

JANUARY 2021: GENDER ISSUES

Five Strategies for Gender-Specific Groups

By Matthew McClain



The small-group setting not only allows students to be heard but also helps them gain perspective and strategies by hearing about others' experiences. Groups provide a safe environment for students to practice new skills, build healthy relationships and gain confidence by taking risks and sharing their thoughts. This is expanded even further when groups are gender-specific. Boys and girls often view things differently, and having a boys-only or girls-only group can go a long way toward group success.

1. Purpose and type: What type of a group do you want – and need – to run? Consider the needs of your specific population but also factor in what will make the most impact on your school counseling goals. Facilitating groups takes a lot of energy, commitment and intentionality, so it's best to select a topic or theme in which you're willing to invest your time and energy. Develop clear goals to ensure you're selecting appropriate activities for your specific participants that are also aligned with the group's purpose.

Make sure you know in advance what exactly you're hoping to accomplish with this group. Are you working on helping students develop social/emotional skills? Study skills? Coping strategies? Organizational skills? Self-advocacy? Something else?

2. Group make-up and balance: Depending on your specific objectives, you may want a group made of students with a variety of personalities, strengths and challenges. That way, students can learn new strategies from others who may be having more success in a particular area. However, a specific group just for students who have experienced loss or for others who need coping skills for anxiety or depression may be appropriate and extremely beneficial. Having a balance between those who are struggling and those who have had some success in any particular area can be helpful and empowering, regardless of the group's purpose/theme.

Select students who are at a similar developmental stage. For example, offer separate groups for sixth-grade girls and another for eighth-grade girls. This ensures you can address specific needs rather than the

conversation being too immature for some or too advanced for others. Another benefit of a gender-specific group is you can keep the conversation germane to one particular gender. I've found both body image and sexual harassment discussions work best when gender-specific, not only because boys and girls have such different experiences in these areas but also because the discussions, video clips and content could be uncomfortable for mixed-group participants.

Do you want to make it open to new members at any time or keep it closed for students who have been in the group since the beginning? For the most part, I'm a fan of closed groups – these allow participants to develop group norms, create safety and build rapport. However, if the group is focused on building academic skills, for example, an open group could work and be appropriate.

3. Group structure: Size really does matter when designing your group, and eight–12 members is ideal. This size allows you to manage the group dynamics and disruptive behaviors while also meeting individual needs in the group setting. Consider asking another school counselor to co-facilitate the group with you, or a faculty member with strong relationship skills. Not only is it helpful to you but this engagement is a great experience for your participants and the other facilitator.

Again, keep in mind that a room full of boys or a room full of girls can be very powerful – and chaotic. If possible, the group facilitator should be the same gender as the group members. When I had a girls group dealing with relational aggression, I asked a female colleague to facilitate the group, allowing it to stay homogeneous in gender. We do, however, find it helpful to sometimes bring in students from the opposite gender for a panel discussion. This gives group members a view of their group issue from the other gender's perspective.

If you have access to older students, having them co-facilitate with you can be effective – and enjoyable. For example, in a social skills group for fifth-grade boys, ask an eighth- or ninth-grade boy to join you as a group mentor. As fantastic and hip as you may be, the younger students are much more responsive to their knowing and cool near-peers.

4. Trust and safety: For your group to be successful, there has to be trust and safety within the group. This begins with creating guidelines/group norms. Draw from your own experiences with team-building and ice-breaker exercises, or check out the level-specific discussion forums on the ASCA SCENE for ideas and advice. Use your counseling skills by asking open-ended questions and encouraging students to talk. Your attitude will carry the group, whether you are hesitant or positive and enthusiastic.

5. Manage behaviors and group dynamics: Every behavior is an attempt to elicit a certain response or communicate a specific need. What may seem like misbehaving may actually be an attempt to be noticed or heard. For example, a student who seems to be disengaged might actually be confused and feeling devalued because his learning style is not being met. A student who may be falling asleep could appear bored but might actually need more activity and movement.

