



Are Boys and Young Men Being Left Behind in Our Classrooms?

December 2024

Physical and Health Education Canada

Thinkers Report

By Caleb Poulin, PHE Canada & Ella Widdis, Teacher Candidate, University of Ottawa



Introduction

**“Boys aren’t broken.
Men aren’t toxic...
dismantling the
patriarchy isn’t about
blame but creating a
world where everyone
can thrive.”**

– Next Gen Men

In May 2024, Physical and Health Education (PHE) Canada convened over 100 leaders from the PHE Community in Saskatoon for the PHE Thinkers Gathering. This was the third Thinkers Gathering hosted by PHE Canada. The annual event serves as an opportunity to identify a critical issue within the

education sector that impedes progress toward its mission of ensuring every child and youth leads an active, healthy life. By using a grassroots approach, the event encourages participants to integrate their professional expertise, lived experiences, and observations from academic and school communities. This collaborative space fosters the sharing of insights and the discussion of actionable strategies.

This year’s critical issue came from the PHE Canada Board of Directors, who were concerned that boys and young men in their school communities were falling behind. At PHE Canada, our vision is to ensure that all children and youth possess the confidence and competence to

flourish—this includes a focused commitment to boys and young men.

PHE Canada is committed to nurturing empathetic, accountable, and courageous boys and young men who champion gender equity and social justice, cultivate supportive and healthy relationships, and respond to challenges with resilience. As an organization, we recognize the weight of and importance of changing the narrative for future generations of boys and young men, and in order to do this, it requires everyone to engage deeply and reflect critically on the complexities and nuances of masculinity.

But how do we get there?

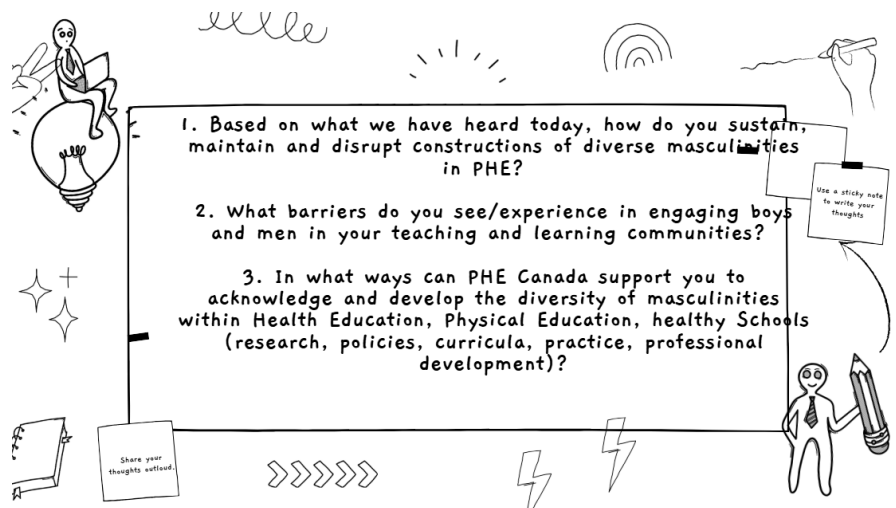


Photo: Dr. Michael Kehler's presentation at the 2024 Thinkers Gathering.

To address this question, PHE Canada engaged Dr. Michael Kehler, professor and masculinity researcher at the University of Calgary, to set the stage. Dr. Kehler's presentation, titled "Leave No One Behind: Let's Talk About Boys and Young Men," explored the societal challenges boys and young men face, particularly within the context of physical and health education and broader school spaces (i.e., locker rooms, playgrounds, sporting fields). Following the presentation, delegates across PHE Canada's membership, including members of the PHE Canada Research Council, PHE Student Chapters, the Board of Directors, presidents of provincial and territorial PHE teacher associations, the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee, and the Indigenous PHE Educators Circle, participated in roundtable discussions. These conversations provided an opportunity for delegates to share perspectives and actively contribute to shaping PHE Canada's

strategies for fostering the well-being and development of boys and young men.

To guide their discussions, delegates were presented with three key questions:



Scribes were placed at each table to capture the conversations. Building on the delegates' insights gathered, PHE Canada then began developing this report to provide the PHE Community with a summary of what was shared and the innovative and responsive strategies that arose to support boys and young men in both the classroom, gymnasium, and across whole school settings. The strength of the input demonstrates the collective power of community-led initiatives in driving meaningful change.

