

Gender Stereotypes and Body Image

Overview

To make students aware of the dangers of gender stereotyping and the media's role in perpetuating gender stereotypes.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate:

- an understanding of the potentially damaging effects of living up to stereotypes, and how they can lead to abuse and violence against ourselves and others.
- an understanding of the media's role in perpetuating these stereotypes.
- an understanding that "going along with the crowd" can involve sacrificing one's own principles, as well as infringing on the rights of others

Preparation and Materials

- for Day 1, a flip-chart and markers
- for Day 2, magazine photos of a thin woman and a muscular man for distribution or overhead projection.

The Lesson: Day 1

Guided Discussion

Write **Act Like a Man** at the top of the flip chart paper and record student responses. (Note: Begin by directing the question to the boys. The girls can then be encouraged to respond. Attempt to record students' own choice of words. If their responses are too wordy, ask them to simplify for display purposes. If the offers are slow to come, ask them to discuss the topic in pairs, then share with the class, or make specific prompts by asking what does it mean to "Act Like a Man" in sports, business, on a date, etc.)

Ask students:

- What does it mean to act like a man? What words or expectations come to mind? (e.g., men don't cry, men are tough, men are strong)
- Draw a box around the entire list.

We're going to call this the **Act Like a Man** box. Inside the box is a list of attitudes and behaviors that boys are pressured to adopt in the process of becoming men in our society. Men and boys are not born this way; these roles are learned.

Next, write **Be Ladylike** at the top of another sheet of flip chart paper and record student responses. (As with the boys, begin by directing questions to the girls, then encourage boys to respond.) Ask your students:

What does it mean to be ladylike? What words or expectations do you think of? (e.g., girls are polite, girls are neat, girls are passive)

Draw a box around this list.

This is the **Be Ladylike** box. It's full of stereotypes, just like the Act Like a Man box. Its walls of conformity are just as restrictive. Women also learn to conform to very specific role expectations as they grow up being female in our society.

Learning Gender Roles

Ask students:

- Where do we learn these gender roles? (Discussion prompts: What people teach us these stereotypes? People in entertainment? Sports? Media? When the students respond "TV" or "movies," ask for specific examples to list.)
- Where do women learn these messages? (Discussion prompts: You may put "moms" on the paper and ask for discussion. What other people influence our learning of gender roles? Where else in society do we find these messages? Ask for specific examples if the comments are too general.)
- Write these responses down the left side, outside the box. You may draw arrows to illustrate how these influences reinforce the wall of the stereotype box.

How Stereotypes Are Reinforced

Ask students:

- What names or put-downs are directed at boys when they don't fit the box?
- What names are women called if they step out of the stereotype box?
Note: Allow students to be blunt with their slang in this educational context.
- Write the names along the bottom of the appropriate box. You may draw arrows to illustrate how they reinforce the wall of the stereotype box.

Ask students:

- How do these labels and names reinforce the stereotype box?
- How does it feel when we are called these names?
- What do you think the person who is using these put-downs is feeling?

(These names are used in order to hurt people emotionally, and we react by retreating to the "safety" of the stereotype box.)

Evaluating the Gender Stereotypes

Ask students:

- How many boys in the class have never cried, hands up? (Note: Choose "don't cry" from their list. If it was not offered during the brainstorming, select another reference.)
- Does this mean that those of you who didn't put up your hands are wimps, nerds, etc.?
- What about the girls; how many want to be passive, etc.?

We're all real people and we can experience the full range of emotions, including happiness and sadness, love and anger. The bottom line is that stereotypes are destructive because they limit our potential! Yet how many guys do we know who try hard to act like the stereotype, without even a second thought? What damage do we do to ourselves and others? Boys are not born to be violent, or to have unhealthy attitudes towards girls. We learn these attitudes and behaviors through the stereotypes of what society thinks it means to "Act Like a Man," and we can free ourselves from the restrictions of these boxes once we see them as unrealistic ideals. Then we can start the process of change.