Instead of interpreting the behavior as disrespectful, ask yourself, "What does this student need right now? What is she trying to communicate to me or to the group?" By redirecting the behavior in a positive, caring way, you can address the disruption while also maintaining positive rapport. Ask the sleepy student to be a junior helper and take notes on the board. Ask the overly talkative student to encourage the person next to him to share his thoughts. These strategies help you turn what might be perceived as negative behavior into successful behavior, while also helping you without punishing the student.

If group members feel they are being punished or disciplined, they may feel shame, sadness or anger, which could result in more distracting behaviors and create tension between the facilitator and the child. If re-directing the behavior in the group setting does not work, have a one-on-one conversation with the particular student to offer encouragement and insight on how their behavior is affecting you or the group.

You might pull the student aside and say, “You are such a strong leader and usually have great input. Today it seems as if your negativity is taking over, and it is making me feel sad. What is one thing you can do to be more positive when we return to group?” Give the student another chance to change their behavior and re-join the group. Remember, the other group members are watching as you address the disruptive student, so patience, kindness and a smile will have a significant impact on the entire group. Some kids are just challenging. Having fun while learning will help manage behaviors for sure.

As we all know, having boys and girls in the same environment it changes the group dynamics, focus and level of comfort. By providing separate groups, we recognize the differences between genders and that each has specific needs that may require a different approach.

Matthew McClain is a school counselor at Baker Central School in Fort Morgan, Colo. He can be reached at mmcclain@coloradoschoolcounselor.org.

Mean Girls and Rough Boys

By Lisa Fulton



For years, my frustration grew as students ignored me during lessons on bullying to male and female students together. I'd introduce the topic. The students would all agree bullying was a significant problem. But nothing I taught them seemed to be making an impact.

But I noticed that male students would talk to me about how another boy just called them a name, teased them, pushed them and elbowed them in the hallway. Female students would tell me about a horrible rumor being spread about them or how they just found out someone was talking about them behind their back.

This revelation about the different ways boys and girls bully, and reading “Owning Up Curriculum: Empowering Adolescents to Confront Social Cruelty, Bullying and Injustice” by Rosalind Wiseman, got me to question my entire approach to bullying prevention. Maybe the problem was that male and female students experienced bullying differently. What might happen if, to teach bullying prevention, we separated the students into same-gender classrooms? What if we then focused on the different needs of our male and female students?

Girls, especially in middle school, tend to be more socially oriented than boys and form their identities around relationships with others. It only makes sense that female students use these relationships for “drama” – bullying other students by spreading rumors, gossiping and excluding their targets from social groups. Boys tend to experience more physical bullying than girls. Shoving, wrestling and even punching are a part of many boys’ daily routines. Although both groups experience verbal bullying, that also is expressed differently.

Together, my assistant principal and I created a four-lesson program targeting gender-specific bullying behaviors and prevention techniques. At the end of each school year, we examine what worked, what didn’t and update our lessons accordingly. Here’s an overview of our current bullying prevention program.

Lessons in Action

We begin by pointing out that the classroom is same gender and asking why that might make sense in terms of bullying. Students quickly bring up the differences in how boys and girls experience bullying. We then move on to helping the students define and recognize what is or is not bullying. We explain that bullying is an intent to do harm that is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power between the bully and the target. In this first lesson, we also cover the three types of bullying: verbal, physical and social. We explain these concepts with gender-specific movie clips. The boys see clips from movies such as “Back to the Future,” “The Any Bully” and “Cheaper by the Dozen.” Girls see clips from “Mean Girls,” “The Clique” and “Odd Girl Out.” At the end of each clip, we lead discussions to identify the bully and the target, what type of bullying was occurring and what actions the students could take to help combat those behaviors. These discussions serve as a springboard for the future lessons.