To finalize this resource, PHE Canada staff then engaged a pre-service educator entering into the 1st year of the

University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education. They were tasked with supporting the research component of this report and sorting the conversation capture to garner the themes and consider them against the following query: Imagine a world

where boys and young men have opportunities to deepen and strengthen their connection between education and their holistic well-being. What could this look like in our schools?

PHE Canada is proud to share their work on the following pages.

Melanie Davis,
Executive Director, CEO, PHE
Canada

Are Boys and Young Men Being Left Behind in Our Classrooms?

Results from the PHE Canada Thinkers Gathering

By Caleb Poulin, PHE Canada & Ella Widdis, Teacher Candidate, University of Ottawa

Driving towards this meaningful change requires not just boys and young men but everyone to reimagine masculinity in a way that empowers boys and young men. It requires people to question and challenge their inner biases, the actions and thoughts of others, and society at large. In order to make this progress, it's crucial to examine how outdated stereotypes and harmful masculinity standards impact boys and young men's health, well-being, and overall development in the school environment.

To undertake this work, we first needed to understand what boys and young men are struggling with, how it is impacting their well-being, and how the construct of gender is influencing how their emotions and vulnerability are demonstrated.

“Given that not all masculine norms are inherently problematic, it is important to consider when and how they become problematic.”

– Next Gen Men

To understand and address the challenges boys and young men face, it was essential to first examine what the research reveals about their struggles and the factors driving these issues. By exploring the research on the intersection of societal expectations, cultural norms, and individual experiences, we were able to gain valuable insights into how these dynamics affect their well-being. In doing so, this



Photo: Group discussion at the 2024 Thinkers Gathering.

analysis highlights the areas where boys and young men need support but also maps the feedback gathered through the Thinkers Gathering to set a foundation for developing informed and responsive strategies to empower boys and young men within physical and health education, school spaces, and broader communities.



For many boys and young men, challenging, resisting, and dismantling outdated gender stereotypes and harmful masculinity norms aren't that simple. Growing up in a system that pressures boys and young men to conform to "traditional" masculinity norms is creating a "culture that prioritizes dominance over connection, stoicism over expression, and independence over community" (Next Gen Men, n.d.). The truth about how the patriarchy is benefiting men is far more nuanced and complex. Not only does it lead to harmful outcomes for everyone, it is also creating impossible standards for men, silencing their vulnerability, and forcing them into the harsh constraints of 'manhood' and what it means to be a 'real man', otherwise known as the "Man Box." (Next Gen Men, n.d.)

The concept of the "Man Box" was first introduced through Paul Kivel's Oakland Men's Project in 1979 and explores the restrictive societal expectations placed on men to conform to traditional masculinity. Known as the "Act Like a Man Box," it highlights the pressures men face to adhere to norms such as dominance, emotional suppression, and stoicism (Kivel, 1998). The term "Man Box" was later popularized and adapted by Tony Porter (2016) and Heilman et al. (2017) as "a set of beliefs, communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society, that place pressure on men to be a certain way." Heilman et al.'s 2017 study results were alarming, confirming how restrictive ideas about

masculinity are harmful, particularly when young men are continuing to be told to "be a man." Heilman et al. (2017) express the need to change harmful masculinity norms, as these have detrimental effects on all of our lives, regardless of gender, for which they later created a new series of research called "The Cost of the Man Box." In this, Heilman et al. (2019) discuss how harmful masculinity norms and the concept of the "Man Box" is impacting men's mental health and well-being, their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships, their career aspirations and economic contribution, and even their ability to develop compassion, empathy, and acceptance for those who fall 'outside' of the "Man Box."



Men who conform to the restrictive expectations of the "Man Box" adhere to rigid and harmful expectations of masculine norms and are more likely to engage in risky behaviours and face severe personal challenges. Research, such as Heilman et al. (2017), shows that these men are at greater risk of being involved with engaging in bullying or harassment, traffic accidents, using violence to resolve conflicts, experiencing depression, considering suicide, binge drinking, and refusing to seek help even when needed. Additionally, they perpetuate traditional gender roles, further entrenching these harmful dynamics with others (Heilman et al., 2017).

After decades of research about masculinities and masculine norms, the Gender Equitable Men (GEM) Scale and Heilman et al. (2017, p. 33) organized the “Man Box” into seven key pillars of gender-related attitudes and norms about traditional ‘manhood’:



7 PILLARS OF “MAN BOX”

Self-Sufficiency

- Men who openly express worries or fears are often not seen as deserving of respect.
- Men are expected to handle personal challenges independently, without seeking help from others.

Acting Tough

- If a man doesn't stand up for himself when mistreated is often seen as weak.
- Men are expected to appear strong, even when feeling scared or anxious.

