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Reframing masculinity for young men and boys

A resource for parents/carers,
educators, and professionals

Dr Sophie King-Hill

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We activate

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Author research and project insights

Dr. Sophie King-Hill is an Associate Professor at the University of Birmingham. Her research focusses on masculinity, sexual health, harmful sexual behaviours and youth wellbeing.

Dr Sophie King-Hill's work with masculinities focusses upon understanding and reshaping how young men and boys' experience and express masculinity, particularly in relation to relationships, self-esteem, well-being, violence, and mental health. Her approach is participatory and interdisciplinary, involving young people directly in the design and delivery of interventions. This ensures that the voices of boys and young men are heard and valued, helping to challenge harmful stereotypes and create environments where diverse expressions of masculinity are accepted and supported. Her research also addresses how social and cultural norms influence both the behaviour and mental health of young men and boys', highlighting the importance of compassionate, strength-based approaches in homes, youth settings, and communities by combining rigorous academic study with practical application. The following research projects were led by Dr Sophie King-Hill and underpin the content of this resource. Each study offered practical insights into how boys and young men experience masculinity, mental health, sexual behaviours, relationships, and education.

The Voice of Boys Project: Engaged boys aged 13–19 in qualitative research on masculinity, identity, and consent. [Joint funded by the ESRC IAA and AHRC IAA University of Birmingham and the Institute for Global Innovation]

Listening to Youth Voice in Relationships, Sex and Health Education: Participatory approach of a co-designed RSHE resource with a group of predominantly boys aged 14–15. [Funded by the ESRC IAA University of Birmingham, see QR code below for the resource]

Amplifying Youth Voice Through Graffiti and Protest Art:

Used protest art to help predominantly boys aged 15–16 explore the importance of being heard through participatory and co-design approaches [Funded by ESRC IAA University of Birmingham]

Understanding Incel Behaviour: An exploration language and behaviour in online Incel communities. [Funded by the Institute for Global Innovation].

Sexually Harmful Behaviour in Young Men and Boys: Analysis of helpline calls concerning sexual issues among young people aged 13 to 18. [Funded by the ESRC NI grant]

Sexual Behaviours in children and young people: Survey of over 1200 young people (including 350 boys) aged 13–18 on their sexual behaviours [Funded by the ESRC NI grant]

Masculinity and Inclusion in the Fire Service: A qualitative study on how masculinity shaped culture and wellbeing in a regional fire and rescue service. [Funded by the Institute for Advanced Studies].

Ethical approval was gained for all of the studies from the University of Birmingham.

A more comprehensive analysis of these studies, together with an in-depth exploration of the central themes presented in this resource, can be found in: King-Hill, S. (2025). Reframing Masculinity for Young Men and Boys: We're in This Together. Palgrave Macmillan.

Find out more:

birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/departments/health-services-management-centre/research/a-students-guide-to-what-you-dont-know

Introduction:

Reframing masculinity for young men and boys

Across homes, education and youth settings and diverse communities, many boys today are grappling with how masculinity is defined and expressed.

These identities often reward toughness, emotional control, and independence while discouraging vulnerability, empathy, and emotional openness. In a fast-moving, digital world, these narrow expectations can leave boys feeling judged, confused, or disconnected from their true selves.

Reframing masculinity means rethinking these narratives and replacing them with an understanding of the complex identities of individuals and taking a more compassionate, inclusive approach to what it means to be a young man or boy. It's not about rejecting masculinity—it's about expanding it positively.

This resource is for anyone who supports boys and young men and boys such as: parents, carers, educators, youth workers, mentors, and professionals. It offers insight into the daily challenges young men and boys may face and why, and provides practical ways to support their emotional development and sense of identity. The way masculinity is framed in families, schools, media, and peer groups has a real impact on young men and boys' wellbeing. When boys and young men feel pressure to hide their emotions, they may struggle to connect, communicate, or ask for help. But when those around them adopt a more nuanced and supportive approach, boys are more likely to become confident, emotionally aware, and engaged. Reframing perspectives allows boys and young men to explore their identities freely, express emotions without shame, and develop healthy relationships rooted in mutual respect and understanding for the good of all genders.