The second lesson focuses on the different roles all students play in bullying: bully, sidekick, supporter, disengaged onlooker, possible defender, champion and target. Our goal is to help the students identify the role, or roles, they play in the bullying process. Although the roles are the same for both genders, this lesson helps them see the roles in the bullying situations that occur for their gender. We also address how all students need to take responsibility for their actions in the bullying that takes place within the school. It is important for students to understand that by watching someone get bullied and doing nothing to try to stop it, they are at least partly responsible for the ongoing problem.

The third lesson is the most gender-specific – and perhaps the most important. I have observed that middle school bullies frequently seem completely unaware of the true impact of their behavior. Our goal in this lesson was to help students who’d been engaging in bullying behavior to see the results of their actions from their target’s point of view.

When working with female students, the lesson focuses on rumors and gossip. We want the girls to understand how gossip and rumors can often manifest as bullying behavior and how they can help prevent the drama. By playing the classic telephone game, the girls can see how sharing true gossip (at the time) or false rumor can lead to hurt feelings and misinformation. We teach girls assertiveness techniques and conflict-resolution skills to deal with problems, rather than spreading rumors about each other.

The male unit is about perspective and the difference between bullying and teasing. It begins with the classic “young lady or old woman” picture and “The True Story of the Three Little Pigs,” with the goal of teaching the importance of perspective and a different point of view can give a completely new understanding of an event. Too often, a male student will mercilessly tease another, only to finish with a “just joking.” We encourage boys to look at those situations from the target’s point of view and ask themselves if “just joking” will really make the target’s hurt go away.

Lesson four addresses the actions of the supporters, disengaged onlookers, possible defenders and champions. Again, the objectives are similar for both the male and female lessons, but we use gender-specific

situations. Students are presented different scenarios and determine as a group the possible actions that could be taken to help the target and combat the bullying behavior.

The female lesson has an additional component to demonstrate the impact of exclusion. Students receive an index card with an animal name on it, and then must form groups without speaking. To set up the activity, one card should have the name of an animal that is not on another card. Thus, as groups are forming, one student always ends up in a group by herself. As the lesson continues, we discuss how one girl is alone, showing how exclusion hurts and how girls routinely exclude other girls from classroom work groups, from the lunch table and from social events.

After the Lessons

Once the lessons are over, the students' challenge becomes implementing what we've taught them. Our challenge is figuring out to what extent the students are succeeding. We give each student pre- and post-tests and use the results to determine how much the students' behaviors have changed as a result of the class.

Like the lessons themselves, the pre- and post-tests have both gender-neutral and gender-specific questions. Over the years, we've consistently found that our targeted lessons have produced positive results on gender-specific topics. In a recent year, we saw a 114 percent increase from pre-test to post-test in girls' understanding of the connection between gossiping and bullying, and 23 percent of girls said they'd witnessed fewer incidents of bullying following the program completion. These results have convinced us that using same-gender classrooms works for bullying prevention lessons in middle school.

Lisa Fulton is a school counselor at Eastern Lebanon County Middle School and the Pennsylvania School Counselor Association president-elect. She can be reached at lfulton@elcosd.org.

A Crisis of Confidence

What 10,678 Girls Think About Themselves, Their Abilities and Their Opportunities

By Lisa Hinkelman, Ph.D.

What do girls need to be successful? When I posed this question to parents, educators and school counselors, I heard many different responses: Grit, education, intelligence, stability, opportunity, caring adults, determination – but more than anything else, I heard the word “confidence.” When I asked more than 10,000 girls the same question in the national research survey, [The Girls' Index](#), the word that they cited most frequently was also “confidence.”

Confidence is a central tenet of decision making. Individuals who are confident make more sound decisions in nearly every aspect of their lives – from relationships, to academics, to careers. A confident person is less likely to stay in an unhealthy dating relationship. They are more likely to challenge themselves with rigorous coursework. They can more easily envision themselves occupying a leadership role or a prestigious occupation.

