to change is to be shown new, positive ways of being male. Programs based on role theory seem to be based on the belief that anti-social behaviour is the result of a *lack of information* about other options. For many adolescent boys, one of the great things about being male is trying out a mix of aggression and sexuality on girls, at girls' expense.

Who cares about the boys?

"*WHAT about* the boys?" State authorities have recognised girls' relative educational inequality and girls' experience of constant harassment, put-downs and physical abuse, but this recognition has only been won through difficult and bitter struggle by a few committed women. Resources for girls have never been given easily and are constantly "under review". Educational opportunities and outcomes are still an important area of inequality, especially if seen in the long-term context of male and female career paths.

However, mistakes have been made in the past, where "instead of focusing on the processes and structures that oppress or constrain girls, [strategies] focus on the girls and their supposed inadequacies." (Margaret Clark, *The great divide*) This fix-up-the-girls approach has also been applied to the increasingly recognised area of sexual harassment. Self-esteem and assertiveness-training for girls have not been effective in limiting the incidence or effects of sexual harassment.

Unfortunately this may result in a tentative support for boys' programs based on an inverted "let's fix up the boys" model. Any work that has at its core the idea that men are essentially bad and have to be "fixed up" is bound to fail.

What is it about boys?

BOYS' programs have to take into account both the difficulties they experience *and* the difficulties they create. This means working in cooperation with, and learning from, workers who work mainly with girls. It means attempting to understand the complex dynamic process by which gender identity and relations are constantly recreated and negotiated. It means bringing into focus the essential problem of *oppressive ways of relating*, not just of boys towards girls but also of boys towards boys, adults towards young people, teachers towards students and the state towards workers-to-be.

We also have to understand how these power relations operate within their particular contexts, such as schools. It is only with this comprehensive view that we can acknowledge the pain and confusion many boys feel without condoning harmful ways of relating.

To aid that process I will point out some common traps encountered in boys' programs. (Some are from a presentation by Jeremy Ludowyck at the National Boyswork Conference.)

(1) *Essentialising:* It is claimed that there are naturally occurring male and female behaviours.

(2) *Individualising:* Behaviour is explained only in terms of the individual.

(3) *Generalising:* The program works from the premise that there is only one masculinity, that makes the experience of all boys and men similar.

(4) *Equalising:* It is suggested that male disadvantage and oppression, while different, are of the same degree as female oppression.

(5) *Blaming:* Fix-up programs try to process boys so that they know their behaviour is "bad" and coerce or coax boys to be nicer.

(6) *Forcing:* Boys are given no choice about their involvement in a program, its content or outcomes.

(7) *Divorcing:* The program does not acknowledge, or attempt to influence, the structures and institutions which shape boys' relations.

(8) *Competing:* The program competes with funds for girls, or for people from non-English-speaking backgrounds or Aboriginal young people.

(9) *Identity-focused:* The solution is seen as lying solely in encouraging a healthy, confident and non-oppressive masculine identity, while ignoring the importance of relations between boys and between boys and girls.

I offer these cautions to encourage practitioners to evaluate and develop our valuable work further. I hope that the thoughts contained here will spur us to continue our compassionate striving for peace and justice, by bringing the wisdom and clarity of theory to the task. ●

Stephen Fisher has been an activist in the men's movement for the past 10 years. He has spoken widely on many issues related to violence, sexuality and relationships that concern both men and women. In particular, he is interested in the experiences and relationships of young men and boys within schools. Stephen works as an early childhood educator within an inner-city children's centre in Melbourne.