

Boys Do Cry: Improving Boys' Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools

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Book Review

Boys Do Cry: Improving Boys' Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools.

By Matt Pinkett

Taylor & Francis, 2023, 238 pages (paperback)

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Introduction

In the book “Boys Do Cry”, author Matt Pinkett seeks to provide a comprehensive guide to boys’ mental health and wellbeing in schools by providing research, anecdotes, and practical solutions to the issues addressed. Pinkett seeks to challenge traditional understandings of masculinity by focusing on key issues that affect boys during critical years of development. The purpose of this book is to provide educators and school leaders information to support boys within school. The book is divided into chapters that are focused on key issues, such as anger, suicide and self-harm, physical activity, and body image and eating disorders. In each chapter, the book highlights research on the topic, personal stories from the author and other educators, case studies, as well as practical solutions to common scenarios.

Anger

Pinkett asserts that anger “is one of the last taboos in education” due to the stigma of the emotion amongst both children and adults. Pinkett focuses on the underlying reasons for the anger, rather than blaming boys for having angry or aggressive behaviours. One of

the findings from this chapter is the idea that men and women experience anger the same amount as adults; the only difference is that “women tend to regard anger as counterproductive [while] men ‘seem to embrace their anger’ and which may be rooted in portrayals and conceptualizations of anger in the media and society. Pinkett’s solution for supporting boys with anger is the importance of teaching students *what* anger is, what the physical signifiers feel like, and utilize anger management techniques. The most important aspect of supporting students with anger, however, is the importance of destigmatizing anger, so that educators can support their students effectively.

Suicide and self-harm

Pinkett states that in his home country of England, “suicide is the single biggest killer of men under the age of 45. They are three times more likely than women to die by suicide” (p. 49), highlighting the importance of ensuring educators can provide support for male students’ mental health. The importance of recognising signs of self-harm as the biggest predictors of suicide, involves a comprehensive list of behaviours including changes in eating/sleeping habits, increased isolation from friends/family, substance abuse, and changes in academics. While the importance of support is emphasized, the author asserts the importance of educators not taking on the role of a therapist, but rather ensuring that students are able to receive the appropriate supports within and outside of school. Perhaps one of the most important revelations in the chapter is the idea of reframing the idea of ‘attention-seeking’. As Pinkett states, “the phrase ‘attention-seeker’ could be replaced with ‘person who has a need that requires attention’” (p. 60), allowing educators to ensure they are considering the needs of the student and reducing the stigma of mental health.

Sport and physical activity

The concern of students getting enough physical activity is well documented in education, with Pickett stating, “at an age where students become more sedentary, and more susceptible to developing a mental health disorder such as anxiety or depression, they are, quite perversely, getting *less* opportunity to exercise during the school day” (p. 140), citing issues such as other subjects getting more curriculum time and the training of physical education teachers. Interestingly, Pickett highlights how most physical education teachers utilize team sports, which can ‘other’ those who do not necessarily embody

the ‘physicality and athleticism’ traditionally expected of boys. The proposed solution for educators is the idea of focusing instruction on physical literacy, which includes “the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding that develops in order to maintain physical activity at an appropriate level throughout life.” (p. 147). This chapter highlights the need of reframing the idea of physical education in a way that is “holistic, inclusive, and diverse” (p. 162) so that every student has the opportunity to engage in physical activity.

Body image and eating disorders

In recent years, much of the work done on body image and eating disorders in youth has focused on female students. However, as Pickett discusses, there are specific body image issues male students encounter, such as ‘bigorexia’ – “an anxiety disorder that leads someone to believe they are too small or skinny, or that they are never muscly enough.” (p. 169). Considering that many discussions regarding body image have to do with weight loss, the idea of ‘bigorexia’ can be a revelation for educators who have not had the opportunity to learn about men’s body image. One of the solutions involves adults considering how they discuss bodies, especially their own. In an appearance-focused society, it is easy to forget that the words adults use regarding bodies can have a lasting impression on students, especially since chastising bodies has become increasingly acceptable in everyday language. Instead of focusing on appearance, Pickett discusses the importance of mental and health benefits of exercise, as well as teaching students about the manipulation of bodies in advertising and social media.

Conclusion

While the author wrote the book with a UK school-based context, his ideas are applicable to an international audience. The importance of supporting boys in the education system is highlighted throughout the book and provides educators with tangible and practical solutions for common problems encountered by male students. This book is recommended for any adult who wants to learn more about how they can support the mental health and wellbeing of boys and discover realistic solutions that can be implemented in a variety of situations.