The Girls' Index research also showed that confidence is an area where girls struggle tremendously. Between fifth and ninth grade, girls' confidence declines sharply and does not return to pre-middle school levels. During

this same time, the percentage of girls who do not think they are smart enough for their dream job doubles from 23 percent to 46 percent. Think about that for a moment. By the time girls are in high school, nearly *half* of them are questioning their abilities and their opportunities.

Unfortunately, intelligence and achievement do not fend off confidence challenges. In fact, among girls with grade point averages of 4.0 or higher, 30 percent don't think they are smart enough for their dream job. Regardless of girls' actual abilities, they don't necessarily see their own potential or performance. Girls prove themselves to be highly capable and competent, yet despite their achievements, they continually disregard their abilities and downplay their intelligence. Girls are more likely than boys to believe that certain careers are out of their reach and that sharing their opinions will mean that others won't like them.

We are missing out on the voices, opinions and contributions of girls, not because they don't have anything to share, but because they are continually questioning themselves and their abilities. For girls, it is not their *competence* that is lacking; rather, it is their *confidence*.



With confidence so central to success, we must create intentional and systematic opportunities to build girls' confidence. In the same way that we help girls with study skills, stress management, college applications and coping skills, we must help them build their belief in their own skills and abilities. This is not something that we should think of as "nice to do if we can find the time" – it should be prioritized as something that is critical to successful student outcomes.

We create opportunities for girls to build their confidence by ensuring they have *experiences* that allow them to try new things, bolster their efficacy and overcome challenges. We should provide them with safe environments to take risks, use their voice, share their opinions and experience themselves being successful. We can reinforce their efforts and support their growth by giving them targeted and substantive feedback, not by simply complimenting them.

Compliments do not build confidence. Compliments are fleeting comments that do little to substantively mold and shape core behaviors or skills. Girls tend to receive many more compliments than boys do, with the majority focused on beauty and outward appearances. We can easily over-rely on the impact of compliments as a mechanism for building confidence and innocently comment on clothing, weight or hairstyle in an effort to bolster self-perception. Although hearing compliments feels nice, we must ensure that we do not misattribute the value of a compliment as a building block toward confidence.

As school counselors, our responsibilities are vast and varied. We are charged with supporting the social/emotional needs of students, advocating for social justice and positioning our students for the best postsecondary options. How we interact with and educate girls now will determine who and what they become in the future. Our investment will dictate whether or not girls see themselves as capable, whether or not they speak their mind and share their opinion, whether or not they reach for the opportunity that seems like a big stretch and whether or not they strive for that leadership role. We have the chance to change the trajectory of girls' lives by instilling confidence, cultivating leadership and supporting risk-taking.

To develop a deeper understanding of your school's girls, you can [apply to participate](#) in the next iteration of The Girls' Index survey. This underwritten project provides participant schools with custom data collection and analysis, including a summary report and recommendations and strategies on how to support girls' social/emotional learning needs.

Lisa Hinkelman, Ph.D. is a counselor, educator, researcher, author and is the founder of [Ruling Our eXperiences \(ROX\)](#), the national nonprofit leader in programming, research and education focused on girls. She is the author of the new book "[Girls Without Limits: Helping Girls Achieve Success in Relationships, Academics, Careers and Life](#)" (2nd edition), Corwin Press, and is the principal researcher of [The Girls' Index: New Insights into the Complex World of Today's Girls](#). Contact her at research@rulingourexperiences.com.

