



## #Big and tough': Boys learning about sexuality and manhood

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# 'Big and tough': boys learning about sexuality and manhood

SIMON FORREST

*University College London, London, United Kingdom*

**ABSTRACT** *This paper explores adolescent boys' reactions to, and experiences of, school-based sex education. Using data and findings from a range of studies, it describes dominant patterns of response, and posits reasons for boys' frequent rejection and disruption of lessons. The relationship between bodily size and social capital and hierarchies of masculine sexual power and status is addressed. Evidence is presented which demonstrates that bravado and disruption are reactions to sex education which fails to address boys' needs. We need to create learning environments in which they can at least temporarily put to one side the need to behave in rigid sex-stereotypical ways.*

## **Introduction**

A few weeks ago I visited a secondary school to talk with teachers about the sex education provision. One teacher was evaluating the programme through a discussion with Year 9 students; young people aged 13 and 14 years old. There was a lot of discussion about whether the teachers should teach about homosexuality. All the girls seemed keen; a small group of boys was very hostile. After the lesson, the teacher said he thought the evaluation was useful but he felt frustrated that the girls seemed to get so much more out of the exercise and the whole programme of sex education than the boys. He spoke about the small group of boys who had been so vocal in the discussion about homosexuality. These boys, he said, got nothing out of the sex education. They could not engage with it. They were just immature. I asked what the girls thought of them. He said they liked them, for being funny and challenging, and some went out with them for short periods, but they thought they were immature too. He pointed to some work the girls had done in a single-sex group. I copied out the words from the sheets pinned to the wall:

*Why boys lie about sex ...*

*To impress their partner*

*Insecure about their ability*

*To hide the fact that they are gay*

*Because they think all their friends have had sex*

Correspondence to: Simon Forrest, Department of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, University College London, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Mortimer Market Centre, off Capper Street, London WE1C 6AU.  
Email: sforrest@gum.ucl.ac.uk

*To make girls want to have sex with them—it makes them look experienced  
 To feel grown up  
 To impress their friends  
 Because their girlfriend has had sex*

On the sheet underneath in a box was added the following:

*look hard  
 feel they need to lose their virginity  
 so they're not called name e.g. frigid/bent  
 make them seem mature  
 make them look experienced—or their partner has had sex, they don't want to  
 look stupid in front of them  
 girls may want sex with them because they think it will be good because the boy  
 is experienced*

School sex education often seems to exacerbate tensions between girls and boys centred around gender stereotypical attitudes towards the values and meaning attached to sexual behaviours and relationships. Work like that of the girls presented above is highly likely to antagonize boys regardless of whether it accurately reflects what they say or believe. Consequently, discussions can collapse into arguments in which girls and boys line up against each other. Sometimes there is a mutual denigration of the other sex; a tit-for-tat exchange of insults and accusations about masculinity and men on the one hand and femininity and women on the other. Girls will call boys immature; boys will accuse girls of trying to annoy them.

The principal aim of this paper is explore how boys respond to school-based sex education in England [1], and identify how the framework for that provision, its structure and content may be collusive with gender stereotyping. In addition, it sets out to explore how boys' learning and experience of sex contributes to their developing sexual identity and beliefs about sexuality and gender. The paper concludes with some suggestions for sexual relationship counsellors and therapists about how to consider these effects in their work with boys and men.

The behaviour of boys in school is often perceived as problematic. With regard to secondary school sex education, there are good accounts of their disruptive behaviour, for example the study of sex education in single-sex groups within an English co-educational school reported by Lynda Measor *et al.* (1996). Here, the authors describe the sense of panic, chaos, the horse-play and undercurrent of denigrating joking and bullying violence among boys who are being shown contraceptives by a female nurse. Clearly, this behaviour makes it an unsafe environment in which to talk about sex seriously. Elsewhere, teachers and trainers have reported their reluctance to engage with boys for fear of encountering this behaviour and their confusion about how to challenge it ( Salisbury & Jackson, 1996). This has also been the experience of professionals in the rest of the European Union (Forrest & Vermeer, 1997). The overbearing heterosexual machismo which Measor *et al.* describe also militates against addressing the needs of young gay men and young lesbians. Descriptions of the frustration and pain of young people in these

hidden minorities is to be found in the accounts of researchers like Marigold Rogers (1994) and Jo Frankum (1996). Rogers describes the triple deficit of young lesbians: being young, female and gay. Frankum describes the anxiety felt by gay young men denied any information about same-sex relationships and safer sex. The effect of denying the existence of gay young people is likely to contribute to heterosexual prejudices and the victimization of young gay people (Rivers, 1995; 1996), and to damage to their self-esteem which can ultimately be linked to self-harm and suicide (Remafedi, 1991).