Physical Attractiveness

- Men who focus heavily on their appearance are often perceived as less masculine.

Rigid Masculine Gender Roles

- Boys are often discouraged from learning domestic skills like cooking, cleaning, or caregiving, as these are considered unmasculine.
- Traditional norms suggest husbands shouldn't handle household chores, reinforcing outdated gender roles.
- Men are commonly expected to fulfill the role of primary breadwinner, with financial provision viewed as their key responsibility.

Heterosexuality and Homophobia

- Being a gay man is not being a “real man.”.
- In contrast, a friendship between a straight and gay man is okay (positive statement).

Hypersexuality

- A “real man” should have numerous sexual partners.
- Men don't decline sex.

Aggression and Control

- If necessary, men should use aggression or violence to earn respect.
- Men should make the final decisions in relationships or marriages.
- Men are entitled to monitor his partner's whereabouts.



Many boys and young men are struggling to navigate in society because of the impact of the “Man Box” rules and collective socialization of ‘manhood’ (Porter, 2016).

It creates very harsh constraints for what masculinity is, forcing boys to learn from an early age how they need to conform to society in order to fit into the “Man Box” and be considered masculine (Next Gen Men, n.d.).

In the school setting, the Man Box can be perpetuated by students and their peers,

school staff, parents/caregivers, and school system leaders in multiple ways, such as the belief that girls should excel in certain academic areas (e.g., language) while boys are expected to excel in others (e.g., math and physical education) (ATA, 2020). This binary way of thinking can lead students to feel like failures if they don't conform to these predefined expectations (ATA, 2020). This is exactly why Dr. Michael Kehler “encourages teachers and parents/caregivers to be aware of their own assumptions around gender and ask themselves, “how their assumptions impact and reinforce gender bias and gender stereotyping within their classrooms and homes.” (ATA, 2020). Further, Dr. Kehler suggested “openness from

adult leaders” for what healthy masculinities are and can be because this “is needed to allow boys to express all aspects of their beings.” (ATA, 2020).

“Healthy masculinities is needed to allow boys to express all aspects of their beings.” (ATA, 2020).



To support educators, administrators, and parents/caregivers in addressing the challenges boys and young men face, the following section highlights key areas where struggles are prevalent.

Drawing on alarming research claims and statistics, this analysis illustrates how harmful masculinity norms and outdated gender stereotypes are contributing to issues such as mental health challenges, body image concerns, academic struggles and disengagement, and resistance to seeking help.

Each point underscores the urgent need for informed and collaborative interventions to support boys and young men's well-being.

Mental Health Challenges

Societal expectations around masculinity often lead to harmful behaviours, including emotional suppression and bullying, which negatively affect boys' mental health and peer relationships (Next Gen Men, n.d.; Statistics Canada, 2020). With hospitalizations due to mental health issues among youth being a growing concern in Canada, it's important to note that boys and young men are making up a significant portion of youth experiencing mental health conditions (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2021). **One in three boys feels society expects them to hide or suppress their feelings** ([State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents](#), 2018), with **four in five boys believing that if they cry, they will be made fun of** ([Gaag](#), 2011). In Canada, **boys aged fifteen to nineteen are four-times more likely to die by suicide** (Reed, 2024) and account for three

quarters of youth suicide-related deaths, with the **highest rates among First Nation and Inuit boys** (age 15-24) ([Children First Canada](#), 2021), and **young men aged nineteen to twenty-nine, racialized men, and gay or bisexual men are at significantly higher risks for depression and anxiety** ([Canadian Men's Health Foundation](#), 2024). The societal expectations for boys and young men to conform to traditional and harmful masculinity norms are pressuring them to be stoic, emotionally restrained, competitive, and dominant. These gender stereotypes are impacting how boys and young men demonstrate their emotions and vulnerability, further contributing to issues like higher rates of mental health challenges and violent behaviours.

When boys and young men are socialized in this way, it is harmful to their development, particularly since **over one-third of boys are reporting feeling pressured to “suck it up” and “not cry”** when faced with

emotions such as sadness or fear ([State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents](#), 2018). Additionally, **seven in ten boys feel pressure from parents, friends, teachers, or society to be physically strong**, which is harmful when followed by misogynistic comments such as **you're “acting like a girl,” which 82% of boys have heard someone tell them** ([State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents](#), 2018). This is leaving boys and young men to struggle with openly and safely discussing their feelings, which is further discouraging them to be vulnerable and express their emotions without the fear that they could be used against them. It is putting boys and young men at a higher risk for engaging in risky behaviours and unhealthy coping mechanisms such as aggression or avoidance, substance-related harms, poor diets, emotional repression, and beliefs to receive preventative health care ([Journal of Health and Social Behaviour, Vol. 52, No. 2](#)).



