



How Adolescent Boys Learn: Tailoring Prevention Messages

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Many curricula used by Personal Responsibility Education Programs (PREP) focus on females. These curricula seldom mention the consequences of early fatherhood and often emphasize female-centered contraception (Hilton, 2001). Compared with female adolescents, male adolescents are less likely to report receiving information about sexual health in general and from parents and teachers specifically (Donaldson et al., 2013). In addition, recent data show a number of gender-based disparities across the education system that put boys at a learning disadvantage and can impact their health outcomes:

- Boys are much more likely than girls to receive any type of disciplinary action in school, including in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion (GAO, 2018).
- Compared with girls, boys are five times more likely to be classified as hyperactive (diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD] or Attention Deficit Disorder [ADD]) and 30% more likely to fail a grade level or drop out of school (Aud et al., 2011).
- Girls outperform boys in grades and homework at all levels (Aud et al., 2011).
- Gender disparities in academics are associated with poorer health among youth, with greater disparities connected to poorer health outcomes (Levine, 2019).

These data indicate that the education system in general is not meeting the learning needs of boys. Given the lack of information young men receive about sexual health, there is an increased need to work across disciplines to ensure that young men have the information they need to promote positive health outcomes (SAHM, 2018). This tip sheet explores gender-based developmental differences that can impact boys' learning and examines strategies facilitators can use to better meet the learning needs of boys in their PREP programming. This tip sheet also provides specific tips for working with boys involved in the juvenile justice system.

DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS

Although individual developmental trajectories vary for all boys and girls, there are some notable group-level differences that may impact how boys learn in the classroom. For example, there are multiple periods of rapid brain development for all children—between ages 0–3 and in adolescence—and the speed at which development occurs can differ between boys and girls. In fact, although the pre-frontal cortex (the decision-

making center of the brain) is not fully mature until young adulthood, this maturation often happens faster among girls than boys. As a result, boys may have greater challenges adapting to change and preventing emotional outbursts in the classroom compared with girls.

Because of differences in the timing of maturation, boys may have a lesser ability to manage impulses compared with girls of the same age. Higher testosterone levels in boys can also lead to behavior that is more active, fidgety, restless, competitive, and aggressive—characteristics that can create challenges for educators in a classroom setting (Leanderson, 2006). There is also evidence to suggest that teachers’ expectations of student achievement and behavior are important predictors of student outcomes, suggesting that perceptions of misbehavior or lack of interest in a particular topic can disadvantage boys (Lavy, 2008; Papageorge & Gershonson, 2016). Thus, addressing implicit bias specifically as it relates to boys’ interest in PREP programming might be an important consideration for facilitators.

ADDRESSING DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES IN THE CLASSROOM

Integrating gender-appropriate teaching methods into sex education aligns with best practices for teaching across all disciplines. For example, educators should use a mixture of teaching methods that appeal to all learning styles: visual, auditory, verbal, physical, logical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Gardner, 1983).

Strategies for Addressing Gender-Based Developmental Differences in Mixed-Gender Settings		
Different Sensory Experiences	Controlling the Physical Setting of the Classroom	Adapting Classroom Instruction to Meet the Needs of Learners
It has been found that boys tend to have sharper vision, but they also may be more likely to experience color blindness.	Print materials on easy-to-recognize sheets of primary colored paper. This helps boys and girls easily identify assignments and instructions for various tasks.	Consider color blindness if you are using colors to split up groups. Boys may not recognize slight color differences like shades of red vs. orange or yellow vs. gold.
Many boys tend to be kinesthetic and tactile learners.	Create opportunities for active participation and learning by doing.	Reduce the amount of time devoted to lectures and offer opportunities for movement during the lesson.
It has been found that boys may have less sensitive hearing as a result of physiological differences in the ear canal.	Be aware of sound volumes in the classroom. Boys may respond well to background music with words during activities, whereas girls may respond better to soft classical music.	Consider including a copy of written instructions to accompany oral instructions for all activities in class. You can also post written instructions at the front of the room as a reference.
Research suggests that boys may have a lower tolerance for brighter light.	Take note of the time of day and the placement of windows in a classroom. Boys may be sensitive to bright lights and request to have the blinds shut or the lights dimmed.	Consider flashing the lights to signal for quiet or to end a group activity and have students return to their seats. Boys may respond more quickly to this than to a verbal announcement.

Although there is research supporting both same-gender and mixed-gender classes as preferred learning environments, often facilitators do not have a choice (Robinson & Smithers, 1999). These circumstances may

be dictated by state, local, or individual school policy, particularly when implementing programs in schools. Overall, creating a nonjudgmental space for all learners can be helpful for ensuring that both boys and girls are able to fully engage with and learn from the program materials.

A Note About Programs

Programs that work for boys often address adolescent sexual behavior by going beyond the classroom, such as incorporating service learning, including a cultural component tied to program effectiveness, and extending the program across school years (Marsiglio et al., 2006).