This would be sufficient reason to explore the questions boys' reactions to school-based sex education raise. However, in addition, public policy development in England and Wales brings a new focus on sex education, with a renewed drive to reduce the number of unplanned conceptions among teenage girls (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) and a proposed revision of governmental guidance to schools in the light of the lowering of the age of sexual consent for gay men and the repeal of a statute (Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act) forbidding local government, which controls the majority of schools, from promoting homosexual lifestyles (Department of the Environment, 1988) [2]. In addition, schools represent a chief mechanism through which social values about sex and sexual relationships are expressed to young people.

This paper does not adopt this focus on school experiences with the intention of undervaluing the impact of cultural or social norms and representations on sexual attitudes and behaviour. Rather, I want to emphasize that maintained schooling remains a common experience for the vast majority of young people in the England and Wales and is therefore a vector through which we collectively seek to provide for their nurture and development. In part, this paper sets out to describe this situation—both the current guidance and structure of sex education, which it will be shown is germane to understanding boys' reactions to it, and the content which bears directly on the performance and development of a multiplicity of masculinities. The scope of the discussion is limited to mid-teenage boys within co-educational state-funded schools. The paper does not draw on the findings of any one empirical study, but on a number of investigations in which I have either been involved, or which have been undertaken by other researchers. The discursive elements of the paper are interwoven with material from these studies and extracts from literary sources.

### **Sex education guidance and the structure of provision**

Little scholarly or concrete had been said about sex education in England and Wales prior to Marie-Ann Doggett's (1987) review of literature in the Appendix to Isobel Allen's book *Education in Sex and Personal Relationships* (1987). Since then, the work of oral historians like Stephen Humphries (1988) has added a great deal in terms of powerful, and often moving, accounts of schools days before and after the Second World War. Michael Reiss (1998a) has described the situation as one in which there was little formal sex education in schools, the main thrust being the prevention of conceptions and births outside marriage. He notes a shift post-war towards

abstracted and scientific teaching about reproductive systems of plants and animals other than human beings. Reiss goes on to identify a further shift, with a broadening of the aims of sex education in the late 1970s and early 1980s, from moral reinforcement and reproductive illumination to the development of a repertoire of skills like decision making, communicating and negotiating. This, he believes, was largely a product of the influence of feminist critiques, which pointed out how existing programmes of sex education reinforced gender inequalities, portraying men as active sexual agents and unreliable in terms of their sexual self-control and women as sexually acted upon and responsible for managing contraception.

This situation altered radically in the 1980s with the discovery of HIV. The effect, bringing to attention as it did sexual behaviour, lesbian and gay rights and the provision of condoms and other contraceptives to young people, contributed to a flurry of political activity and legislation and guidance. Contemporary themes are a re-emergence of polarized beliefs that education about sex either corrupts innocent children and promotes sexual behaviour and experimentation (including exploring same-sex sexual relationships), or that it can positively enhance young people's ability to manage their sexual lives for themselves.

Despite the heat of media and moralistic fury about the allegedly corrupting influence of sex education, recent research on parents' attitudes towards school-based provision reports as much support as when Isobel Allen undertook her pioneering study in 1987. Consistently, between 94% and 96% of parents believe schools should provide education about topics in sex and personal relationships (Allen, 1987; NFER, 1994). Despite this support and considerable academic evidence to show a liberal sex education has positive effects on knowledge, attitudes and behaviour (Grunseit & Aggleton, 1998; Kirby *et al.*, 1994), the field remains controversial and difficult for schools.

Maintained secondary schools in England and Wales are obliged to provide sex education to all their students. However, beyond a few topics, how provision is organized and delivered is very much at the discretion of the school governing body. There is much instruction and guidance to consider, including the National Curriculum[3] (revised under the Dearing Review in 1995) and associated Guidance on Health Education (NCC, 1990), the Education Acts of 1986, 1993 and 1996, the framework for school inspection, and the indirect influence of the aforementioned Local Government Act (1988).

