



# How Adolescent Boys Learn: Tailoring Prevention Messages

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In general, adolescent pregnancy prevention (APP) programs focus on the needs of female learners. APP programs seldom mention the consequences of early fatherhood and often emphasize female-centered contraception, which is a topic that may not resonate with boys (Hilton, 2001). Recent data show a number of gender-based disparities across the education system that put boys at a learning disadvantage:

- Boys account for 71% of all school suspensions and 67% of all special education students.
- Compared to girls, boys are 5 times more likely to be classified as hyperactive (diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD] or Attention Deficit Disorder [ADD]) and 30% more likely to fail a grade level or drop out of school (Aud, KewalRamani, & Frohlich, 2011).
- Girls outperform boys in grades and homework at all levels (Aud et al., 2011).

These data indicate that the education system is clearly not meeting the learning needs of boys. This tip sheet explores gender-based developmental differences that can impact boys' learning and examines strategies facilitators can use to better meet the learning needs of boys in their APP programming. This tip sheet also provides specific tips for working with boys who are involved in the juvenile justice system.

## DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS

Although individual developmental trajectories vary for all boys and girls, there are some notable group-level differences that may impact how boys learn in the classroom. For example, there are multiple periods of rapid brain development for all children—between ages 0–3 and in adolescence—and the speed at which development occurs can differ between boys and girls. In fact, although the pre-frontal cortex (the decision-making center of the brain) is not fully mature until young adulthood, this maturation often happens faster among girls than boys, which may result in an apparent lack of self-control among boys in the classroom. Because of differences in the timing of maturation, boys may have less ability to manage impulses compared to girls of the same age. Higher testosterone levels in males can also lead boys to be more active, fidgety, restless, competitive, and aggressive—all characteristics that can create challenges for educators in a classroom setting (Leanderson, 2006).

## ADDRESSING DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES IN THE CLASSROOM

Integrating gender-appropriate teaching methods into sexuality education aligns with best practices for teaching across *all* disciplines. For example, educators should use a mixture of teaching methods that appeal

to all learning styles: visual, auditory, verbal, physical, logical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Gardner, 1983).

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

Although there is research supporting both same-gender and mixed-gender classes as preferred learning environments, often facilitators do not have a choice (Robinson & Smithers, 1999). These circumstances may be dictated by state, local, or individual school policy, particularly when implementing programs in schools.

### **A Note About Programs**

Notable characteristics of programs that work for boys include those that address adolescent sexual behavior by going beyond the classroom, such as those that incorporate service learning, those that include a cultural component tied to program effectiveness, and those that extend across school years (Marsiglio et al., 2006). Programs should consider including male facilitators or role models who might participate in specific discussions or lessons.

### **COMMON MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT BOYS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUALITY**

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

- Most boys are interested in having a relationship even if it does not involve sex (66%).
- One in five boys have been pressured to go further sexually than they wanted.

- Nearly all boys (94%) say it is important to avoid getting someone pregnant now (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2010; Albert, 2012).

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

### **A Note About the Media**

As educators plan programming in the classroom, they should consider the impact of the media on boys' social and emotional development. When it comes to adolescent boys' decisions about sex, the media has a stronger influence than their siblings, religious leaders, or teachers (Albert, 2012). Research shows that African American youth in particular report that the media negatively portrays them in situations related to sex and relationships compared to white youth (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2011). Therefore, African American youth need particular support to navigate the conflicting messages they are receiving from the media vs. other sources such as school and family. Facilitators should consider incorporating activities within lessons that utilize media, discussing celebrity relationships through role play or small group conversations, bringing in advertisements for popular brands to use as visuals when discussing gender norms, or incorporating social media into lessons.

### **SPECIAL CONSIDERATION: YOUTH INVOLVED IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM**

Although data show that arrest rates for girls are increasing, there is still a disproportionate number of boys in the juvenile justice system. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, in 2010, for a variety of complex reasons, boys 10 to 17 years of age experienced more than twice the arrest rate of girls in the same age group. Some boys in the juvenile justice system report benefits to becoming a parent as a teen, and research findings also indicate that the status of adolescent fatherhood can be instrumental in facilitating positive and productive life changes (Kelly, Lesser, & Paper, 2008), which is notably different from girls in the juvenile justice system and in stark contrast to the motivation to avoid pregnancies seen among teens in the general population (Albert, 2012). There are two programs designed specifically for incarcerated youth: Sexual Health and Adolescent Risk Prevention and the Rikers Health Advocacy Program. These and other evidence-based programs can be implemented with youth involved in the juvenile justice system. Consider the following tips from experts who work with male youth involved in the juvenile justice system to prevent adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections:

- Keep programs as interactive as possible.
- Shorten session/program length if possible.
- Train facility staff to implement programs so youth see familiar faces.
- Provide incentives such as grooming aids, additional phone calls, or other rewards. Ask youth what they would like.
- Provide youth with a certificate of completion that they can take pride in and share with a judge or parole officer.
- Co-facilitate sessions with male and female staff members so youth get both perspectives.
- Be LGBT-inclusive during lessons and role play.
- Allow different staff members to facilitate lessons to maintain participant interest.
- Consider the greater context of participants' lives and how that influences their behavior.

- Allow youth the freedom to express themselves using language they feel comfortable with, while sticking to ground rules, but minimize bragging among youth.
- Rephrase comments and questions to be general; use terms like *youth* instead of *you*.
- Ask open-ended questions.
- If the concept of abstinence is foreign to participants, refer back to sessions on healthy relationships to inform discussion.
- Use same-gender role play when facilitating groups of all males, or have a female facilitator play a female role.
- Have a positive regard for the youth and build trust with participants to create buy-in.
- Demonstrate comfort with the topic of sexuality.
- Be aware of diverse literacy levels.
- Ask youth for ideas for real-world scenarios.
- Be aware of referral systems and protocols for the agency in which you are implementing.

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