



**Family
Education Trust**
the voice of family and youth concern

BOYS AND THE BURDEN OF LABELS



An examination of
masculinity teaching
in schools

Lottie Moore

Foreword by **Nick Fletcher**



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FOREWORD

The work of the Family Education Trust dates back to the early 1970s. In that time, they have been an influential voice, warning of the many societal changes that have taken place through the normalisation of liberal ideologies and policies implemented by successive Governments. Sadly these have had consequences, unintended or not, that have damaged family life, often leading to the erosion of our communities and, dare I say, our country.

We know through so much research that the family is the bedrock of any civilisation. It is proven that when a family stays together it is not only a lesser burden on society but produces happy, content, and hard-working individuals which add to each others' happiness and prosperity and that of our nation as a whole.

The Family Education Trust have, through sound research, tried to advise decision-makers and influencers on all the tough topics: marriage, safeguarding, divorce, and education to name but a few. In the time of social media and the erosion of free speech this is neither an easy or enviable task, but this has not deterred them in their mission to protect what so many of us take for granted – family life.

In keeping with that work, this report looks at one of the latest problematic ideological manifestations that has started creeping into mainstream thinking: 'toxic masculinity'. Again, not an easy subject to navigate, as I have found at my own cost.

As a former Member of Parliament and former Chair of the APPG for Issues Affecting Men and Boys, I am extremely pleased to see that Family Education Trust has taken the time to investigate this issue. My time over a four-year period in Westminster allowed me to meet individuals from across the world who realised the damage that has been done to boys and men and continues to be done by the negative narrative regarding 50% of our population. The phrase 'toxic masculinity' appears to capture all that is bad in the world and place it firmly on the shoulders of those with an XY chromosome. What is worse, so many boys and young men are told that they are inherently toxic and that it is society's job to cure them.

Our society is experiencing a series of serious problems in which men are profoundly disproportionately represented. The prison population is 94% male and the incidence of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is at an all-time high. Denying there is an issue would be foolhardy. In fact, it can be seen over the last two decades the situation has only got worse. Demonising all men however, telling boys at school that they are born bad, and continually pursuing a 'Diversity, Equality and Inclusion' (DEI) agenda whilst ignoring or minimising the welfare of 'white working-class boys', is not going to help.

FOREWORD

This report addresses the concept of ‘toxic masculinity’ and what is wrong with it. It also looks at biology, equality and the issues of incorrectly addressing this subject. I hope the reader will take time to thoroughly absorb this report and work with all stakeholders in their field to address this huge issue that society faces.

We need to start speaking well of the boys and men we share our lives with; start expecting the best out of them whatever stage they are at in their life; get them to feel valued at school, work and home; get them to respect themselves and others. If we encourage family life and make a huge effort to understand the need for a great Dad in every home, we will win this war. If not, we will sadly see the further erosion of family cohesion, more deeply troubled men, more violence against women and girls, and no doubt an increase to the biggest killer of men under forty-five – suicide.

I have no doubt some may take a negative view of this report’s findings, and assert that it is women that require greater help. I do not disagree that girls and women do need further assistance. As I often state, however: ‘If we help our boys and men, we automatically help our girls and women’.

The two halves of humanity exist as part of an organic whole, and cannot flourish one without the other. It can therefore surely only be a good thing that we critique regressive ideologies that seek to divide us, as part of the alternative effort to promote the restoration of a unifying and universally caring balance in our social and political discourse.

Nick Fletcher

Former Conservative Member of Parliament for Don Valley

INTRODUCTION

There has been growing concern over the last several years regarding Relationships, Health and Sex Education (RSHE) in schools. The content children are being taught, and the age at which they are taught it, has been the subject of an intense public debate. These concerns have generally arisen due to the fact that a contested set of beliefs about sex and gender have become embedded within many schools. This report will examine the emergence of another controversial set of beliefs about boys and young men, and the extent to which schools are incorporating these as they approach the issue of masculinity within RSHE.