Many boys and young men feel pressure to live up to damaging ideals because it is seen as the most respected and valued way to become a man. This can make young men and boys worry about fitting in and being accepted. Being seen as a man isn't something you get once and keep forever. Instead, it has certain components:

- Earning manhood by proving damaging masculine traits — for example: taking dangerous risks
- Keeping manhood by acting tough and following certain rules — for example: avoiding vulnerability
- Proving manhood if others question or challenge you — for example: getting into fights or sexually harassing others to elevate status.

Because of these pressures, boys may hide their feelings, act tough even when they don't feel that way, or take risks to prove themselves.



Unpacking the roots of masculinity

Masculinity isn't something fixed or solely innate – it has changed a lot over time and is shaped by history, culture and the expectations society places on boys and men.

Many long-standing and culturally inherited ideas about what it means to be a man still influence young men and boys today. These outdated views often encourage boys to act tough, hide their feelings, or try to control others. Understanding where these ideas come from is important for challenging narrow stereotypes. Parents, carers, educators, youth workers, and all professionals who support boys play a vital role in breaking cycles that link masculinity with aggression, silence, or emotional suppression. Boys today face pressure to live up to certain masculine ideals that may not fit who they really are. Recognising that there are many ways to be a boy or young man helps create welcoming and supportive environments for all children and young people.

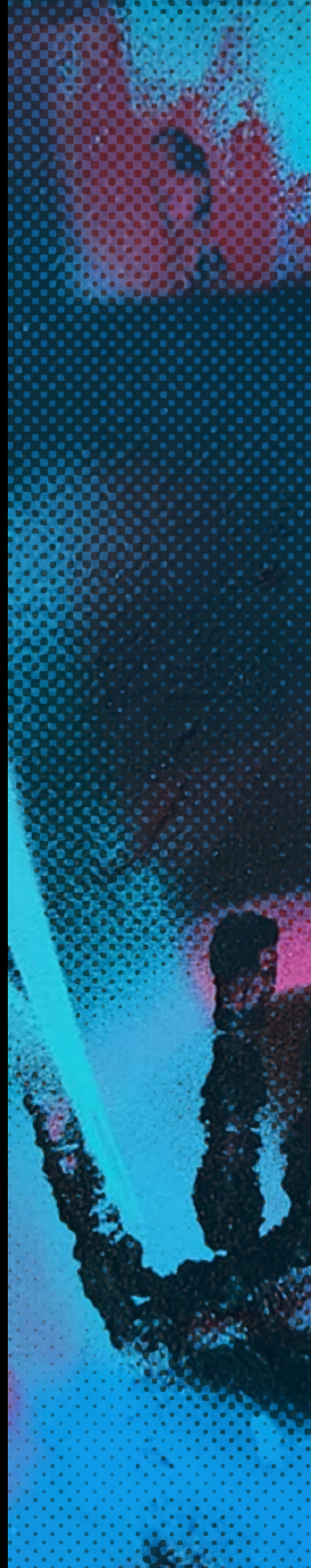
How this impacts on young men and boys

- Boys may act out or withdraw if they feel they always have to prove their masculinity.
- Some young men and boys quietly struggle with a conflict between who they are and who they feel they have to be because they fear being seen as weak.
- Not all young men and boys fit rigid masculine norms or feel comfortable adhering to them – yet may feel pressured to conform to them.
- There's a lot more to a young man or boy's identity than just gender—things like ethnicity, social class, culture, experiences, and sexuality all play a part. But these aspects are often ignored, not given the attention they deserve or overshadowed by masculine expectations

