

**SUBMISSION TO THE
STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION and
WORKPLACE RELATIONS**

The Education of Boys

The following submission contains some observations and considerations that may be pertinent to this inquiry.

I am a **Child Psychologist** employed by the *Illawarra Area Health Service*. Much of my work focuses on the **psychological and behavioural concerns of boys in the primary to early high school age range**.

You will note that the following points are not based on any systematic or rigorous research on my part. Instead they reflect my concerns based on my professional observations of what is happening with boys, particularly in relation to schools and education.

1. **Language Receptivity Problems in Boys**

I have become increasingly aware of how a problem with language receptivity in some boys is often **an unrecognised factor in poor classroom behaviour and inattentiveness to learning tasks**. My clinical observations support the view that poor language receptivity problems are more prevalent or apparent amongst boys. It can impact significantly on these boys in that they often have difficulty with processing instructions in a classroom setting. The rest of the class will be getting on with the task while these boys will be either causing mischief (because they're not entirely sure what they should be doing) or engaging in an activity that seems unrelated to what the majority of the class is doing

From my experience, teachers often miss the language receptivity problem, claiming instead that the boy has A.D.D. or is that he is just plain naughty. Typically the child's behaviour is not a concern outside of school but the parents will often admit that he is not very good at listening and following instructions.

These observations suggest that **schools may need to develop better awareness of language receptivity problems in boys and how these can often manifest as behaviour problems in the classroom.** Practical exercises and strategies for helping these boys to listen and follow instructions better may also need to be employed.

Assessment for language difficulties and disorders are normally carried out by Speech Pathologists. Many Speech Pathologists regard the current assessment tools as quite unsatisfactory and are sometimes reluctant to assess a child as a result. **More ‘user-friendly’ methods for assessing this problem are clearly needed.**

2 **The Benefits of One to One Alliances**

I have observed that in our society boys tend to experience the world predominantly in the context of groups, eg. class room, football team, ‘gangs’, etc. These group experiences are often positive and are mostly welcomed by the boys who participate in them.

On the other hand, I’m sure that I am not alone in noting the extraordinary ‘hunger’ that boys have for positive one to one relationships with adults, especially with men. On many occasions I have observed how **a positive alliance between a boy and an adult male can lead to improvements in self-esteem, behaviour and attitudes to school and learning.** It may be that some boys benefit from this individual attention and ‘mateship’ more than others do. However, my experiences so far suggest that every boy gains, in one way or another, from such a relationship. Parents and teachers have reported that the child is happier, more settled and better behaved even though the relationship may not have addressed these concerns directly.

I am aware of at least one area in Australia where ‘mentor’ programs have been tried, with some success I understand (Newcastle). If the resources for such a program were available in my area (Wollongong) I would strongly support it as a matter of priority. In my view such a program should begin by focussing on boys in grades 5 to 8 who are living in single parent families (ie. where contact with their father or an equivalent

male figure is limited, negative or non-existent). I feel that this is the age group that could most benefit from such a program.

2. **The Management of Behaviour Problems in Schools**

It is said that more than **75% of behaviour problems in schools involve boys**.

Teachers have told me how a single incident in the classroom can unsettle and disrupt the whole class for hours. This is clearly a substantial issue for some schools.

However, I am also aware of **numerous examples where the school disciplinary codes and procedures implemented have *not* helped the boy involved to sort out his problems**. In too many cases I've observed that the problem has worsened.

In virtually every case I've been involved with the boy concerned has clearly expressed a desire to *not* be seen as 'bad'. **They genuinely want to avoid getting in to any more trouble**. From my perspective it is frustrating to find that the school often responds to a child like this in an inflexible and increasingly punitive way. For example, persistent behaviour problems are frequently dealt with by prescribing longer and longer periods of school suspension. This mostly results in parents being resentful and frustrated because they don't know what to do and with boys who are missing out on school work and feeling increasingly marginalised and misunderstood.

I am aware that **School counsellors and behaviour support teachers are supposed to be an important part of finding some helpful strategies and solutions**. **However, from my perspective they often seem to be *over worked and so wedded to the structures and culture of the school that they are unable to provide any or many effective solutions***. There often doesn't appear to be anyone who can **advocate on behalf of the boy** and his particular needs except the parents and they are invariably viewed as biased or as significantly contributing to the problem.

In an ideal world I would like to see more flexibility in the implementation of behaviour management strategies for boys in schools. Where there are significant or persistent behaviour problems with a particular boy I would ideally like an advocate, preferably not the parents, to be involved in any discussions. This advocate would

need to be someone who has a positive relationship with the boy. It could, for example, be a teacher, an uncle, a counsellor or any other positive adult figure. The role of this person would be to provide a **sympathetic and interested voice**, particularly at school meetings where it is not uncommon to find a whole room of people who have nothing positive or constructive to say about the child.

3. **Why Do We Have to See Boys as a Problem?**

Most of the discussion and literature about boys' issues seem to focus strongly on the idea that boys are a problem. It often seems that the agenda is to change or modify boys so that they will fit the expectations of the community or an institution such as a school. I believe that this approach is firstly doomed to failure and, secondly, fails to appreciate the many positive and unique qualities that are often found in boys.

From a psychological perspective you can't change or transform another person until you first understand their perspective and second, acknowledge what is good and desirable about that perspective. I don't see this kind of reflection taking place enough in respect to boys.

I agree with *Richard Fletcher*, manager of the University of Newcastle's "*Men and Boys' Program*", when he says that we need to ask "What is good about boys?" as well as "What is good about men?" We need to start with an affirmation of certain masculine qualities.

What I find delightful and inspiring about boys is that they are often **spirited, exuberant and enthusiastic about the things that really matter to them**. They can also be very loyal and protective of these things and of the important people in their lives.

Summary of Recommendations to the Committee

1. Work towards developing better diagnostic tools and greater awareness in schools of **the impact of receptive language problems in boys.**
- 2 Encourage programs where **positive one to one alliances** can be developed **between boys and adult males.**
- 3 Devise more **flexible and effective disciplinary codes in schools.** Encourage the involvement of non-parental adults who can play an advocacy role, providing a sympathetic and interested voice at school meetings where discipline issues are discussed
- 4 **To affirm those qualities that are positive and desirable about the way boys relate to the world.** This is an important step if we are to prevent ourselves from going down the road taken by parts of the United States where boys (and their masculinity) are increasingly viewed by educators as fundamentally wrong.

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