The conversation around sex equality in the UK is considered almost exclusively through the lens of feminism. There is a risk associated with any effort to talk about policies relating to boys and men on their own terms – that is, without reference to women and girls. Accordingly, there is a sense that any focus on men and boys is acceptable only when it positively impacts the lives of the opposite sex. This narrative is clear in the Government’s approach, which is considering rolling out specific education for boys – but only in order to curb violence against women.¹

Over the past decade, an ideology that frames masculinity as destructive or ‘toxic’ has crept into mainstream thinking. ‘Toxic masculinity’ refers to the notion that there is something inherent to masculinity (traits relating to manhood and by extension boyhood) that is socially destructive. If masculinity is toxic, all boys and men must be too. Rather than addressing the challenges boys are facing today, these beliefs suggest the issue lies with boys themselves. Arguably it is not a coincidence that extremist figures such as Andrew Tate have become more popular, with a minority of boys and young men turning to dark corners of the internet in search of an identity which has been deemed as toxic from inception elsewhere.

Similarly to how other contested beliefs have entered mainstream thinking, the Family Education Trust sought to understand the extent to which this approach to masculinity is emerging within the classroom. This paper will firstly outline how discourse surrounding ‘toxic masculinity’ has developed within the UK, before explaining why these beliefs are problematic. It then sets out the obligations for schools regarding the RSHE curriculum, before assessing how a sample of schools are teaching pupils about masculinity. In July 2024, the Family Education Trust sent out over 300 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to schools in England to assess the prevalence of schools teaching ‘toxic masculinity’. We share the results of that survey and a number of notable trends. Finally, we offer a number of recommendations to Government and schools on how they should approach the subject of masculinity within the classroom going forward.

1 [Harriet Line, 'Labour vows to tackle rising tide of sexism in classrooms – caused by internet personalities like Andrew Tate – to prevent 'generation of misogynists', *Mail Online*, 21 June 2024.](#)

IS MASCULINITY TOXIC?

Discussions around masculinity and specifically ‘toxic masculinity’ remained largely within academia until 2017. Carol Harrington points out that before 2011, academic texts referencing ‘toxic masculinity’ never numbered above 20 a year, and until 2014 remained largely within this sphere. After 2017, references were returned in the thousands and the term had become mainstream, and commonly used in social and policy settings.² As noted by Helen Pluckrose in *Cynical Theories*, masculinity within academia is almost exclusively studied through a feminist framework.³

Despite entering mainstream discourse, the term ‘toxic masculinity’ is hard to define. Without a stable and well-conceptualised definition, the phrase lends itself to being the catch all phrase for just about anything and everything negative associated with men.

Despite its broad definition, ‘toxic masculinity’ is usually framed as a set of socially constructed norms and expectations that emphasises the dominance, aggression and emotional repression of men as innate behaviours associated with the male sex.

Traits associated with ‘toxic masculinity’

- *Sexism and misogyny*
- *Aggression and violence*
- *Emotional repression*
- *Homophobia*

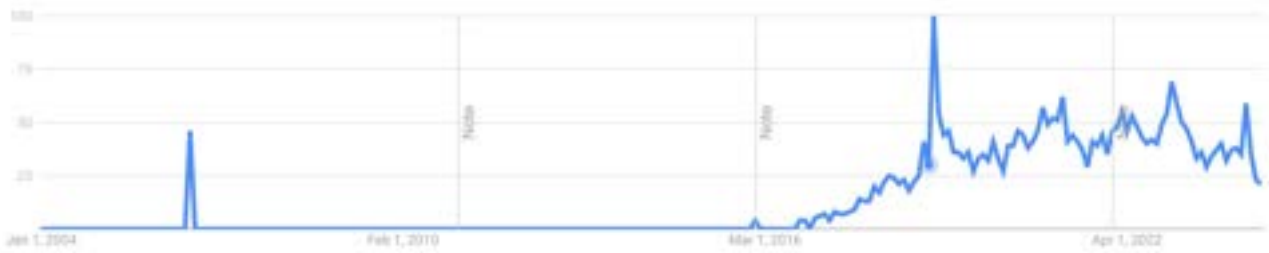
Misandry creeps into the mainstream

The advent of fourth wave feminism in the early 2010s, which focuses on rape culture, body shaming and sexual harassment brought into sharp focus the role of powerful men in the subjugation of women. In 2017, the #MeToo movement following the appalling revelation of sexual abuse by film producer Harvey Weinstein gained significant traction, exposing unchecked sexual violence against women and girls. However, it also bred a narrative by which the phrase ‘toxic masculinity’ took hold within the public consciousness. Lacking a stable definition, it is for the user to decide how they deploy it. As Reeves notes, ‘the phrase now refers to any male behaviour that the user disapproves of, from the tragic to the trivial.’⁴

2 Carol Harrington, ‘What is “Toxic Masculinity” and Why Does it Matter?’, *Men and Masculinities*, Volume 24, Issue 2, 2020, page 2.