This is not to say that it's wrong for guys to like sports or fix cars or for girls to enjoy cooking (cite other examples from student generated list). (Note: It is important to make this point in order to be sensitive to boys or girls who may feel defensive.) The problem is that we are told that we must perform these roles in order to fit in. It is important for all of us to make our own decisions about what we do.

A stereotype rigidly confirms the belief that if you are a girl or a boy, or a woman or a man, you must perform these specific roles, and do them well. This belief takes away our personal choices in determining our own interests and skills. It also discourages men from participating in "women's work" (such as flower arranging and child care) and it restricts women from choosing roles that are traditionally "male" (such as engineering and science).

Ask students:

- What are some situations where you may be pressured to "Act Like A Man" or "Be a Lady?" (e.g., for boys, friends may tell you to try a cigarette or participate in a risky activity, to prove that you're 'tough', or for girls, you might be prevented from playing a certain sport or you might let someone bully you into doing something that you don't want to do, because it isn't "ladylike" to argue or be assertive.)
- How might these stereotypes lead to violence? (e.g., boys might be expected to 'fight it out,' rather than 'talk it out,' and girls might be expected to put up with bullying, rather than be assertive.)

Activity

Journal Entry

Have you ever experienced a situation where you were expected to act a certain way because you were a girl or a boy, even though it may not have been the way you felt like acting?

Day 2: Gender Stereotyping and Body Image

Background for Teachers

The concepts of acting like a man or being ladylike do not only relate to attitude. There are also physical expectations which are connected with these stereotypes, many of which are unrealistic. When we unconsciously try to live up to the standards of these stereotypes, we can do physical and emotional harm to ourselves. Often, we don't notice this because we tend to mold ourselves to fit these stereotypes as a matter of course. This can be damaging. A boy with a very slight build who wants to be musclebound is fighting against himself if he tries to change his physique to match that of the stereotypical male. A girl who has an angular nose can fall into the same trap if she listens to her friends and/or relatives who are trying to convince her she needs a nose job.

It takes conviction and self assurance to accept oneself despite of the judgements of others. The first step is seeing that aspirations towards stereotypical ideals stem from a weak sense of self. Being accepted by others, as desirable as it may be, is not as important as self acceptance. The activities in this lesson are designed to help students see the harmful effects of accepting gender stereotypes.

Guided Discussion

Yesterday we discussed stereotyping and how it can make you act a certain way, even if you don't really want to. We also looked at how these stereotypes might lead to violence, because boys and girls feel that they have to live up to certain expectations. Today we are going to talk about how these stereotypes can lead to another kind of violence.

Have you ever noticed similarities in the images of males and females in magazines, in movies and on TV? Like the attitudes of being a man or acting like a lady, these images also affect how we see ourselves. Male and female stereotypes portray the perfect face, the perfect body, the ideal build ? images that are totally cool. We tend to want to be like them. We want to look like the woman on the cover of Seventeen or high-fashion models or the men that we see in commercials, in the movies, and on TV. If we are not careful, we can begin to lose self-esteem, because we want to be like someone else - our media heroes.

What does this have to do with violence? It means not liking who we are. This is a subtle form of violence towards ourself. The next step is that we begin to expect and want others to fit these stereotypes too - we begin to like the stereotypes more than the real people, and so we try to fit our friends into these boxes. This causes lots of problems in relationships.

Note: Students may need help with this point because there is a big difference between thinking somebody else looks good, and wanting to be like them. It's important for us to fundamentally like the way we are.

Show photos of "fashionably" thin women from any women's magazine on an overhead projector or on a handout.

Ask students:

- How does this person live up to the "ideal" standards found in the stereotype box from last class?
- How is she successful at being a woman according to these norms?
- What is the connection between ads like this and eating disorders?
- Do you think women would want to be thin if they were not bombarded with thin images of women, like this, in the media?
- How do these standards for body image differ from standards for cultural groups such as: African, Canadian, Inuit or various Asian cultural groups? (Consider that the vast majority of models have white skin.) Note: In some cultures, heavy body weight is considered to be a sign of healthiness!
- What about at different times in history? Has the thin woman always been the ideal? Note: Paintings that pre-date this century often depict full-bodied women. The women Matisse painted were anything but thin!

