

Activity 3 – Life in a Box: Boys should be... Girls should be...

Notes for educators

This exercise hinges on the distinction between biological sex (the immutable and timeless differences between all males and all females) and socially created gender (our definitions of manhood and womanhood, our ideas of masculinity and femininity, typical physical attributes that we accentuate, and the relationships of power between the sexes.) Gender definitions change from era to era, culture to culture, and within different social classes and ethnic groupings. Because it proscribes certain behaviours, gender has traditionally set limits and restricts the full humanity of both women and men.

If you are interested in reading more on this topic, please read Michael Kaufman's *Cracking the Armour: Power, Pain, and the Lives of Men*, ch. 1-3, www.michaelkaufman.com/articles/crackingarmour.html

This exercise draws on "Act-Like-A-Man Box," developed by Paul Kivel and the Oakland Men's Project, and adapted by Michael Kaufman.

Ontario Ministry of Education Curriculum Linkages

Healthy Living: Grade 5

Growth and Development

- *identify strategies to deal positively with stress and pressures that result from relationships with family and friends;*
- *identify factors (e.g., trust, honesty, caring) that enhance healthy equal relationships with friends, family, and peers;*

Healthy Living: Grade 6

Growth and Development

- *apply a problem-solving/decision-making process to address issues related to friends, peers, and family relationships;*

Healthy Living: Grade 7

Growth and Development

- *use effective communication skills (e.g., refusal skills, active listening) to deal with various relationships and situations;*

Healthy Living: Grade 8

- *identify the physical, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual aspects of healthy sexuality (e.g., respect for life, ethical questions in relationships, contraception);*
- *apply living skills (e.g., decision-making, problem-solving, and refusal skills) to respond to matters related to sexuality, drug use, and healthy eating habits.*

You will need

- Activity sheet 3, one for every two youth;
- A flipchart or chalk board plus flipchart markers or chalk;

Activity (30 minutes)

1. Recall ground rules for all classroom discussions. Remind youth that you are counting on them to enable each student to respond as an individual and also as a responsible member of a community who is owed respect, is not measured against a stereotype and who will not participate in stereotyping. Ask the group if anyone has anything they would like to share from their journal entry last week.

Last week's journal questions were:

1. What was interesting to you about your group's survey results?
2. What choices, opinions and thoughts get most of the attention? Why?
3. What could you do to challenge an opinion that hurts a person or group of people?

2. Let youth know that this activity allows us to examine our gender assumptions about both women and men. We suggest using any of the following as a catalyst for thinking and talking about gender stereotyping:

- a. a powerful read-aloud poem (eg. For Every Girl by Nancy Smith), song lyrics (your students current favourite or "Video" by India Arie) or a quote (eg. "Boys will be boys" or, "Men are taught to apologize for their weaknesses, women for their strengths," by Lois Wyse);
- b. images of men and women (video, still or creative media) in stereotypically different roles defined by society's expectations;
- c. ask the group who their favourite sports celebrity is and keep track of how many women are named.

3. Ask the group to come up with five types of behaviour or qualities that traditionally have been defined as appropriate or inappropriate for men and women. These points should not necessarily be their own opinions, but the traditional views of society. Once the whole group has come up with five, break the youth up into pairs.

To get them started, here are some examples of traditional views held by society.

Men:

Loud, outspoken, makes the point
Leader
Strong
Provider
Occupied with car
Being bad is positive at times

Women:

Quiet, pretty
Follower, takes lead from others
Weaker, not as strong as men
Nurturer, care-giver
Occupied with household
'Good girl'

4. Ask each pair to continue the list but on their own worksheets for the next 5 minutes.

5. Pairs now need to report back. Cycling through the groups (getting one point from each group), ask for the points they came up with about women. Repeat, asking about men. Write on the board or flipchart. If on a flip chart, write small enough that the full list will take up no more than one page. Ask what the class sees when they compare the lists. (They tend to define opposite qualities. Often the men's list is seen as more positive.) What are the differences? How would the class summarize each list (for example, men have traditionally been seen as the stronger sex).

6. Ask which of these definitions are biologically natural and, by definition, describe all males or females. (You'll find that few or none are biological. Here you can introduce the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender.) If they aren't natural, where do we get these ideas?

7. Draw a box around each list. Explain that each set of lists is like a box that men and women traditionally were supposed to live within.

8. Ask the youth how many girls and women they know who still live in their box — that is, fit each and every point. Discuss what has led to these changes. How have women benefited by escaping their box? (It is, of course, the modern women's movement that provided the impetus for many women to escape their traditional box.) What put-downs are young women called when they don't fit into the box?

Some possible put-downs include;

- Homophobic teasing and put-downs such as dyke, butch;
- tom-boy or she-boy
- An attack on her appearance that may be irrelevant with comments such as ugly and/or fat;
- 'ball-breaker' or bitch;
- Feminist, radical;
- Angry, overly-emotional.

9. Ask how many boys and men they know who live up to each and every expectation of their box. (Of course, few, if any, actually do.) What happens to the boy in school who tries to escape from the box? (He is bullied or teased.) Conversely, what happens to the boy who seems to fit in? (In other words, there is a system of rewards and punishments that keep boys and men in their box.) What put-downs are young men called when they don't fit into the box? (Typically these boys will receive homophobic teasing and be called fag, pussy, queer or gay.)

10. What are the factors that force us into these gender roles? Where do we learn these roles? Do we see these attitudes in our parents? What people teach us these stereotypes?

Some possible influences include;

- Social institutions such as school, religious community and family;
- Culturally defined and reinforced stereotypes by media such as television, movies, magazines, newspapers, video games, pop culture and music;
- Peer to peer influences.

Wrap-up (10 minutes)

1. Ask the group how we all can benefit if we escape these boxes? What are the effects of being forced into these boxes? How might someone feel who doesn't conform? What choices can we make in our lives to help not only ourselves, but also others, to escape these boxes? Take this opportunity to open discussion about stereotypes and challenge any myths that might have come up.

2. Invite youth to visit www.whiteribbon.ca, Youth section, so they can post their comments and see what youth across Canada have to say about gender stereotyping and violence against women.

Hand Outs

If you have not done so already, please hand out a button to each youth who participated in the activity so they can visit www.whiteribbon.ca and see what other youth are saying about gender stereotyping and the problem of men's violence against women.

This Week's Journal Questions

1. What actions can we take individually and as a group to get out of the 'gender box'?
2. Thinking about the survey we did last time, how does everyone make it hard to not live 'in the gender box'.

Worksheet 3

Thinking About How Girls and Boys Act

What girls should do, say, act like....	What boys should do, say, act like....