3 Helen Pluckrose & James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity – And Why This Harms Everybody* (Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), page 154.

4 Richard Reeves, *Of Boys and Men: Why the modern male is struggling, why it matters, and what to do about it* (Swift Press, 2022), page 107.



Google Trends interest in the term toxic masculinity (2004-present).⁵

As Reeves highlights, ‘toxic masculinity’ has been blamed ‘among other things, for mass shootings, gang violence, rape, online trolling, climate change, the financial crisis, Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and an unwillingness to wear a mask during the Covid-19 pandemic.’⁶

Once the idea that males are inherently toxic or flawed entered the mainstream, with it an avalanche of misandry became socially acceptable. In an article for HuffPost in 2018 describing the phrase ‘Men are trash’, the author states:

Enter any room, social event, dinner party, creative gathering and you’ll hear the phrase from at least one corner of the room, and you’ll naturally gravitate towards that group of women because you immediately know you’ve found your tribe.⁷

The author quickly asserts that she doesn’t actually think all men are trash – her father, brother, and male friends are all exempt. Indeed, ‘despite the anger in their words, they [women] are not looking to end the entire gender, as appealing as it sometimes seems.’⁸ It is also probable that those using the Twitter/X hashtag ‘Kill All Men’ do not actually believe in the genocide of half of the human race, but under the badge of feminism, calling for it is seemingly excused from any kind of moral scrutiny that would apply to every other form of genocide sympathy.⁹ Most recently, one of the most commercially successful women in the world, singer Taylor Swift, screamed ‘Fuck the patriarchy!’ during her concert at Wembley Stadium, London in July 2024. 90,000 people cheered resoundingly.¹⁰

⁵ Google Trends, ‘Toxic Masculinity’, last accessed: 15th August 2024.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Salma El-Wardany, ‘What Women Mean When We Say “Men Are Trash”’, *HuffPost*, 2nd May 2018.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ X (formerly, Twitter), ‘#KillAllMen’.

¹⁰ ‘Taylor Swift gets fans to chant “f*** the patriarchy” during concert’, *Video, Mail Online*.

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE IDEA OF TOXIC MASCULINITY?

There are a number of issues with the concept of ‘toxic masculinity’ and its associated discourse. This chapter summarises these in four main problems: it posits that men and boys are innately flawed, it ignores the biological differences between the sexes, it encourages victim blaming, and it suggests sex inequality only runs one way.

Men and boys are innately flawed

Masculinity refers to a set of naturally occurring traits associated with men and boys. If these traits are toxic, by default males are naturally flawed. By pathologising masculinity in this way, there is no way for men and boys to escape their toxicity, because it is intrinsic to them by definition of their sex. As Psychologist Dr John Barry writes:

‘The evidence is much clearer therefore that it is not masculinity that is the problem as much as our attitudes to it. It cannot be good science to pathologise half of the human race. The fact that we can even seriously entertain the hypothesis that half of our gender spectrum in the human species is faulty shows evidence as to where the real problem lies.’¹¹

This narrative is also counterproductive. It is not difficult to see how people may not like being told there is something fundamentally wrong with them, simply by virtue of an immutable characteristic they possess. This scenario runs in parallel to the recent backlash against Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in the workplace. Many people are fed up with being told they must be ‘anti-racist’ or an ‘ally’, rather than simply respectful and polite to each person they work with.¹² The law and courts should be sufficient in dealing with those who do genuinely discriminate against others. Within the context of education, telling pubescent boys experiencing the array of natural emotions that accompany puberty that there is something wrong with who they are growing into is counterproductive. It does not resonate with how young men perceive themselves and the challenges they face.