To summarize, secondary schools are required to provide information, through the National Curriculum for Science, about human sexual reproduction and contraception. It is also anticipated that they will teach about sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. There is a whole host of additional topics covered in Guidance which schools are not obliged but encouraged to teach, including puberty, masturbation, sex and the law, accessing sexual health services, sexuality, resisting pressure; decision making; communicating; negotiating in relationships; religious and cultural diversity in values and views; and self-esteem. It is suggested that these topics are covered in an age-appropriate order and at a level of complexity which accords with the needs of the students. Parents at a school have access to the policy documents describing what is taught by whom and when, and retain a right to

withdraw their children from aspects of sex education not contained within the National Curriculum. Recent research on the state of policy formation has indicated a high degree of variability in the quality and detail of these policies (Pearson, 1999; Regis, 2000).

The complexities of the content and organization of sex education bear upon its provision, as do concerns about transgressing the moral precepts laid out in the Guidance. Fears about scandals stirred up by the press also operate as an effective deterrent to progression. Sex education outside the core of the National Curriculum is vulnerable to erosion by demands to improve academic standards. Both staff and young people tend to perceive sex education as a non-examinable and hence trivial digression. The lack of specialist initial teacher training reinforces this lowly status. Delivery through pastoral tutors, a popular approach, also exposes the provision to patchiness and marginality.

This brief exploration of policy, structure and organization of sex education is highly relevant to the further consideration of boys' reactions to the provision. Much of the behaviour described and analysed below reflects the vacuity of the *moralism* in political debates about sexuality and young people. Boys' performances of masculinity seem to show an intuitive grasp of the vulnerability which teachers feel in trying to teach them about sex and an ability to twist and invert messages presented as ideal social norms into something grotesque and pantomimic.

### **The sexual behaviour of boys and young men**

A censorious social climate militates against investigating the sexual behaviour and experiences of young people who are themselves concerned about disclosing their experiences. Consequently, research on the socio-sexual lives of young people tends to be focused on behaviours that relate directly to public health concerns, where arguments for the benefits from research are regarded as self-evident.

Among the 16–19 year olds interviewed in the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSSAL) (Wellings *et al.*, 1994), 19% of young women and 30% of young men report their first experience of sexual intercourse occurring before the age of 16. There were associations between the age of first sexual intercourse and both social class and faith. The median ages for first sexual intercourse of boys from the highest social class backgrounds was nearly 18 years old, and that of boys from the lowest social class backgrounds around 16 years old. Boys reporting a religious belief or active adherence to any faith tended to report later first sexual intercourse. About a quarter of black African and Afro-Caribbean boys, compared with a fifth of white and a tenth of Asian boys, reported their first sexual intercourse before 16 years old. For boys, their first sexual partners are generally of the same age, whereas the norm among girls is for older partners. About 40% of boys and half of the girls reported their first sexual intercourse took place in the context of an established relationship. Among boys, a further 30% reported that they had known their partner for some time, although it was not a steady relationship. This compared with 16% of girls. There are significant gender differences when it comes to feelings associated with first intercourse. Eight out of

TABLE I. Main factors associated with first intercourse among 16–24 year olds

Factor (%)			
Boys		Girls	
Curiosity	30.7	In love	37.5
Natural course	23.1	Curiosity	23.6
In love	16.7	Natural course	23.2
Lose virginity	11.2	Carried away	6.3
Peer group	7.2	Drunk	5.2
Drunk	6.6	Peer group	4.1
Carried away	4.5	Lose Virginity	0.2

10 boys compared with six out of 10 girls felt their first experience of sexual intercourse came at the right time and 15% of boys compared with 36% of girls regretted their experiences.

The NATSSAL study emphasized the inadequacy of the dichotomizing heterosexual and homosexual identity in mapping sexual behaviour and experiences and used a 'Kinsey' scale (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948) to rate experiences of same-sex feelings and sexual experiences. The data collected showed that about 7% of boys had experienced some homosexual attraction, 5% had had some form of homosexual experience and 3% had had some homosexual genital contact between 16 and 24 years old.