Practical steps for supporting young men and boys

- **Challenge stereotypes:** Talk openly about different ways to express masculinity without condemning positive masculine identities.
- **Model emotional honesty:** Show care, vulnerability, and empathy in your own behaviour and reflect upon how you perceive masculinity.
- **Check your environment:** Look for gender bias or outdated ideas in books, displays, language, and routines.
- **Use stories and history:** Help boys understand how ideas about masculinity have changed over time that relates to community and culture.
- **Create inclusive spaces:** Support activities and groups where boys can connect beyond competition or sports.
- **Provide safe spaces:** Encourage boys and young men to explore who they are without pressure to fit a strict idea of masculinity and feel they can talk openly and honestly without fear of retribution.

Recognising how outdated ideals of masculinity affect boys today allows for more acceptance, reducing harm and encouraging confidence, respect, and equality.





What masculinity looks like for young men and boys today

Young men and boys today receive many mixed messages about what it means to be male from areas such as the media, family, culture and social expectations.

Some are told to be tough, while others are encouraged to express their feelings and respect boundaries. This often causes confusion and, for many boys, can lead to silence, feelings of shame, or disruptive behaviours.

These struggles often manifest in youth settings such as schools and youth centres, where boys try to balance being themselves with fitting into complicated peer groups. Outside of these settings, social media, pornography, and online influencers can shape how boys understand relationships, sex, and identity.

It's important to remember that not all boys experience masculinity the same way. Factors like ethnicity, culture, class, sexuality, and family background affect how they understand and express masculinity. So, rigid, one-size-fits all approaches do not work.

How this impacts on young men and boys

- Young men and boys may find it hard to manage emotions or set healthy relationship boundaries—especially when online content promotes dominance or emotional suppression.
- Stereotypes and digital pressures can hide the struggles of young men and boys and discourage them from seeking help.
- Without recognising their diverse experiences, including the impact of social media and online culture, some boys may feel unsupported or misunderstood.
- Exposure to unrealistic portrayals of masculinity online can affect boys' self-esteem, body image, and expectations in relationships.

Practical steps for supporting young men and boys

- **Teach critical media literacy skills:** Help boys question myths about masculinity and the impact of online content on their own perspectives.
- **Highlight diverse role models:** Show boys different examples of masculinity through books, stories, and activities.
- **Use restorative approaches:** Encourage reflection and understanding when conflicts happen, rather than just punishment and retribution.
- **Create safe spaces:** Offer space where young men and boys can talk openly about identity, consent, and respect, without feeling that they have to stick to a social script and say what they think you want them to rather than how they really feel.
- **Be aware of signs of distress:** Learn to recognise when young men and boys' anger, avoidance, or withdrawal may signal emotional struggles.

When boys feel seen, heard, and supported in navigating what it means to be male today, they gain confidence, build stronger relationships, and reduce risky or harmful behaviours.

Boys, emotions, and mental wellbeing

Boys and young men often struggle with their mental health, but their difficulties may not always be obvious.

Many mental health challenges first emerge during adolescence and young adulthood, making this a crucial time for support and early intervention to prevent long-term consequences. Suicide is a significant cause of death among males in the UK, highlighting the urgency of addressing these issues early.

Often, boys and young men mask feelings of sadness or depression with anger, withdrawal, or silence. Outdated ideas of masculinity discourage them from asking for help or showing vulnerability, while digital influences—such as social media and online stereotypes—can reinforce these pressures, making it harder for young men and boys to express emotions openly or seek support.

How this impacts young men and boys

- Boys and young men may withdraw from learning or become disruptive as they struggle to meet narrow, often unrealistic expectations of what it means to be a man.
- They may avoid conversations about wellbeing or support because traditional masculine ideals, reinforced by social media and online influencers, discourage vulnerability.
- Feelings of shame or embarrassment about expressing emotions are intensified by societal and digital portrayals that promote emotional toughness and stoicism.
- These pressures can lead to increased conflicts, social isolation, or risky behaviours as young men and boys try to conform to or cope with these limiting images.
- These behaviours are not just typical “boyish” traits—they can be signs of deeper emotional distress. Often, young men and boys have learned to outwardly portray masculinity in ways that make it hard for them to openly express what they’re really feeling.