11 Dr John A Barry, ‘The Male Gender Empathy Gap: Time for Psychology to Take Action’, *New Male Studies: An International Journal*, Vol 5, Issue 2, 2016, page 9.

12 Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, ‘Why Diversity Programs Fail’, *Harvard Business Review*, July-Aug 2016.

This is supported by a study from King's College London published in February 2024:

- *37% of men aged 16–29 found the term 'toxic masculinity' a 'somewhat / very unhelpful' way to think about relations between the sexes in Britain today.*¹³
- *Three in ten young men think it will be harder to be a man than a woman in 20 years' time.*¹⁴
- *Young men are considerably less positive than young women about the impact of feminism.*¹⁵

The idea that there is something innately wrong with any person contradicts how we perceive ourselves as individuals. People rightly believe they have natural sovereignty over themselves to choose how they behave within society. Demonising half of the human race as inherently toxic, emotionally repressed and violent diminishes the principle of free will which underpins the functioning of liberal democracy.

Biology matters

The 'nature versus nurture' debate is important when it comes to discussions about sex inequality. There is a tension within the discourse about 'toxic masculinity'. Despite claiming that masculinity is by nature toxic, proponents of this ideology also believe outcomes between the sexes are entirely the result of nurture. Hence, boys can be educated out of their problematic dispositions. The denial of biological reality here is similar to proponents of gender ideology, who believe there are no material differences between men and women. As such, either can become the other because all differences are simply down to nurture.

Of course, nurture is a substantial factor in the differences and outcomes of the sexes, but the role of biology is frequently underplayed. The male hormone testosterone is responsible for the fact that males have increased sexual desires (or sex drives) and their propensity to aggression and violence. This is not to say that society does not also 'nurture' these traits by glamorising them, but it is a fact that testosterone masculinises the brain, as well as the body. Male behaviours, preferences and interests are not simply the result of socialisation. A number of studies demonstrate that male toddlers demonstrate higher levels of physical aggression than female toddlers. As such, the early development of sex differences in aggression cannot be the result of nurture.¹⁶

Respecting the natural differences between the sexes is not a justification for sexism, and it does not mean we must be fatalistic about sex inequality and give up on the ideal of achieving equality of opportunity for everyone. Acknowledging that there is a biological basis for sex differences is essential, but 'toxic masculinity' frames these natural differences only in ways which are bad for males.

¹³ ['Emerging tensions? How younger generations are dividing on masculinity and gender equality'](#), The Policy Institute, King's College London, February 2024, page 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, page 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, page 15.

¹⁶ John Archer, ['Sex Differences in the Development of Aggression from Early Childhood to Adulthood'](#), *Encyclopaedia on Early Childhood Development*, January 2012, page 4.

Victim blaming

A further consequence of ‘toxic masculinity’ is the ways in which it ascribes problems to men as individuals. The APPG on Issues Affecting Men and Boys report into educational underachievement reached the following conclusion:

We found a widely held explanation for Boys’ Educational Underachievement was one which blamed the negative stereotypes of masculinity in the boys and that there was a need to improve their attitude. In effect, that the reason that boys are not doing well at school, is a problem they have caused and a problem of masculinity rather than society and the adults around them.¹⁷

While proponents of progressive ideologies are usually disposed to finding structural or societal causes for individual problems, men as a category appear to be exempt: male problems are a result of their own failings. ‘Toxic masculinity’ doubles down on this approach. For example, if a man experiences poor mental health, it is because he does not talk about his feelings. Similarly, if a teenage boy is failing at school, it is because he does not try hard enough. These narratives fail to consider wider evidence on the structural causes of these problems, such as the fact that boys and girls learn differently, and girls’ brains generally develop more quickly during puberty.¹⁸

There is also a classist element within ‘toxic masculinity’ discourse. Harrington argues that within academic scholarship, the label tends to be applied to marginalised men in a way that essentialises them as aggressive and criminal ‘discursively packaged in a way’ that presents itself as a concern for their wellbeing.¹⁹ The boys and men who are not doing as well within society as they once were, are generally poorer and often white. By individualising these peoples’ failings in the way that ‘toxic masculinity’ does, structural challenges that have arisen over the past 30 years are completely sidelined.