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- Journal of Health and Social Behaviour, Vol. 52, No. 2

Educational Disparities

Alarming, **boys are three-times more likely than girls to be expelled from school** (OECD, 2018), and, due to systemic biases, **boys from Black and Indigenous communities are disproportionately disciplined** through suspensions and expulsions (Fergus, 2022; Gregory & Fergus, 2017). These exclusionary practices and disparities are not only harming boys' academic engagement but also contribute to **higher dropout rates among marginalized boys** (Next Gen Men, 2021) and contributing to lower graduation rates and fewer boys enrolling in post-secondary education (OECD, 2018). Expulsion and suspension are not sustainable or restorative methods for dealing with engagement or behavioural issues, especially since boys are more likely to exhibit behavioural problems in school (Pathways to Education, 2023).

Societal pressures linked to masculinity can often exacerbate these issues (Pathways to Education, 2023; Brookings, 2023) and perhaps could be contributing to why **boys are twice as likely than girls to say, "School is a waste of time."** (OECD, 2018). These educational disparities and disciplinary 'norms' leave boys and young men to navigate societal masculinity expectations without any guidance, access



to resources, or positive support networks.

Many boys struggle to see themselves represented in education, both as students and potential educators, due to societal messaging and media portrayals that often highlight male success in athletics, business, and entertainment. Coupled with a significant underrepresentation of male teachers, the lack of visibility reduces the availability of positive male role models in schools, limiting opportunities for boys to envision education as a viable or rewarding career path (American Psychological Association, 2023). **In Canada, there is a significant disparity between the number of men and women educators**, indicating a gender imbalance in the availability of male identifying educator role models for young boys and men from grades K–12. For example, in British Columbia, in every ten teachers, nine of them identify

as women (Todd., 2023). Of all teachers across Canada, only 25% are men ([Statistics Canada, 2024](#)), with 41% of that being secondary education teachers, and of all educators at the elementary level, only 16% of teachers are men (Statistics Canada, 2021). This differs in physical and health education, where the PHE Canada Member Survey showed an almost equal distribution of women (39.5%) and men (42.0%) teachers (["Are We There Yet?" An Examination of Teacher Diversity Within Canada's Physical and Health Education Community](#)). This examination of teacher diversity within Canada's PHE Community is rooted in the significant body of literature that affirms that a match between the lived experiences of teachers and students is a critical factor in improving student outcomes and offers wholistic benefits to students, the school community, and the education system (Sulz, L., Davis, M., Dumani, D., 2023).

Exposure to Violence

A considerable number of boys experience violence, with nearly half reporting physical assault or threats, which has long-term implications for their well-being and behaviour ([Next Gen Men, n.d.](#)). Alarming, **four in ten boys (almost half) in Canada have experienced some sort of physical assault at high school**, with one in five being threatened with a weapon ([CBC News, 2019](#)). Such exposure to violence has long-term implications for their well-being and behaviour, potentially increasing the likelihood of them perpetuating violence in the future. According to Next Gen Men (n.d.), boys and men are “more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of violence,” with **men accounting for 99% of accused perpetrators of sexual violence** (Statistics Canada, 2019). When addressing gender-based violence, it is imperative to understand how societal expectations around masculinity and personal experiences (e.g., bullying, emotional suppression, etc.) intersect to perpetuate

harm, especially given that one in three women experience sexual violence in their lifetime ([Ontario, n.d.](#)). A staggering statistic that has probable cause for contributing to gender-based violence and harmful masculinity norms is how **one-third of boys aged fourteen to nineteen are exposed to sexual comments and sexual jokes** about girls and women daily, with six in ten surrounded by this at least once a week ([State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents, 2018](#)). Further concerning is how close to 50% of boys are hearing these comments from extended male family members, three in ten are hearing them from their dad, and one in three boys are exposed to sexual comments and sexual jokes about women several times a week or more in the media, TV, or movies ([State of Gender Equality for U.S. Adolescents, 2018](#)).