Practical steps for supporting young men and boys

- **Encourage emotional expression:** Create regular opportunities for young men and boys to talk about their feelings through conversations and activities. Recognise that sit down face-to-face talking does not work for everyone.
- **Recognise hidden distress:** Learn to see beyond challenging behaviour and understand the emotions that might be underneath.
- **Provide male-friendly safe spaces:** Offer informal groups or drop-ins, with activities, where young men and boys can talk freely, without fear of judgement or labels.
- **Use positive, strength-based language:** Frame wellbeing in terms young men and boys can relate to. Work with young men and boys to understand the contexts they are situated in and how this will look as it will not be the same everywhere.
- **Celebrate vulnerability as strength:** Share stories of men who have talked openly about their emotions, struggles, and growth.

Supporting young men and boys’ mental health isn’t about making them softer or weaker—it’s about giving them the skills and confidence to cope, connect, and thrive. When parents, carers, educators, and professionals work together on this with young men and boys, they help create safer, kinder, environments where all boys can grow and be happy.





Online influences and extreme misogyny

In today's digital world, many boys and young men are exposed to harmful online spaces that promote extreme misogyny.

Online spaces that relate to the Manosphere, movements like the Incels and toxic online influencers are shaping how some young men and boys view masculinity, women, relationships, and themselves. These online communities often validate feelings of anger, rejection, and powerlessness, while promoting damaging ideas about masculinity, control, and entitlement. The anonymity and echo chambers created by these platforms can intensify harmful beliefs, making it harder for boys to develop healthy attitudes and behaviours, about themselves and others. Additionally, constant exposure to such content can distort their understanding of respect, consent, and emotional connection, leading to long-term negative impacts on their mental health, identity and relationships.

Boys can access content like this on mainstream platforms – sometimes long before others are aware. Misogynistic messages that encourage dominance, disrespect, and suspicion toward women and girls can deeply influence young people's attitudes and behaviours. Parents, carers, educators, and youth workers are in a unique position to counteract these messages through open education, role modelling, and creating safe spaces for honest dialogue.

How this impacts young men and boys

- Many boys feel pressure to accept sexist or disrespectful comments as “banter” because challenging them might threaten their sense of belonging or masculinity.
- Damaging ideas about masculinity can make it difficult for boys to fully understand or engage with others experiences and concerns, limiting their ability to express empathy.
- Young men and boys may look up to influencers who promote narrow, harmful views of masculinity, as these messages can seem like one of the few ways to feel confident and accepted.
- Discussions about gender equality or consent may be met with resistance or ridicule, partly because young men and boys lack safe spaces to explore these topics and fears around expressing vulnerability make it hard to raise questions or concerns.

Practical steps for supporting young men and boys

- **Teach media literacy:** Support young men and boys critically assess the content they see online and question harmful messages. And support them to critically appraise the impact that their own social media access, content and volume may be having on them.
- **Create safe spaces for difficult conversations:** Encourage boys to ask questions, express confusion, and explore their feelings without fear of shame or judgement.
- **Promote the positive aspects of masculinity:** Emphasise values like respect, empathy, support, friendship, confidence and integrity.
- **Use real-life examples:** Incorporate stories and case studies in conversations or educational settings to show how harmful ideologies develop linked to masculinity and how to manage them.
- **Work together with young men and boys:** Involve them as equal partners in efforts around gender equality, leadership, and peer mentoring to foster shared respect and responsibility.

This issue goes beyond safeguarding—it's about shaping culture and supporting all genders. When harmful influences are discussed openly and promote inclusive, respectful masculinity, they help young men and boys understand they have value and that they are equal partners in tackling these complex societal issues.