### The context and meaning of sexual behaviour for boys

Data on the frequency of occurrence of particular sexual behaviours or experiences is of fairly limited usefulness outside the context provided by an understanding of the social and personal meanings of the activities. The NATSSAL study, drawing upon Schofield's earlier (1965) work, showed that there were differences for male and female teenagers in their main motivations at first sexual intercourse. These are reported in Table I below. For both girls and boys, a sense of curiosity, feeling love or that to have sexual intercourse was a natural development in their relationship were the highest rating factors. However, only 17% of boys compared with 38% of girls reported being in love as being their main motivation, and 11% of boys compared with fewer than 1% of girls reported losing their virginity as an important factor.

Taken together, these data suggest that, broadly speaking, boys view sexual activity, especially losing their virginity, as an achievement. Not surprisingly, this produces anxieties about sexual capacity, appetite and performance. This generally focuses on worries about adequacy compared with other boys rather than on satisfying the emotional or physical needs and desires of girls. As Deakin (1988) has noted, this pursuit of 'sexual excellence' by men produces a raft of concerns that can

undermine their ability to form intimate emotional bonds. They can end up preoccupied with penis size, maintaining an erection, making sexual intercourse last a long time, and achieving simultaneous orgasm.

While having a sexual career is in itself a positive social attribute for boys, they also build identity through showing off what they are not. A central element in the struggle to build and maintain a good heterosexual reputation with male peers is the expression of violent and physical anti-gay and lesbian feelings (Forrest, 1997). Male homosexuality implies an erosion of the heterosexual male identity and threatens many boys. The direct result is the victimization of other boys who are labelled as gay, and those who are gay. The Stonewall survey *Queerbashing* (Mason & Palmer, 1996) described the extent of homophobic bullying in school suffered by young lesbian and gay people: 90% had been called names; 61% had been harassed; 48% had been violently attacked; and 22% had been 'beaten up'. Of the violent attacks, 40% had taken place in school, and half of these attacks and 79% of the name-calling were by fellow students.

### **Heterosexual sex education: the misfit between main messages and boys' needs**

There is a mismatch between the kind of sex education boys' sexual experiences and motivations imply ought to be provided and that laid out in statutory guidance and taught in schools. Boys identify the censoriousness of sex educators as a major cause of this mismatch. Work by the Sex Education Forum (Lenderyou & Ray, 1997) and Simon Blake on behalf of the Health Education Authority (1999) reported the following criticisms of sex education by boys:

Normally we are told things that other people think are important;  
(Lenderyou & Ray, 1997: 5)

It concentrates too much on women and periods; (HEA, 1999: 1)

Boys also commented that the content of sex education was mostly negative;

Don't do this, or this will happen ... (Lenderyou & Ray, 1997: 5)

The perceived focus on pregnancy and women's sexual health is not felt to be relevant by many boys. Their main concerns are quite different. Gathering anonymous questions from young people via a 'suggestion box' activity is a common approach to assessing needs in developing health education interventions. I have frequently observed teachers and health educators asking groups of young people to think of any question they have about sex and relationships, to write it down on a scrap of paper and to place it, anonymously, in a box or bag as a means of providing ideas for topics or issues they would like covered in a lesson. Sorting similar questions together into categories by sex produces interesting, if tentative, findings. The following emerged in the course of work I conducted in three co-educational comprehensive schools between 1997 and 1999. Altogether data were collected



from about 500 young people aged either 13 or 14. Eight principal categories of question emerge.

Almost all the questions about the penis and erections were asked by boys. The majority of questions were about the size of the average penis. This was supplemented by questions about whether their own penis was big enough. They also asked if it hard to get an erection, about impotence and ejaculation.

The second category of questions was about sexual acts. Again, almost all were asked by boys. They asked for descriptions of oral sex, masturbation and anal sex. They also asked about the range and number of possible positions for heterosexual sexual intercourse. They asked about which is the most pleasurable position, for both men and women, and how gay men and lesbian women have sexual intercourse.

The third category, in which almost equal numbers of questions were asked by boys and girls, was to do with puberty. The questions were usually seeking reassurance that the individual concerned was developing at the normal rate for their age. Boys focused on the growth of pubic and body hair and girls asked about breast size and menarche.