Masculinity norms can play a significant role in the recruitment of young boys into criminal activity, particularly through societal pressures to conform to ideals of toughness, dominance,

and emotional suppression. In Canada, research shows boys and young men are more likely to engage in violent behaviour and criminal activities as a means of asserting their masculinity. These norms often create environments where aggression, power, and a disregard for authority are glorified as masculine traits. A study by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics found that **young men aged 18-24 are disproportionately involved in criminal activity**, with many incidents linked to issues of identity, peer influence, and the desire to prove themselves within their social circles. Moreover, exposure to violent behaviour, often linked to hypermasculine ideals, can further normalize criminal activity, leading boys to feel it is a legitimate way to assert control and respect. Addressing these harmful masculinity norms through education and intervention is essential to reducing youth involvement in crime and supporting positive, healthy development for young boys. (Roberts, S., & Elliott, K.)



“Boys and men are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of violence.”

- Next Gen Men

Body Image Struggles

Close to 30% of boys and young men struggle with body image concerns and dissatisfaction over their appearance, contributing to mental health challenges and emotional problems (CBC, 2018). With societal pressures often seen in media portrayals to conform to unrealistic male body ideals, the drive to achieve a muscular physique can spark the beginning of eating disorders or an unhealthy relationship with their bodies (Osler, 2018; [Butterfly Foundation](#), 2024). The widespread accessibility of social media platforms promoting unattainable muscular ideals has exposed boys and young men to

harmful body standards, driving nearly half of adolescent boys to engage in risky behaviours, such as disordered eating and performance-enhancing substance use, in an effort to meet these unrealistic expectations ([PLOS Blogs](#), 2024).

Further compounding this issue is the small fraction of research in eating disorders focused on men (less than 1%) and gender stereotypes with eating disorders often seen as primarily affecting women ([PLOS Blogs](#), 2024). This is an alarming statistic given that over the past two decades, **hospitalization rates in Canada for eating disorders among boys aged five to seventeen have drastically increased by 416%** ([PLOS Blogs](#), 2024).

Eating disorders, gender stereotypes, and the lack of awareness regarding how eating disorders manifest differently in boys and men (e.g., an excessive focus on muscularity rather than thinness) can prevent them from recognizing symptoms or seeking treatment. ([Nagata et al.](#), 2020; [PLOS Blogs](#), 2024). When boys and young men are comparing themselves to such impossible body image standards while they are still developing, it can have detrimental impacts on young men and boys relationships with food and movement, their mental health, and well-being later in life (Staff, 2021).





This analysis draws attention to the harmful impact of traditional masculinity norms and outdated gender stereotypes on boys and young men, contributing to a range of issues including mental health challenges, academic struggles, body image concerns, and resistance to seeking help. As emphasized by Next Gen Men, it is essential to stand as allies and support those affected by the pressures of traditional masculinity. “While masculinity itself isn’t inherently ‘toxic,’ the societal standards that demand boys conform to traits such as stoicism, dominance, competitiveness, and emotional

“While masculinity itself isn’t inherently ‘toxic,’ the societal standards that demand boys conform to traits such as stoicism, dominance, competitiveness, and emotional repression are unrealistic and harmful.”

– Next Gen Men

repression are unrealistic and harmful.” These pressures are linked to higher rates of

mental health challenges, with boys being at greater risk for depression, anxiety, and suicide. Educational disparities, such as higher expulsion rates and a lack of male educators, further harm boys’ academic engagement and limit their role models. The normalization of violence, both as victims and perpetrators, exacerbates these issues, alongside body image struggles fueled by unrealistic ideals seen in the media. The analysis underscores the urgent need for informed and collaborative interventions to address these challenges and promote boys’ and young men’s well-being.

PHE Canada Thinkers Gathering: Key Takeaways and Insights

At the 2024 PHE Canada Thinkers Gathering, participants shared insights and targeted support strategies for addressing the challenges faced by boys and young men, as well as how to better engage them in today's educational settings. The discussions highlighted the importance of **recognizing and promoting diverse masculinities within health education, physical education, and healthy schools**. It was emphasized that masculinities are not a homogenous concept; men are not a fixed historical group, and the definition of masculinity is heavily influenced by societal perspectives. Terms like "masculine" may carry different meanings depending on culture and context. Various cultures have their own interpretations of masculinity, often diverging from

the stereotypical or "powerful" physique. Acknowledging these variations fosters a broader understanding of what masculinity is and can be.

Reframing masculinity and prioritizing the voices of boys and young men in physical and health education (PHE) holds the potential to empower them to redefine their understanding of masculinity. **The conversation explored how schools can shift the culture around masculinity** and how PHE can serve as a space not only to empower boys and young men but also all young people to redefine what it means to be "masculine." Educators, administrators, and community leaders play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity, encouraging positive contributions, and creating equitable futures for

everyone. By embracing this approach, we can support boys and young men in feeling safer as they reshape and embrace their unique identities and masculinities, ensuring they thrive in environments that nurture both their well-being and ongoing development.