Preventing violence

Violence by men and boys—toward people of all genders, including women, children, and other men—is a serious issue rooted in power, control, and outdated ideas of masculinity.

It's not just a criminal justice problem but a cultural one that begins early in life—shaped by a number of factors that include socialisation, and how they are taught about gender. Parents, carers, educators, and youth workers all have important roles in preventing harm by changing how masculinity and gender are understood and modelled. Violence and harm doesn't stop outside the home or away from schools. Peer harassment, controlling behaviours in relationships, and the normalisation of disrespectful “banter” can be signs that harmful attitudes are taking hold. Boys may copy behaviours they see at home, in media, or online. Addressing these early can break cycles of violence before they escalate.

Using Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) alongside Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) can help broaden the conversation around harm and prevention. While VAWG rightly highlights gender-based violence against women and girls, the term VAWC also draws attention to the fact that all children—including boys—can be vulnerable to violence and abuse. This more inclusive framing helps ensure that support, protection, and education efforts address the needs of all young people, encouraging a holistic approach to prevention and care.

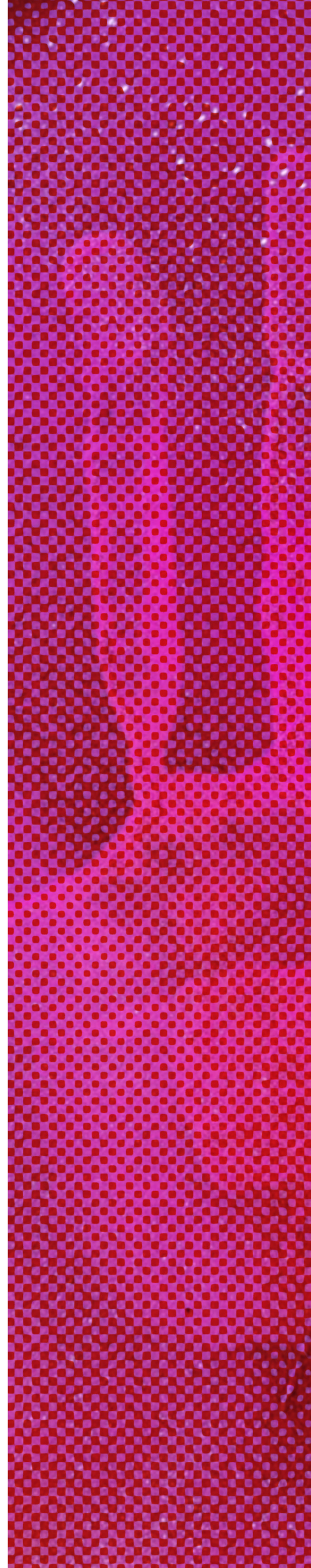
How this impacts young men and boys

- Young men and boys can be direct victims of violence and abuse within families, relationships, or communities, but their experiences can be overlooked.
- Witnessing violence against women or girls—whether at home, in relationships, or online—can cause distress, confusion, and long-term emotional harm for boys.
- Boys may internalise harmful ideas about power, control, and gender roles, which can affect their mental health and how they relate to others.
- Growing up around violence can make it harder for boys to express emotions, trust others, or form respectful, equal relationships in the future.
- Social pressures to outwardly demonstrate damaging masculine ideals—by being dominant, emotionless, or in control—can contribute to cycles of violence, harming both boys themselves and those around them.

