Boys, teens can benefit from inclusion in common-interest groups

Social environment may help create a healthy male identity

By Georgia Hall and Linda Charmaraman

While inclusive grouping is an important part of building community in a youth development setting, there is also value in supporting development of common-interest groups that can offer a unique contribution toward growing and sustaining members of the group. For example, some out-of-school-time programs have created opportunities for girls to have time together as a group to socialize, talk about and process their experiences as girls growing up in this time and participate in mutual goal-setting or skill-building in some desirable domain without the interruption of gender bias or role sensitivity. Many schools or youth development organizations have facilitated a Latino Club or Gay/Straight Alliance to provide a nurturing and safe space for a particular set of youth to feel valued and supported. Program leaders should consider creating and fostering a common-interest group for boys.

Researchers at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) documented the interactions and experiences of a middle school boys’ after-school empowerment group during the 2009-2010 school year. The participants were between 12 and 15 years old from primarily African-American backgrounds (reflecting the school’s predominant racial-ethnic composition).

Facilitators describe the group as a “boys’
support group” that provided a forum for building friendships and setting mutual goals. Periodic after-school meetings were organized along with special outings and team-building activities. In addition, former members who had graduated were encouraged to return to the group to provide mentoring for current members and to continue relationship-building with the facilitators.

William Pollack, author of Real Boys, believes many of our nation’s schools are failing to meet the needs of male students by not giving enough attention to boy’s issues and challenges that surface in the school setting (Pollack, 1998). Some boys coping with violence in the community can show particular vulnerabilities to aggressive and risky behaviors. Exposure to violence in the community can take a toll on adolescence.

“Community violence destroys the notion that homes, schools and communities are safe places, and youths exposed to community violence have higher rates of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive problems. Witnessing community violence has emerged as a risk factor for all kinds of problems, from depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms to suicidal behaviors, aggression and violence” (Latzman & Swisher, 2005).

The process of establishing a healthy male identity can be difficult for many young boys. Males, in general, have limited definitions of masculinity available to them, mostly characterized by competition, repression of fear and emotion, and physical or emotional strength. Boys of color and those of lower economic status tend to encounter even fewer alternatives for defining their “maleness.” than white boys or boys of higher economic means (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 2010).

Providing space, time and support for boys to grow healthy identities, to come together, share information and work/play cooperatively can be a unifying and valuable experience. Boys in the NIOST study reported many positive impacts from their participation in the empowerment group including:

- Gaining respect for authority figures
- Establishing integrity — a consistency around their personal values, actions and principles
- Seeing a pathway toward future success
- Managing their states of anger or pride
- Improving grades/academic performance
- Taking responsibility for peers and keeping peers out of trouble
- Building and keeping healthy friendships and relationships

Establishing and supporting a boys’ empowerment group as part of an after-school program may have its challenges. Selection of the right group leader is key. Building the necessary group

Learn about NIOST’s findings related to effective program strategies and leadership qualities in the December issue of School-Age NOTES.
Social-emotional learning provides valuable development skills

By School-Age NOTES staff

Studies have shown that social and emotional learning (SEL) play a large role in child development. After-school programs provide a natural fit for SEL activities.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) at the University of Illinois at Chicago defines SEL as “a process for helping children and even adults develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness.”

CASEL identifies five basic sets of skills that are crucial to SEL and can be cultivated in a home, school or after-school setting. The skills are:

• Self-awareness: Identifying one’s thoughts, feelings and strengths and recognizing how they influence one’s choices and actions.

• Social awareness: Identifying and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others, respecting their rights and appreciating diversity.

• Self-management: Establishing and working toward short- and long-term goals, and handling emotions so that they encourage, rather than interfere, with the task.

• Responsible decision-making: Generating, implementing and evaluating positive and informed solutions to problems, and assuming responsibility for personal decisions and behaviors.

• Relationships skills: Communication, listening and negotiation skills to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding connections with individuals and groups (http://www.casel.org/basics/skills.php).

A new book on SEL — designed especially for use in after-school programs — will soon be available through School-Age NOTES. Social-Emotional Learning Activities for After-School and Summer Programs, by Susanna Palomares, features more than 75 activities designed to foster the five crucial skill sets identified by CASEL.

Palomares writes in the introduction:

While SEL may seem like the warm, fuzzy side of education, a growing body of research shows that social and emotional competence boosts academic achievement. SEL is not just about better social functioning. It’s also about achieving academically. When children possess self-management skills, understand how to get along with others, and build positive relationships, they show improvement on virtually every behavioral measure, including cognitive development and academic performance.

Research also indicates that children with well-developed SEL skills are better able to resist the perils of violence and crime, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, anxiety, eating disorders and teen pregnancy.

In addition to the dozens of activities provided in the book, Palomares offers tips for effective instruction so children get the most out of the activities. And while the activities are fun, reading, writing, listening and the development of speaking skills are integrated into the learning process.

See the box (above) for details on how to pre-order your copy of Social-Emotional Learning Activities for After-School and Summer Programs.

References


To order Discipline in School-Age Care — Control the Climate, Not the Children (8.95), go to www.schoolagenotes.com.

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These concepts do not refer only to the removal of architectural barriers but to modifying activity choices, room arrangements, social grouping or daily schedules to allow a child to participate in a program successfully. A program must document all the program modifications that were tried before expelling a child with a disability.

While even contemplating the need for an expulsion policy can be difficult, it is important. When handled carefully, such a policy can create good communication and a level playing field for all.

Reference


Dale Borman Fink is a professor of early childhood education and special education at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams, MA. He is also the author of Making a Place for Kids with Disabilities. He can be reached at info@schoolagenotes.com.

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dynamic and environment can take time. NIOST’s research findings about the benefits of participation in a boys’ empowerment group suggest that these are valuable steps worth taking.

Footnote

1. The after-school empowerment group met in the public school and was facilitated by a community-based youth worker and school staff member.

References


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