Proposed Solutions for Engaging, Promoting, & Embracing Diverse Masculinities in PHE

In the following section, we will explore solutions proposed by participants at the Thinkers Gathering for supporting all boys and young men in PHE.

PHE educators need to provide a wider array of movement and learning experiences, as well as opportunities for socio-emotional learning. **When PHE educators create environments where all boys and young men feel more connected and supported in their well-being, it enhances their sense of relevance, meaning, and belonging in PHE.** This approach can help mitigate various deterrents to engagement in school contexts (e.g., attendance, subject matters, sports, socializing), making students less likely to engage in risky or unhealthy behaviors.

PHE should provide boys and young men with opportunities to develop a range of skills and life competencies, understand and respect themselves and others, and cultivate a sense of resiliency. Consequently, students are more likely to appreciate diverse learning opportunities and participate meaningfully in PHE, fostering a more inclusive environment for all.

Here are some strategies shared by PHE educators:

Choice in Class	Offer students a choice between competitive and non-competitive physical education classes. A participant noted that this change significantly engaged more students who might not traditionally elect PHE in high school.
Mixed Environments	Allow students to experience PHE in mixed-gender environments and incorporate real-world activities. Another participant highlighted that participation in PHE Canada's Real-World program enhanced boys and young men's engagement with their community, fostering a deeper awareness of available opportunities.
Gender-Specific or All-Gender Options	Provide options for gender-specific or all-gender PHE classes. A participant discussed how gendered classes can inadvertently reinforce traditional norms, limiting students' opportunities for self-expression and personal development.
Incorporate Student Voice	Include student voice and choice in PHE programming. Many participants shared that integrating student interests into instruction has helped many students find joy in PHE.
Flexible Clothing Options	Offer flexibility regarding clothing for PE participation and ensure safe spaces for students to feel comfortable. Some schools encourage students to change for PE, which can create discomfort. Many participants emphasized the need to eliminate this requirement and provide gender-neutral washrooms and private stalls.
Focus on Skill Learning	Emphasize skill learning rather than outcomes. One participant advised newer PE educators to avoid overemphasizing physical achievements, as this can neglect the emotional and social aspects of physical activity.

Mindful Language	Be mindful of the language used during instruction and assessment as it can significantly impact engagement and motivation. A participant noted how sometimes educators use different feedback language for boys and girls. For example, telling boys to “try harder”, “you can do better”, or “stop messing around” while providing more supportive phrases like “good try” or “keep going” for girls. Instead, educators can focus on using consistent, constructive feedback that highlights effort and improvement for all students, regardless of gender.
Variety of Activities	Provide opportunities for all students to explore a variety of physical activities without gender constraints. Many participants urged educators and schools to challenge the notion that certain activities are for “boys or girls.”
Interest-Based Activities	Encourage students to participate in activities based on their interests rather than societal expectations. Participants emphasized the importance of educators modeling inclusive behaviours and respecting self-expression.
Social Skills and Mental Health	Include learning opportunities for developing social skills and promoting open discussions about mental health. Many participants agreed that PHE is invaluable for teaching emotional regulation, conflict resolution, self-awareness, cooperation, and stress management.
Safe Exploration	Create a classroom environment where students feel safe to explore and question societal expectations. Participants discussed how PHE educators should encourage students to challenge traditional gender roles in a supportive environment.
Critical Assessment of Media	Equip boys and young men with the tools to critically assess societal messages encountered through social media. Many participants highlighted the need to discuss harmful masculinity norms and promote positive and diverse representations of masculinity.
Mentorship Opportunities	Schools should intentionally facilitate mentorship opportunities between male role models and boys. Participants noted that discussing vulnerability and emotional health can demonstrate that embracing emotions is a strength, combating harmful masculinity norms.
Social Justice Learning	Embed social justice and activism learning opportunities to enhance boys' and young men's engagement with challenging harmful masculinity norms. Schools can provide safer spaces for boys and young men to openly discuss societal expectations and explore their values, fostering healthier identities

Summarized Challenges in Physical and Health Education

To foster a more inclusive and supportive PHE environment, it is essential to encourage open communication about diverse masculinities and their role in shaping the atmosphere and culture within these settings. However, participants identified several common barriers that persist in their educational contexts, including parental influences, peer pressure, social media content, and societal norms, which must be addressed concurrently. **The following highlights the key experiences participants face regarding the impact of harmful masculinity norms on classroom dynamics and the behaviour of boys and young men:**

Impact of Social Media

Gathering participants highlighted how social media normalizes harmful behaviours, like vaping and smoking, and drinking and driving, while figures like Andrew Tate complicate classroom dynamics and interactions with female teachers and students. Constant exposure to curated content pressures boys and young men to conform to societal ideals, hindering their ability to express vulnerability and empathy.