Practical steps for supporting young men and boys

- **Open up honest conversations:** Create safe spaces for boys to talk about relationships, emotions, and experiences with violence—whether they've witnessed it, been affected by it, or feel confused by what they see online or in media.
- **Teach respect, boundaries, and consent early:** Support boys to understand that empathy, listening, and mutual respect are strengths—not weaknesses—and essential for all healthy relationships.
- **Explore harmful messages about masculinity:** Help boys question the pressure to be dominant or emotionless. Encourage confidence without control, and power built on kindness and integrity. Co-design approaches to this with them.
- **Support all adults to understand boy's needs:** Ensure parents, carers, educators, and mentors can recognise why young men and boys might be violent and how they may also internalise violence or stress, and how to respond in supportive, non-shaming ways.
- **Listen to young men and boys' real stories:** Use their experiences and perspectives to guide prevention efforts. When young men and boys feel heard and included, they're more likely to speak up, reflect, and take positive action.

Preventing violence requires more than awareness. It means giving young men and boys the tools and trust to grow into respectful, emotionally healthy young men. When they are supported in this journey, a safer community for everyone is created.



Making relationships, sex and health education work for young men and boys

Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) often excludes meaningful sessions that include young men and boys.

Many programs unintentionally frame boys as either uninterested or problematic, overlooking their genuine confusion, questions, and need for clear guidance. This can leave boys feeling embarrassed, fearful, or mistrustful of RSHE lessons, which limits their ability to learn and engage. Parents, carers, educators, and youth workers have a crucial role in helping shape RSHE that is inclusive, honest, and empowering for all boys.

When RSHE doesn't reflect boys' real experiences or concerns, they tend to withdraw or resist the lessons. This creates a gap often filled by misinformation from pornography, peers, or social media. These are sources that can distort ideas about relationships, consent, and sexuality. Without a safe space to ask questions and explore these topics openly, young men and boys may develop harmful beliefs or behaviours that affect themselves and those around them. RSHE that supports boys, rather than shames them, helps build confidence and respect.

How this impacts young men and boys

- Boys may feel blamed or stereotyped when lessons focus only on preventing harm, without addressing their own pressures or vulnerabilities.
- When RSHE doesn't include boys' perspectives, they can feel disconnected, misunderstood, or defensive.
- A lack of space to ask honest questions may lead to confusion, embarrassment, or reliance on misinformation from peers or online sources.
- Without feeling seen or supported, boys may shut down, act out, or internalise harmful beliefs about masculinity, relationships, and emotion.
- Young men and boys are often assumed to always want or consent to sex, so conversations rarely explore their boundaries, feelings, or experiences of pressure, leaving them without the language or support to navigate relationships safely for them.

Practical steps for supporting young men and boys

- **Involve boys in designing RSHE:** Ask them what topics matter and how they prefer to learn, this builds ownership and trust.
- **Create smaller groups:** These can help boys feel safer and more comfortable sharing honestly.
- **Shift the tone of RSHE:** Move away from shame or strict rules toward open dialogue, empathy, and understanding.
- **Talk openly about pleasure, respect, and boundaries:** Not just risks or dangers—this makes lessons more relevant and balanced. This must relate to all genders and move away from focussing on boys as sexually driven
- **Equip RSHE leaders with training:** Ensure those facilitating these sessions can manage sensitive topics with confidence and without judgement.

When boys see RSHE as relevant, respectful, and real, they engage more fully. Involving young men and boys in shaping RSHE helps create safer, healthier communities where everyone can thrive.

The importance of listening to young men and boys

Many boys feel confused, blamed, and unheard in conversations about gender and behaviour.

When given the chance, young men and boys often show insight, empathy, and a real desire to be part of positive change. This resource highlights the importance of truly listening to boys' voices to better support them.

Masculinity isn't one fixed thing, it's shaped by society and culture. Damaging social norms around masculinity refers to the dominant cultural ideal of what being a man means, which often values toughness, emotional control, and dominance over others. This ideal creates pressure on boys to fit a narrow, sometimes harmful, standards.

This puts masculine identity in a fragile position for young men and boys as it constantly needs to be proven. Boys can feel under threat if they don't meet these expectations and may react by acting out, hiding emotions, or excluding others. Both concepts explain why boys may struggle with confusion and frustration over how they're expected to behave. This also causes a conflict between who they are as individuals and how they are expected to act.