The fourth category of questions was about conception and contraception. Here, questions from girls formed the slight majority. Equal numbers of questions were about the signs of pregnancy and whether it was possible to conceive while menstruating. Others asked about abortion and the relative effectiveness of the contraceptive pill and the male condom. There were questions about the age at which it is legal to obtain or buy both the pill and condoms.

A fifth category of questions, again found nearly as commonly from boys as girls, related to the law. The majority asked for clarification about the age of consent to heterosexual sexual intercourse. Boys tended to ask why it only applied to girls and what the chances were of conviction if they had sex with a girl under the age of consent.

The sixth category of questions were almost all asked by girls and were about pressure from boys to have sexual intercourse. The penultimate group were all asked by girls and related to first heterosexual sexual intercourse. Fears about pain during sexual intercourse predominated. The final category was almost entirely from girls and was about discomfort and pain during menstruation.

Overall, the greatest number of questions was asked about sexual acts. Roughly equal numbers concerned masturbation, oral sex and other sexual acts, with fewer on sexual positions and homosexuality. There were nearly as many questions on conception and contraception; however, the range was much more limited. The third most numerous group of questions related to the penis and erections. The lowest number of questions was asked in the remaining categories and comprised about one- third of the total number of questions.

One should of course be cautious about the outcomes of this activity. There is no way to assess whether everyone made a contribution, or whether some made no contribution and others submitted two or more questions. Responses cannot be differentiated according to ethnicity, religious conviction or social class. Some young people may have submitted questions in order to amuse

themselves or their friends or to try and embarrass the teacher. The relative numbers of questions asked in each identified category are of less importance than the topics. That said, there is an evident divergence between the concerns of boys and girls. For boys, sex is a technical feat to be mastered and a repertoire of couplings to be discovered and tried. Girls concern themselves with repulsing unwanted sexual attention and harassment from boys and, when they engage with them, taking responsibility for the health and social consequences of intercourse.

Secondary schooling is not the initial source for gender stereotypical attitudes and beliefs among boys or girls, nor it is necessarily the main reinforcement during adolescence. Epstein (1997) has vividly described the reinforcement of what she terms “compulsory heterosexuality and of conventional gender relations” (p. 107) in her account of children’s memories of a pretend wedding in a primary school. In this pantomime, girls were dressed up as bridesmaids and a bride and acted out a marriage ceremony indulging in the explicit reproduction of normative heterosexuality, with its panoply of messages about femininity and masculinity as a desirable fantasy future. Brown (1995) has researched images of relationships, gender and sexuality, and adolescence with a range of primary school-aged children, and has shown that children frequently draw on stereotypical images of heterosexual couples to illustrate concepts of love and intimate relationships.

Illustrating gender as partly a product of physical differences between men and women has long been an important part of educating boys. Traditionally, gender and sexual roles have been portrayed as the social expressions of a natural order. As Reiss (1998b) has pointed out in his analysis of the representation of human sexuality in some science textbooks, the body remains important in maintaining male conceptions of sex, gender and sexuality. Reiss notes much sexism, usually taking the form of an assumption of heterosexuality and sex equating only with penetrative vaginal intercourse, within which women are mostly portrayed as “passive (supine) receptacles into which sperm are deposited” (p. 145). Much more time is dedicated to describing sexual intercourse from the point of view of the male rather than the female, and female orgasm was mentioned in only five of the 15 books reviewed. Bodies are always shown with the male penetrating lying on top of the female. In another study, Jewitt (1997) notes that, while some current sexual health posters and leaflets do attempt to emphasize aspects of male sexuality usually disregarded—notably sexual responsibility and competence—the overwhelming mass of images only serves to collude with conventional representations of masculinity. Men are shown as more active than women in the context of sex and “acting on their desire, women enforce sexual protection” (p. 3); men are also less knowledgeable. Jewitt also notes an important gender differentiation around settings where sexual health is addressed. Men are shown as having sexual control in public urban environments, as sexually dangerous, and women are shown in control in domestic settings. Finally, she highlights how male virility and sexual competitiveness are represented in the frequent symbolic imagery of sports, fast cars and motorbikes.