Limited Focus on Emotional Health

Gathering participants discussed the lack of attention to emotional health in provincial/territorial PHE curricula. This oversight perpetuates the notion that emotional vulnerability is incompatible with physical activity, discouraging boys and young men from seeking help for mental health issues, which contributes to high rates of depression, anxiety, and engagement with risky behaviours (e.g., drinking, smoking, vaping, etc.).

Resistance to Challenging Gender Norms

Many participants observed that some generalist and PHE teachers often do not challenge traditional gender roles or encourage students to question societal expectations when they infiltrate PHE spaces. This lack of discussion allows harmful gender norms to persist, with boys and young men avoiding activities deemed “feminine” due to fear of social repercussions. Similarly, girls and young women may feel unequal in physical spaces, leading to lower participation and diminished self-confidence.

Colonized Structure of PHE

Gathering participants examined how the traditional structure of PHE, characterized by gendered classes and hyper-competitiveness, reinforces harmful masculinity. Emphasizing ideals like “winning” and “physical toughness” creates an environment where boys and young men are discouraged from collaborating or expressing vulnerability, reinforcing stereotypes that equate masculinity with emotional repression.

Coercive Relationships and Toxic Masculinity in Sports

Gathering participants addressed the troubling culture of toxic masculinity in sports, where behaviours like glorifying fighting in hockey persist. Participants expressed concern for boys’ and young men’s well-being in locker rooms despite efforts to foster inclusive classroom environments. There is also a call for more resources and professional development for PHE educators to support transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse students, as traditional masculinity norms and inadequate safe spaces negatively impact these students’ experiences and sense of belonging in PHE.

Barriers to Engagement

Many gathering participants identified several barriers that hinder **the engagement of boys and young men within broader teaching and learning communities, including:**



Administrative Reluctance

Resistance from administrators to support initiatives like boys' groups focused on social-emotional learning and mental health, especially in the absence of equivalent girls' groups.

Policy Implementation Pressures

Conflicts among adults in the school system regarding policy implementation and challenges in shifting entrenched attitudes.

Upholding Rigid Expressions of Masculinities

Difficulties in advocating for diverse expressions of masculinity when peers (including parents, students, and administrators) do not recognize their value.

Social Media and Home Environment

The influence of social media and home environments complicating efforts to address masculinities.

Societal Pressures

Traditional socialization practices that reinforce gendered stereotypes.

Peer Reinforcement

Peers, whether intentionally or not, reinforcing stereotypes of "being a real man" through jokes that pressure boys and young men to prove their "toughness" or ridicule those who express emotions or engage in non-competitive activities

Navigating Relationships

Students navigating romantic or platonic relationships may inadvertently endorse harmful behaviours while trying to fulfill roles such as the "provider" or "protector."

In sum, these challenges highlight the need for systemic changes in PHE to create an environment that supports the well-being of all students. There was a shared understanding that the current organization of physical and health education in many schools often reinforces harmful stereotypes and traditional gender roles by promoting rigid notions of masculinity. By prioritizing inclusivity, emotional well-being, and the dismantling of gender norms, **PHE can transform into a powerful tool for helping all students develop healthier and more authentic identities.**

Moving Forward: Advocacy for Social Justice

Gathering participants suggested that PHE Canada continue advocating through an intersectional lens for social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in K-12/CEGEP schools. Advocacy efforts should emphasize asset-based approaches, contrasting with the commonly used deficit-based perspectives. In a deficit-based approach, the focus tends to be on what is lacking or problematic, framing issues as deficiencies that need to be fixed. **This perspective can perpetuate a narrow view of boys and young men**, often depicting them as victims of social pressures and overlooking their potential for resilience and growth.

Conversely, an asset-based approach centers on the strengths, interests, and capabilities that boys and young men already possess, aiming to nurture and foster these traits. To implement this, PHE Canada and the Thinkers Gathering participants recommend that PHE educators:

1. **Avoid unintended harm in discussions surrounding harmful masculinities.**
2. **Create environments where boys and young men can thrive and embrace healthy masculinities.**

This table below illustrates the **comparison between a deficit-based approach, which often emphasizes issues and problems, and an asset-based approach that focuses on strengths and opportunities for growth**. An asset-based approach offers a more holistic and positive framework for supporting boys and young men in PHE, enhancing awareness in classrooms while minimizing the risk of unintended harm.