Sex inequality is not a one-way street

Arguably the most damaging element of ‘toxic masculinity’ ideology is the fact that it presumes sex inequality is only a problem concerning women and girls. The dominance of feminist rhetoric within public discourse on sex inequality is wholly focused on inequality experienced by females. With a few exceptions, there is very little public discussion or focus on the inequalities experienced by males in the UK, particularly young men and boys.²⁰

¹⁷ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Issues Affecting Men and Boys, [‘Closing the Gender Attainment Gap, Report of Inquiry No 4: Boys’ Educational Underachievement’](#), 19th November 2023.

¹⁸ Rhoshel K. Lenroot and Jay N. Giedd, [‘Sex differences in the adolescent brain’](#), *Brain and Cognition*, Volume 72, Issue 1, February 2010, page 47.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, Carol Harrington, ‘What is “Toxic Masculinity” and Why Does it Matter?’, page 5.

²⁰ The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Issues Affecting Men and Boys is a notable exception to this. Chaired by former MP Nick Fletcher (see his foreword above), the APPG held a number of important inquiries on sex inequality relating to males.

Education

At School²¹

- At the end of reception year, **under two-thirds of boys** had a ‘good level of development’ at age five, compared to approximately three-quarters of girls.²²
- At the end of primary school, boys were **5%** behind girls in meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths.²³
- At the end of compulsory secondary education, girls did better at every Department for Education measure than boys. In 2023, **68% of girls** in school achieved a pass in English and Maths GCSE compared to **63% of boys**.²⁴
- In the autumn term, boys were nearly **twice as likely** as girls to be suspended, and **more than twice as likely** to be **permanently excluded**.²⁵
- **Boys are more likely to have identified special educational needs (SEN)** than girls. In January 2023, **22% of boys had SEN**, compared to just 12% of girls. **6% of boys** had Education, health and care (EHC) plans, compared to 2% of girls.

Higher Education²⁶

- **Women are much more likely to attend university than men.** 54% of female pupils entered higher education by age 19 compared to 40% of males. **The gap in progression rates rose 1.2% between 2020/21 and 2021/22.**²⁷ Men are also less likely to attend ‘High Tariff’²⁸ institutions than females.²⁹
- **White male British pupils eligible for free school meals at age 15 were among the least likely to progress to university by age 19 in 2021/22.**³⁰
- **Men are slightly less likely** to graduate with an Upper Second Class Honours or First-Class Honours degree, and considerably **more likely to drop out** of their university courses than women.³¹

21 These statistics are from the latest available data, which is the academic year 2022/23. This data refers only to State-maintained schools.

22 UK Government, [Early years foundation stage profile results: 2022 to 2023](#).

23 UK Government, [Explore education statistics](#).

24 UK Government, [Key stage 4 performance](#).

25 *Op. cit.*, [Explore education statistics](#).

26 These statistics are from the latest available data, which is the academic year 2021/22.

27 UK Government, [Widening participation in higher education: Academic year 2021/22](#).

28 High Tariff institutions are those that typically require higher grades for entry.

29 *Op. cit.*, [Widening participation in higher education](#).

30 *Ibid.*

31 Paul Bolton and Joe Lewis, ‘[Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England](#)’, *House of Commons Library*, 25 July 2024, page 5.

Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

- Young men are more likely to be NEET than young women. An increase in the number of NEET young people between 2022 and 2023 was primarily driven by young men.³²

Youth Crime

- There have always been more male First Time Entrants (FTEs) to the criminal justice system than females. In December 2022, **boys comprised 84% of the total FTEs.**
- The number of child FTEs has fallen for both sexes over the last decade, but a larger percentage decrease has been seen in girls (82% for girls compared to 69% for boys).³³

It is understandable that until recently, sex inequality has focused primarily on women and girls, and of course, females can still experience very real disadvantages. However, acknowledging that sex inequality can and does run both ways is fundamental. The ‘toxic masculinity’ narrative allows no room for exploring these disparities.