Programs should consider including male facilitators or role models who might participate in specific discussions or lessons. In fact, recent research underscores the importance of having male facilitators who are able to connect with adolescent men and provide a safe space where they can ask questions and connect with resources about adolescent pregnancy prevention (Child Trends, 2019). Pregnancy prevention programs should also consider the context of the adolescent men in their programs, including the presence of racism in their lives, particularly for young men of color, and how it impacts their relationships with adults, peers, and romantic partners (Child Trends, 2019). Perceptions about the impact of early pregnancy may vary depending on culture and context. Some research suggests that in high-poverty communities with lower-than-average life expectancy, early childbearing combined with extended family support can be seen as beneficial for the community (Geronimus, 2004). Programs should consider these various perspectives when considering implementation of a pregnancy prevention program.

Another important contextual factor to consider in programming for adolescent men is the social concept of masculinity and how perceptions of masculinity may impact health and health information-seeking behavior both broadly and related to adolescent pregnancy prevention (Collins et al., 2017). Masculinity—a set of shared social beliefs about how men should present themselves and generally supports notions of physical toughness, self-reliance, and dominance—has been found to be associated with increased risk behaviors related to sexual health for young men (Collins et al., 2017; SAHM, 2018; Silver & Bauman, 2014). As a result, there has been an increased interest in developing programs that address masculinity in the curricula (CDC, 2018; Child Trends, 2019).

COMMON MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT BOYS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUALITY

Many stereotypes about adolescent boys are perpetuated by youth and adults alike. Some common themes emerge through the media and in classroom conversations, including that relationships do not matter to boys, that girls are the only ones who feel pressure to have sex, and that preventing pregnancy is not a priority for boys. However, surveys with boys suggest that these stereotypes are myths. Educators should keep the following in mind:

- Six percent of young adult men who had sex as a teenager reported that they really did not want it to happen at the time, and more than one-fourth report mixed emotions about their sexual experience during their adolescent years (NCHS, 2017).
- The vast majority of adolescent boys (80%) say they would be a little or very upset if they got a girl pregnant now (Abma & Martinez, 2017).

Educators can highlight these data during role plays, discussions, and other activities to help make programming more resonant and authentic for boys.

A Note About Media

As educators plan programming in the classroom, they should consider the impact of the media on boys' social and emotional development. The media may have a particularly strong influence on adolescent boys' attitudes

and decisions about sex (Albert, 2012). Research shows that African American youth report that the media portrays them negatively in situations related to sex and relationships compared with white youth (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2011). Therefore, African American youth need support navigating the conflicting messages they receive from the media vs. other sources like school and family.

Data on the impact of social media on sexual health outcomes are limited, but there is some evidence that social media can influence perceptions of body image and self-objectification and willingness to participate in casual sex (Collins et al., 2017). Facilitators should consider incorporating activities in their lessons that use media, like discussing celebrity relationships through role play or small group conversations or bringing in advertisements for popular brands to use as visuals when discussing gender norms.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATION: YOUTH INVOLVED IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

In recent years, arrest rates have been decreasing for both male and female youth ages 10 to 17 years, but there is still a disproportionate number of boys in the juvenile justice system (OJJDP, 2012). According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in 2018, for a variety of complex reasons, boys 10 to 17 years of age experienced more than twice the arrest rate of girls in the same age group (OJJDP, 2012). Some boys in the juvenile justice system report benefits to becoming a parent during adolescence, and research findings also indicate that the status of adolescent fatherhood can be instrumental in facilitating positive and productive life changes (Kelly et al., 2008), which is notably different from girls in the juvenile justice system and in stark contrast to the motivation to avoid pregnancy seen among youth in the general population (Albert, 2012). There are two programs designed specifically for incarcerated youth: [Sexual Health and Adolescent Risk Prevention](#) and the [Rikers Health Advocacy Program](#). These and other evidence-based programs can be implemented with youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Consider the following tips from experts who work with male youth involved in the juvenile justice system to prevent adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Note that these tips can apply to any program implementation setting, not only those serving young men in the juvenile justice system.

- Keep programs as interactive as possible.
- Keep session/program length short.
- Train facility staff to implement programs so youth see familiar faces.
- Provide incentives like grooming aids, additional phone calls, or other rewards. Ask youth what they would like.
- Provide youth with a certificate of completion that they can take pride in and share with a judge or parole officer.
- Co-facilitate sessions with male and female staff members so youth get varied perspectives.
- Consider the greater context of participants' lives and how that influences their behavior.
- Allow youth the freedom to express themselves using language they feel comfortable with, while sticking to ground rules and minimizing bragging.
- Rephrase comments and questions to be general. Use terms like *youth* instead of *you*.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- If the concepts of abstaining from sex or waiting to have sex are foreign to participants, refer to sessions on healthy relationships to inform discussion.
- Use same-gender role play when facilitating groups of all males, or have a female facilitator play a female role.
- Have a positive regard for the youth and build trust with participants to create buy-in.
- Demonstrate comfort with the topic of sexuality.
- Be aware of diverse literacy levels.
- Ask youth for ideas for real-world scenarios.
- Be aware of referral systems and protocols for the agency in which you are implementing.

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