Women's preoccupation with the current beauty myth is evident in most cultures that consume television and other media influences. Sadly, more and more women aspire to the stereotypical ideal. They are preoccupied with either getting thin or staying thin. For many young girls, this starts as early as elementary school.

This is a form of violence that women do to themselves. Excessive dieting can not only lead to starvation by robbing the body of essential nutrients, thereby damaging the organs, it can cause death. The "dying to be thin" mindset also fosters a very unhealthy set of attitudes, which affects relationships, both now and in the future.

Two eating disorders that result from women trying to live up to these images are called anorexia nervosa and bulimia. Anorexics pursue thinness through extreme dieting and excessive exercise, while bulimics eat out of control and then purge themselves by vomiting, fasting, taking laxatives, and exercising.

Show photos of men from magazine ads on an overhead projector or as a handout.

Ask students:

- How does this person live up to the "ideal" standards found in the stereotype box from last class?
- What messages are being given to men through these images? How are they different from the messages that we get from the images of women that we have seen?
- Do you think that men are also pressured to look a certain way?

There is pressure for men or boys to look like these images, but mostly, they face pressure to do or act in certain ways, rather than look a certain way. Physical ability is very important in becoming a man, and it is often used to prove one's manhood. From movies, sports activities (like the World Wrestling Federation), and certain initiation rituals, men get the message that to be a real man, you must be the toughest.

- Name some media role models who send this type of message.
- What do men physically have to do to prove that they are "real men?"
- Let's look at our **Act Like A Man** stereotype box. If you are a victim of bullying, or sexual abuse, how do the attitudes in this box make it difficult for you to talk about your problems? What names will you be called if you talk?

These stereotypes push an unhealthy message on men: When we get hurt, we take it in, keep it in, don't ever tell anyone. When we raise a child to take the pain, keep it to himself, and to not show any feelings, we're training an emotional time bomb. What is going to happen when this person finds himself getting mad or upset about something at the age of 17 or 18 or 20? When we hear "men's violence against other men," we typically think of blatant acts of aggression, like hitting, stabbing, or gunning down. But there are a lot of other forms of violence we don't normally think of. Take initiations, for instance.

- What do we mean by initiation?

Define "initiation," and call students' attention to initiations in sports. Give two examples:

Heat Liniment: Heat liniment is poured down the front of the new team member's shorts in the locker room. One student in Brookfield, N.S. was reportedly sent to hospital with second degree burns.

Peanut Butter Jog: The new team member goes jogging with peanut butter smeared on his under arm. When he returns from the jog, he has to eat the peanut butter with crackers while his team members watch.

- Have you heard about other initiations in sports?
- Why is it important in this type of initiation for the person to be uncomfortable?
- What does discomfort have to do with being a "real man?" (According to the male stereotype, men have to prove that they're tough; that they can take it; that they're not sissies, so the best way to know if someone is a "real man" (i.e., one of the guys) is to put him to the test, which involves making him suffer.)

Closure: The violence we can do to ourselves if we unknowingly accept these stereotypes can be very subtle. Girls need to understand that they don't have to look like a Hollywood model or a soap opera star. These people put a huge amount of effort into maintaining a certain look, and they get paid lots of money for their trouble. What does that have to do with us? We're leading ordinary lives in the real world, yet for some reason we have a hankering to be like them. It's important for us to understand why there are so many women who are suffering with eating disorders. First, it can help us avoid falling into the same pitfalls, and it can also help us to feel empathy for those who have.

Boys need to understand that they don't need to accept these stereotypes either. In Hollywood, the toughest person isn't the actor you see on the screen, it's the stuntman who literally risks his life to make the actor look brave. You don't have to be pressured into proving to anyone that you are tough, either by participating in a risky activity, or by physically hurting another person.

Activity

Journal Entry

- Have students reflect on what has been discussed in these lessons. How do they feel about these issues?
- Let students share their feelings with the class or in groups.