A clear example of this within the UK education system is the admirable focus on encouraging girls to pursue Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) at university and beyond. Since 2010, there has been a 35% increase in the number of STEM A-Level entries from girls in England.³⁴ But there has been no similar policy initiative directed at providing opportunities for boys to pursue ‘pink collar’ or ‘female’ careers in HEAL subjects (as coined by Richard Reeves: Health, Education, Administration and Literacy).³⁵ In 2021/22, 75.7% of school teachers were female.³⁶ According to Royal College of Nursing statistics from 2023, only 9% of nurses are male.³⁷

Finally, discourse surrounding ‘toxic masculinity’ plays into an unhelpful oppressor / oppressed dichotomy, in which males are oppressors and females are victims. This fatalistic narrative is unhelpful for both sexes, who should be taught to view one another with mutual respect as individuals, not identities.

32 *Census 2021, ‘Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: February 2024’.*

33 National Statistics, *Youth Justice Statistics 2022 to 2023 England and Wales*, published 25 January 2024.

34 UK Parliament, *‘Diversity and inclusion in STEM: Government Response to the Committee’s Fifth Report, Third Special Report of Session 2022–23’*, released 16 June 2023.

35 Richard Reeves, *‘Men can HEAL’*, *Of Boys and Men*, Substack, 25th September 2022.

36 UK Government, *‘School teacher workforce’*, released 2nd February 2023.

37 Royal College of Nursing, *‘RCN Nursing in Numbers 2023’*, released 26th September 2023.

ANDREW TATE BECOMES THE SOLUTION

The challenges faced by men and boys, combined with rising misandry and its consequences highlighted above, has coincided with extreme ideas about masculinity flourishing among certain groups of boys and men. Within the UK, the most prominent example of this is Andrew Tate. Tate is an American-British 'alpha male' influencer and former kickboxer who has been accused of serious crimes, including rape and conducting a human trafficking and organised crime operation.³⁸ He has been banned on most major social media platforms for promoting a variety of aggressively misogynistic positions. Tate gained prominence as part of the 'manosphere' – a collection of online communities that espouse extreme ideas about women, feminism and gender roles.³⁹

Excerpts from Tate's commentary

*"I think the women belong to the man."*⁴⁰

*"If you're my friend, you just can't be a p*ssy. 'Well, I had a heart attack', get the f*** up. F***'s wrong with you? Go to the hospital later. Have a drink, cigarette, cup of coffee, back in the game. F***ing having heart attacks near me, you little p*ssy."*⁴¹

*"The masculine perspective is you have to understand that life is war. It's a war for the female you want. It's a war for the car you want. It's a war for the money you want. It's a war for status. Masculine life is war."*⁴²

There is growing concern about the influence of Tate's ideas on young men. The study referenced above from King's College London finds young men are much more likely to be favourable to views of Tate:

- *While only a small proportion of those who have heard of Andrew Tate say they have a favourable opinion of him, a much larger share of young men have a positive view.*⁴³
- *One in seven who have heard of Tate's statements on men and women say he raises important points, which rises to three in 10 among young men.*⁴⁴
- *Majorities of those who say they have heard of Tate's statements find his views on men and women offensive, but one in five young men aware of them do not.*⁴⁵

38 BBC News, 'Who is Andrew Tate? The self-proclaimed misogynist influencer', 23 July 2024.

39 The Conversation, 'The draw of the 'manosphere': understanding Andrew Tate's appeal to lost men', 12 February 2023.

40 Piers Morgan Uncensored, 'Andrew Tate: "Women Belong To Men in Marriage" On Women Being "Property"', YouTube, 8 October 2022.