### **Male sexuality, status, power and control**

Proper heterosexual manhood involves being sexually competent and skilled at sexual intercourse with women. Boys see the acquisition and display of sexual knowledge and experience as lending them status, whereas the main sources of professional sex education—teachers, health educators and parents—want them to be considerate and responsible sexual partners. Some analysts of boys' reactions to school-based sex education have concluded that their acting up is an effect of feeling threatened by these messages. This might be so, but, I would maintain, not because such messages threaten boys' relationships with girls and femininity, but because they are incompatible with the way they structure relations between themselves. The management of discourses and performance about sex and sexuality are used as a way of jockeying for status with other boys. School capitalizes on much of the resources boys find for this. A major element in this is the body. There is good evidence (Peskin, 1967; Mussen & Jones, 1957) to show that boys entering puberty earlier than their peers acquire social advantages in terms of their degree of self-confidence, assurance and popularity. Their appearance is more likely to lead to them being selected or identified as leaders and given responsibility by adults. This reaction to male sexual development may contribute to the confusion experienced by young people about whether sexual maturity, including sexual experience, is socially valuable or not.

The added value of apparent sexual maturity through body size and early development is an essential component in the formation of male hierarchies in school. Formal and informal activities collude with or become arenas for the subversive establishment of body-based scales of status. Prendergast and Forrest (1998: 161) were struck by accounts frequently revolving around football. They describe one boy's report of a daily ritual as follows:

Every lunchtime a group of small boys played football on the school fields. They, like other groups of boys, had their particular patch, their place of occupation in the school space. A group of bigger boys often joined in with their game and took pleasure in getting the ball and keeping it from the smaller boys, who were unable to push them off or catch them when they ran away. In the game the big boys slid into tackles on the smaller boys, knocking them over. Some of the small boys slid into the big boys in return. The big boys laughed and got up. But, sometimes the big boys tackled the smaller boys with real viciousness, intending to hurt them.

Here, smallness is associated with feeling shame and inadequacy. There is really nothing a small boy can do to avoid or challenge the attention of the bigger boys. He is likely to become the target in a ritualized form of bullying in which boys learn they have to be submissive to physical power and to control their feelings. If a small boy loses his temper and kicks out he is likely to be hurt. The only way to gain status is to give in, accommodate and entertain the bigger boys, hoping that some of their bodily capital rubs off by association.

This kind of mobbing around a ritualised activity to acquire status with other

boys is what is going on in disrupted sex education lessons. Here, the main vehicle is sexualized joking. The aim is show group allegiance, feel strength and solidarity from being with other boys. This is achieved by entertaining them through ridiculing the subject, the teacher and other people in the room. A major component of this is aggressive heterosexism. This is no doubt stoked up by sex education provision which, for fear of political repercussions, shies away from correcting fallacious beliefs about homosexuality and instead promotes erroneous models of heterosexual sexual interaction.

Sex education provision and other cultural representations conspire in portraying 'real' sex as penetrative vaginal intercourse, and investing in this act a whole panoply of stereotypical beliefs, assumptions and attitudes about gender roles. Heterosexual male and female bodies are often constructed in the minds of boys as complementary (Forrest, 1997). Male bodies penetrate and females are penetrated. Male sexual desire and activity is hard, thrusting, ready and urgent. Females are softer, receptive, slow to arouse and more passive. Homosexuality comes therefore to be understood as a shift in gender constructs to fulfil these complementary, and apparently biologically essential, roles (Forrest, 2000).

The sum effect of these beliefs is to place sex and gender, especially the pursuit of an overt heterosexual masculinity, at the centre of schooling. Being male becomes about the control of self, but also of physical and psychic space. Girls and gays are both edged to the periphery in the pursuit of the trappings of a real manhood. It should be noted, however, that this is contested and engaged with in all sorts of ways by boys and girls. Not all boys at all times are caught up in the madness. In fact, it seems not to emanate from any one particular source, being the product of interactions between and within groups, and functioning to entertain as well as control. At times boys and girls both engage in playful inversions and pantomimes, seemingly acknowledging the silliness of the rigidly gendered sexual roles they utilize to survive. Rosenthal (1984) nicely dramatized an example of this kind of cathartic carnival in his play *P'Tang, Yang Kipperbang*, making fun of the powerfulness of adolescent masculinity by showing off a ritualized inversion of the rules of male and female engagement:

The routine is this: Eunice stands with her back to the wall, blowing bubble-gum, as the boys, their homework in their satchels, form a queue in front of her. Each boy, in turn then presses his body against Eunice's for a moment with complete absence of passion, then wanders from the room to go home. As each boy presses against her, Eunice—automatically and unconvincingly—complains: "Honestly, you're terrible/You boys, really!/A girl just isn't safe!/You're horrible ... it's every night, the same/I'm disgusted with you, truly I am ..."