100 Males to College: Bound for Greatness

By Leticia Boyles, Ed.D., and Anne Dillard



Participants in a 100 Males to College workshop

Low-income males and males of color face gender and racial gaps in academic readiness and college participation. Worrying college enrollment trends, shown in National Clearinghouse data, indicate a decline in minority males' college going and college completion. Equity is integral to college and career access and higher education is critical in promoting social and economic mobility and evolving democratic citizenry ([Brookings Institute](#)). A postsecondary credential is vital to addressing equity in the workplace ([College Board – Education Pays 2019](#)). Data also shows attainment and achievement gaps for first-generation students of

color, especially young men. In our community, our call to action as school counselors was to change this trajectory. To make a positive impact on these underrepresented populations, school counselors have been engaged in the Springfield Public Schools (SPS) 100 Males to College program to increase entry and completion of postsecondary education to help meet Massachusetts' growing need for a diverse, educated and skilled citizenry.

In spring 2015, SPS was the first district in the commonwealth to launch 100 Males to College with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. The program is a multi-sector collaboration with higher education institutions, high schools, and district and community leaders. Using data to target the most at-promise (rather than "at-risk") and underrepresented male students across the district, the program begins with 10th and 11th graders, supporting the cohort through high school and to college or career. The program provides college and career exposure and internal school supports through a positive youth development model that embraces culture and identity. Program highlights include:

- designated success coach at the high school
- connections with college students and college staff
- courageous conversations about male identity and culture
- career and college planning support
- financial literacy and FAFSA assistance
- college and/or university campus experiences, including an overnight stay
- free dual enrollment courses
- community service



Students tour an HBCU campus.

Students participate in experiential activities that are multidisciplinary, developmental and relevant. These experiences emphasize the importance of rigor (doing well academically), relevance (connections between academic planning, career aspirations and why college is important), and relationships (understanding the importance of relationships with teachers, school counselors, parents and peers to assist with college aspirations). This program explores and identifies multidisciplinary ways to help the young men understand what it takes to enroll in college, persist in college and complete college.

The Springfield Public Schools Model

SPS's 100 Males to College program continues to provide young men in our community with access and opportunities to develop competence, confidence, connection, character and compassion to increase outcomes through service, opportunity and supports (see www.edmentoring.org). As of May 2019, 510 students have participated in this program with SPS. Out of the class of 2019 cohort, 100 percent graduated, 20 percent enrolled in dual enrollment, 80 percent enrolled in college, 16 percent chose career pathways, two percent enrolled in CTE programs and two percent enlisted in the military. Although these young men did not all choose the same path, the connections they have made with each other will be long lasting.



Program participants march in the local Puerto Rican Day parade.

This school-base model allows SPS's 100 Males to College program to utilize intentional resources within the district to provide additional support to students (such as Springfield Promise Program, Summer Melt and Reach Higher). We develop individualized postsecondary success plans for each student. Each high school's recruitment process begins at the end of 10th grade with a short presentation and interest meeting, and interest levels are high enough to typically require a waiting list. Students express wanting to be a part of this brotherhood and describe the contributions they will bring to the program. Each high school has approximately 20 participants, and students are actively engaged during their junior and senior year. Across the district, more than 100 students participate in the program each year. At each school, success coach teams include at least one school counselor and one or two teachers. The success coaches conduct frequent check-ins with participants and hold and monthly school-based meetings.

Affirming Our WHY

The 100 Males to College program provides opportunities for these young men to celebrate and uplift each other. Moreover, the knowledge and beliefs they gain around identity and development of positive masculinity increases their ability to model and produce behaviors that build communities and strengthen families. A series of student engagement activities over a two-year span leads to the culminating Annual Bow Tie Ceremony (photo below). To witness the multiple opportunities for these young men to love and support each other is memorable. Throughout the duration of the program and beyond, these young men have the opportunity to build strong friendships and lasting relationships, utilize personalized success plans, redefine masculinity and increase participation in dual enrollment. They have provided the exemplar for expanded programs in Brockton, Salem, Framingham and Worcester districts. Not to be left behind, three young women in our district, Damahya Mongroo, Briyanna Henry and Mahoro Shimiro, asked, "What about us?" This led to the creation of the similar SPS College Bound Girls group.