Boys and young men are often seen as the problem in discussions about sexism, violence, or behaviour. This can leave many feeling isolated or reluctant to engage. There is a pressure to live up to damaging masculine ideals but a lack in safe spaces to express doubts or fears. Ignoring young men and boys' voices risks disengagement, resentment, or defensive behaviour. Listening carefully is essential for fostering understanding and change.

When boys feel heard—not blamed—they engage more positively. Parents, carers, and professionals who listen help build empathy, responsibility, and gender equity, supporting boys to grow into confident, happy and respectful young men.

To improve outcomes for all young people, it's essential to change how we view and support boys. Too often, boys are seen as problems to be fixed which is an approach that fuels shame, silence, and resistance. Instead, schools, families, and professionals need to adopt a reframed, compassionate, and strength-based approach that sees boys as part of the solution, not the problem.

- **Reframe challenges as needs, not just misbehaviour:** Look beyond the behaviour to understand what support young men and boys may be missing.
- **Shift from blame to belonging:** Encourage empathy and care, seeing young men and boys as capable of positive change.
- **Recognise intersectionality:** Understand how race, class, sexuality, and other identities shape young men and boys' experiences self within masculinity.
- **Make gender a whole-community issue:** Include positive aspects of masculinity in staff training, leadership, curriculum, conversations and in conversations at home.
- **Prioritise prevention:** Build a culture of respect, inclusion, and care from the start instead of reacting after problems emerge.

How young men and boys are seen and engaged with today will shape the men they become tomorrow.

Building a compassionate, inclusive vision of masculinity

This resource is geared around a call to action. To improve the lives of boys and young men, the way masculinity is understood and supported needs to be fundamentally rethought.

Historical, narrow ideas about masculinity — centred on toughness, emotional silence, and dominance — no longer serve young men boys in today's complex, online and offline, social world. These outdated norms contribute to confusion, emotional distress, and harmful behaviours among young men and boys, many of which begin in adolescence.

Masculinity is not a fixed trait but a social construct shaped by history, culture, and environment. Recognising this allows parents, educators, and professionals to challenge stereotypes and offer young men and boys alternative ways to express identity, emotion, and strength. This reframing approach encourages inclusive, compassionate models of masculinity that validate diverse experiences and reduce stigma around vulnerability and mental health.

Young men and boys often feel blamed or silenced in conversations about gender, which risks disengagement or acting out. Listening to boys' voices and involving them in shaping education and wellbeing initiatives fosters trust and responsibility.

There is a need to understand and acknowledge how race, class, sexuality, and other intersecting aspects of identity affect boys' experiences. A one-size-fits-all approach fails to support all young men and boys equally.

Ultimately, shifting the narrative from blame and control to belonging, empathy, and strength will create a healthier future.

When boys are supported to be authentic, emotionally aware, and kind, they grow into men who are capable of forming healthy, positive relationships. This collective effort helps build safer, more inclusive communities where all young people can thrive.

Reframing masculinity means moving away from stereotypes that equate strength with silence or dominance, and instead embracing a more inclusive, emotionally honest, and respectful understanding of what it means to be male.

This shift is critical because the mental health challenges many boys face often begin in adolescence, at a time when they are learning how to express emotion and form relationships. Boys frequently mask distress with anger or withdrawal, and without supportive environments, they risk falling into harmful patterns influenced by extreme online narratives or outdated gender norms.

All of these suggestions are underpinned by co-design and a commitment to working with young men and boys, not at them. They must be recognised as having agency, with their voices being respected and central to the process. When considering safe spaces, they need to be asked, consulted, and actively involved in shaping what those spaces look like.

If we want a better future for boys and young men, we must rethink masculinity with them — by listening, deeply, challenging our own preconceptions, and ensuring their voices are part of the decisions that shape their lives.





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