Comparison of Approaches: Deficit-Based vs. Asset-Based

Deficit-Based (Instead of...)		Asset-Based (Try this...)
Highlighting body image and self-esteem issues	→	Encouraging authentic self-expression and weight-neutral health promotion
Discussing mental health signs and symptoms	→	Providing support with social-emotional learning
Analyzing harmful societal pressures and social media influences	→	Allowing interest exploration and teaching digital literacy skills
Addressing traditional gender roles and stereotypes (e.g., the manbox)	→	Implementing mentorship opportunities to connect with positive role models
Discussing high exposures to violence and risky behaviours	→	Focusing on healthy relationships, consent, and promoting healthy behaviours
Examining educational challenges and disparities	→	Implementing trauma-informed and restorative teaching practices

Next Steps for PHE Canada:

A common theme in supporting the development and continuous learning of diverse masculinities within PHE spaces is for PHE Canada to play a crucial role in **helping educators address these challenges in their classrooms and schools** by providing:

- **Professional Development:** Opportunities to keep pace with the evolving landscape of PHE and guide educators in navigating complex issues surrounding masculinity.
- **Advocacy for Healthy Schools:** Continued advocacy for policies that promote healthy school environments and oppose those that negatively impact student well-being and safety (e.g., pronoun usage, optional sexual health education, etc.).
- **Accessible Research:** Efforts to make research more accessible for PHE educators.
- **Curriculum Development Support:** Assistance with updates to provincial and territorial PHE curricula.
- **Evidence-Based Resources:** Ensuring educational resources are informed by evidence and practice, easily accessible, and adaptable.

The [Canadian Physical and Health Education Competencies](#) serves as a living document that supports updates based on new research, curricula, policies, and teaching practices. This resource enables PHE educators, administrators, school boards, and other stakeholders to remain current with best practices in PHE. **PHE Canada recognizes the necessity for all educational settings to promote gender equity, build agency and ownership, incorporate student voice and choice, and provide opportunities to challenge traditional stereotypes.** These efforts empower students to embrace and nurture their unique identities. For all children and youth to live active, healthy lives, the holistic impact of PHE must prioritize their physical, emotional, social, spiritual, cultural, and mental development. By doing so, we can empower boys, young men, and all young people to navigate their learning safely, meaningfully, and authentically, exploring various aspects of self-expression, personality, abilities, and interests free from societal constraints.



Limitations Highlighted:

PHE Canada acknowledges that the discussion around masculinity is framed within a binary gender framework, which is inherently limiting and fails to reflect the complexity of gender identities and expressions. This binary approach reinforces rigid societal norms and overlooks the experiences of individuals who identify outside of this framework, including non-binary, genderqueer, and transgender individuals.

Expanding the conversation beyond a binary framework allows for a more inclusive understanding of how masculinity can be expressed across all genders. It enables educators, students, and communities to challenge harmful stereotypes linking masculinity exclusively to traits such as stoicism, dominance, or aggression. Instead, they can recognize and celebrate diverse expressions of masculinity and other gendered traits in ways that affirm individuals' identities and experiences.

By adopting a non-binary approach, PHE Canada and educational spaces can foster learning environments that promote acceptance, belonging, and self-expression for all students. This approach equips educators to support students in navigating the complex intersections of gender, culture, and identity, ensuring that no one is excluded from discussions about healthy behaviors, relationships, and personal development. Such inclusivity not only addresses the harms of toxic masculinity but also enriches the broader educational experience by validating the diversity of human experiences.

Conclusion:

By sharing insights into the struggles faced by boys and young men, how these challenges impact their well-being, and how the construct of gender influences their emotional expression and vulnerability, **PHE Canada hopes to cultivate a more inclusive and empowering environment for all students**, regardless of gender, where diverse masculinities are recognized and respected. Through a concerted effort to challenge

harmful gender norms and promote a broader understanding of masculinity, we aim to create educational spaces where all students can explore and express their identities freely, without fear of judgment or exclusion.

In striving for equity and inclusivity, it is essential to collaborate with educators, students, and communities to build a future where every individual feel valued and supported in their personal and educational journeys, free from the constraints of harmful masculinity and stereotypes. While many may believe that the primary responsibility for challenging harmful masculinity lies with boys and men—and the structures that support these behaviors—**everyone has a role to play in shaping these attitudes and behaviors.**



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