41 Yash Nair and Mateusz Miter, '60 most controversial Andrew Tate quotes', 31 July 2024.

42 Adsum Try Ravenhill, 'The Andrew Tate Phenomenon & Providing a Better Path', 25 January 2023.

43 Ipsos, 'Emerging tensions? How younger generations are dividing on masculinity and gender equality', page 22.

44 Ibid., page 24.

45 Ibid., page 27.

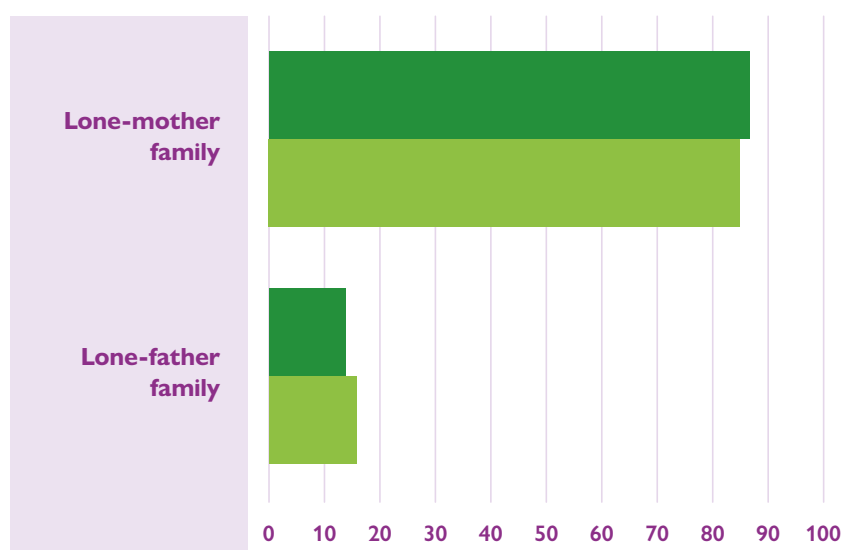
THE CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG MEN TODAY

Fatherlessness

Figures such as Tate become more appealing if boys lack positive male role models in their lives. It would be remiss of this report not to acknowledge the growing problem of fatherlessness in the UK and the impact this has on children, but especially boys.

Figure 2: The percentage of lone-parent families headed by a father in 2023 increased compared with 2013

Percentage of lone-parent families headed by a mother and by a father, UK, 2013 and 2023



Source: ONS family breakdown statistics 2013-2023.⁴⁶

Family breakdown is a major problem in the UK. In 2023, there were 3.2 million single-parent households, an increase of over 6.5% since 2013.⁴⁷ In practical terms, family breakdown generally always means fatherlessness, since 85% of single-parent households are made up of mothers.⁴⁸

There is an abundance of evidence that demonstrates the relationship between family breakdown and adverse childhood outcomes. For example, in a 2023 report on UK Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scores, the median number of ACEs of those who did not experience parental separation is 1, compared to 4 for those who did.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *Census 2021*, 'Families and households in the UK: 2023'.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood. They are often used as a metric to assess long-term impacts on health, opportunity and wellbeing. The higher the ACE score, the more likely a person is to have suffered trauma.

Children with active fathers are up to 28% less likely to suffer behavioural problems in their pre-teen years compared to children without an active father.⁵⁰ 76% of young men in prison in England and Wales had an absent father.⁵¹ In a joint survey of teachers by CiC Lads Need Dads and University of West London, 93% of respondents believe there is a link between boys with absent fathers or limited access to a positive male role model and disruptive behaviour at secondary school.⁵²

Fatherhood is important for children and supportive of mothers. Boys benefit from positive male role models. As our findings demonstrate below, there are good examples of schools using RSHE to promote positive male role models. It is beyond the scope of this report to focus fully on how to solve the fatherlessness crisis in the UK, but policymakers must be alert to the fact that without fathers and positive male role models, boys are more likely to find figures like Tate attractive.

Mental health

There is increasing awareness of the mental health challenges faced by boys and men. Suicide is consistently more prevalent among men than women and remains the biggest killer of men under 50.⁵³ Around three-quarters of suicides registered in 2022 were males (74%)⁵⁴ and in 2023, among children aged eight to ten, boys were more likely than girls to have a probable mental health disorder (this gap reversed in older age groups).⁵⁵ Despite this, men are less likely than women to have been in contact with mental health services, with women making up over 60% of referrals to mental health services in every local area in England in 2023.⁵⁶

There are a growing number of campaigns and organisations directed at encouraging men and boys to engage with their mental health. However, there is a tendency within ‘toxic masculinity’ discourse to co-opt this by suggesting that boys and men who do not engage with their mental health are emotionally repressed, which is a ‘toxic’ trait.