## Conclusions

Secondary school sex education in England seems to be regarded by boys as incompatible with the stresses and strains placed upon them to express a

burgeoning, bludgeoning masculinity. The ritualized bullying, hectoring, denigration and showing off performed by male groups function as a testing ground for fixing rigid ideas about gender and sexual roles, and the pattern of relations between boys and girls, and boys and other boys. Boys' experience of this proving ground is complex. They often enter into problematic and challenging behaviour in sex education lessons while concealing profound concerns about sex and sexuality. Their behaviour is often understood as a failure to articulate their needs and anxieties, a fear of being shamed by showing ignorance or doubt. As Harre and Parrott (1996) point out, emotions, particularly those like shame and embarrassment, are social constructions performing functions of social control. The behaviour of boys in sex education classes can therefore be seen as an attempt to distance themselves from showing feelings which might place them at a social disadvantage with their male peers. Despite the apparent dominance of action over words, boys do express their concerns verbally, and it is through these accounts that insights can be gained into the direction sex education needs to take to engage them and address their needs.

MacLeod and Barter (1996) offer insight into this private world in their description of boys' calls to the telephone helpline, *ChildLine*. They report that few boys call in about pregnancy and partner relationships, more about domestic violence, offending and school worries, and a disproportionately high number about sexuality, drug use and abusing other children. However, of all calls, only 18% come from boys. They report that boys talk less when they call; they are less fluent and easy; and they are highly self-critical about having to seek help at all: "Real boys don't feel" (p. 14). MacLeod and Barter conclude that boys feel barred from talking because talk does not fit with their ideals of manhood, which run along the lines of "Boys act strong; they think it's soft to ask for help; Boys have to be tough, girls are more sensitive; Boys find it embarrassing and think it's their fault" (p. 30). Boys (mis)behaviour is troubling and difficult. However, as these authors sympathetically conclude (p. 32), "helping boys is important for future behaviour as men, fathers and family members".

What role can sexual relationships therapy and counselling play in providing this help? The importance to boys of using knowledge, experience and prejudices about sexuality to gain status within their male peer groups is evident. Therapeutic interventions ought to acknowledge that talking about sexuality and gender with men implies addressing their experience of relationships with other men in male peer groups as much as their experience of sexual relationships with individual women or men. In addition, there must be scope for dealing positively with male anxiety about sexual performance and showing that there is something enriching to be had from engaging in sex as part of emotional relationships. Boys' reluctance to use to health and welfare services suggests that promotional work might be undertaken aiming to inform them of the available help and support. There is a special need for easy-to-access support for young gay men. The visibility of the gendered body in boys' experiences of school and sex education suggests the need to take experiences of being big and small and of feelings of strength and vulnerability into account, and to encourage men to explore how their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour are reflected

and felt in their bodies. Finally, men might be helped to understand their experience of their masculinity and male sexuality by looking back on their experiences of sex education in school. Men could be helped to explore these experiences and see that they were not representative of essential truths about sex and gender, but products of a context which militated against showing their needs for fear of being seen as less of man.

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## Notes

- [1] In England and Wales, state school education is organized around three consecutive phases. Primary education begins at about five years old and ends at 10. Secondary schooling begins at 11 years old and goes on until 16. From 16 years onwards most young people now undertake further study in secondary schools or colleges of further education and may go on to higher education, usually provided through universities. For most this begins at age 18.
- [2] The majority of state funded schools are managed through local government which is prohibited from "intentionally promoting homosexuality as pretended family lifestyle". Repeal of this troublesome law, difficult to interpret and not strictly binding on schools but on the layer of local governmental management responsible for them, was, at the time of writing, undergoing an uneasy and uncertain passage through Parliament.
- [3] The National Curriculum provides a framework that describes what subjects should be taught in schools and includes targets for achievement at the end of four stages spanning the primary and secondary sectors. The Guidance on Health Education is a detailed plan for the organization of education about a range of health topics, including sexual health, across the subjects in this curriculum.

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### **Contributor**

SIMON FORREST, BA, MA, *Research Fellow*