Leticia Boyles, Ed.D., and Anne Dillard are Springfield Public Schools school counseling department chairs, success coaches for 100 Males to College/College Bound Girls, and adjunct professors at Springfield College. Both have received the Harold Grinspoon Teacher of Excellence Award. Dr. Boyles is also the “effective educator coach” for new school counselors in the district and is based at the High School of Science and Technology in Springfield, Mass. She is the associate editor-in-chief of the Interdisciplinary Journal of Advances in Research in Education. Mrs. Dillard is based at Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical Academy, also in Springfield.

Gender 101

By Charles Williams

The first step in beginning to understand gender is to get rid of the box. We have been taught that things are either black or white, boy or girl, masculine or feminine. Now we know that there is gray between the black and white, and the gray terms students – and adults – use to describe gender are ever changing and evolving.

Sex

“Sex assigned at birth” is the child’s sex as identified by a medical professional, and this assignment is based on the sexual organs that have developed. Common terms are male and female. Intersex is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. This is more common than we think – 1.7 percent of people are born intersex, while just 0.3 percent of people have a twin. In these cases, parents usually choose the gender of the child based on the sex organs that are more pronounced.

Gender Identity

Gender identity, by definition, is an individual's personal sense of having a particular gender. In simple terms, it is the gender they see when they look in the mirror. Gender identity is determined by each person, not by science, culture or their parents. Students may see themselves as more masculine or feminine, or may even see themselves having characteristics that would be considered both male and female. Cisgender male/female means a person's gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth. Transgender male/female means a person's gender identity is different than their sex assigned at birth. Gender nonconforming, nonbinary, genderqueer, and gender fluid are some terms used for people whose gender identity goes between both male and female, and it may or may not match their sex assigned at birth. The definition of the terms used by a gender nonconforming individual is set by that person. A person who identifies as genderqueer may have a different definition from another person who identifies using the same term. Assume the person is the expert in their own identity and seek to understand what they see and not what society tells you.



Gender Expression

Gender expression is the way in which a person outwardly expresses their gender identity, typically through their appearance, dress and behavior. This is where students tend to get into trouble and it may cause issues at school. Students may use terms such as masculine, feminine, androgynous, butch, queen or many others to describe their style and sometimes behavior. Fashion and social media are influencing what is appropriate for certain expressions; some of our students follow those trends and some do not. Consider a girl with a short haircut who could be labeled as a tomboy or some other masculine descriptor. She may very well identify as female and just like wearing her hair short. Her expression of gender is up to her and not dependent on others' expectations. The same applies to boys with long hair. For example, the man bun is now popular, but had a completely different meaning 20 years ago.

Another major aspect of expression is preferred name and pronouns. A person's name and pronouns hold significant meaning and value to the individual. As school counselors, it is important for us to ensure all students are called by their preferred name/pronouns. If we allow student to choose their preferred nickname (such as Zachary going by Zack), any other student should be allowed that same right, and we should respect the choices students make about how they wish to be addressed.

Here are typical pronouns:

- Masculine: he, him, his

- Feminine: she, her, hers
- Gender nonconforming: they, them, theirs

As school counselors, it is important for us to make sure that *all* expressions of identity are accepted in our buildings. Stereotypes and biases are due to individuals holding on to the certain ideas of male vs. female, especially regarding outward appearance and behaviors. Take a moment to think about some of the common stereotypes our society imposes on gender roles. These generalizations cause anxiety for the average student, so you can imagine the struggle for a student who does not fit the box of gender stereotypes, or chooses not to fit in a box. I urge you to challenge those stereotypes and microaggressions in your building by remembering that *all* students deserve to be respected and feel safe while expressing who they are.

Charles Williams presented on this topic at the 2020 ASCA conference. He is an elementary school counselor at Solar Preparatory School for Boys in Dallas, Texas. Contact him at chwilliamsjr@dallasisd.org.