Analysis of therapeutic approaches by the British Psychological Society notes that the fact that men seek therapeutic help less than women do has been attributed to a deficit in men (for example, stubbornness) rather than limitations of therapy models or services. It also notes that there have been relatively few attempts within mainstream therapeutic services to design specific interventions for men in comparison with traditional approaches.⁵⁷ Men express their psychological needs differently, but this is not ‘toxic’ behaviour.⁵⁸ Toxic masculinity does not lead to men committing suicide, poor mental health does.

50 Charles Opondo, Maggie Redshaw *et al*, ‘Father involvement in early child-rearing and behavioural outcomes in their pre-adolescent children: evidence from the ALSPAC UK birth cohort’, *BMJ Open*, 2016, page 6.

51 Prison Reform Trust, ‘Prison: the facts’.

52 Lads Need Dads and University of West London, *Teachers’ experiences of the impact of fatherlessness on male pupils*, November 2022, page 9.

53 Samaritans, ‘Latest suicide data’.

54 *Census 2021*, ‘Suicides in England and Wales: 2022 registrations’.

55 Carl Baker and Esme Kirk-Wade, ‘Mental health statistics prevalence, services and funding in England’, *House of Commons Library*, 1 March 2024, page 15.

56 Carl Baker and Esme Kirk-Wade, ‘Mental health statistics prevalence, services and funding in England’, page 25.

57 The British Psychological Society, ‘Psychological interventions to help male adults’, November 2022.

58 Roger Kingerlee, Duncan Precious, Luke Sullivan and John Barry, ‘Engaging with the emotional lives of men’, *British Psychological Society*, 25 June 2014.

It also notes that there have been relatively few attempts within mainstream therapeutic services to design specific interventions for men in comparison with traditional approaches. Men express their psychological needs differently, but this is not ‘toxic’ behaviour. Toxic masculinity does not lead to men committing suicide, poor mental health does.

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION AND HEALTH EDUCATION (RSHE)

In order to understand how schools determine the curriculum within RSHE, this section will summarise key elements of the Government’s guidance on Relationships and Sex Education (RSHE) and Health Education.

In 2019, the Government released statutory RSHE guidance. In 2020, Relationships Education and Health Education was made compulsory in all primary and secondary schools. Crucially, schools are able to determine their own curriculum, but they must have regard for the guidance, ‘having good reason to do so’ when they depart from it.⁵⁹

Parents have a right to withdraw their children from sex education, **but they do not have a right to withdraw their child from Relationships or Health Education.** The guidance is clear that schools should work closely with parents when forming and teaching RSHE, and schools must share RSHE teaching materials with parents when they are asked. In March 2023, the former Education Secretary Gillian Keegan wrote to all schools in England to remind them of this duty. This was following widespread concern that gender identity beliefs (rooted in the idea that it is possible for children to be transgender and change their sex) were being taught within RSHE classes.⁶⁰ After several cases emerged of schools preventing parents from seeing resources due to copyright clauses, Keegan wrote again to schools in October that same year. She reiterated the fact that such contractual clauses are void and unenforceable in light of ‘the clear public policy interest of ensuring that parents are aware of what their children are being taught in sex and relationships education.’⁶¹

In light of parental concerns and widespread media attention on the appropriateness of material within RSHE, an independent review into RSHE was launched under the previous Government in 2023, with a view to updating the statutory guidance.⁶² Draft guidance was published in May 2024 alongside a public consultation which closed in July 2024. However, due to the 2024 General Election and subsequent change of Government, the updated guidance was never finalised.

59 Department for Education, ‘Draft Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and Health education’, May 2024.

60 UK Government, ‘Letter from Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP to schools about sharing curriculum resources (March 2023)’.

61 UK Government, ‘Letter from Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP to schools about sharing curriculum resources (October 2023)’.

62 UK Government, ‘Relationships, sex and health education independent review’ (June-September 2023).

Highlighted below are elements of the current statutory RSHE guidance (last updated in 2021) relevant to the topic of this report:

Within **primary school**, the statutory guidance states:

- ‘The focus in primary school should be on teaching the fundamental building blocks and characteristics of positive relationships, with particular reference to friendships, family relationships, and relationships with other children and with adults.’⁶³
- ‘Schools should teach pupils the knowledge they need to recognise and to report abuse, including emotional, physical and sexual abuse. In primary schools, this can be delivered by focusing on boundaries and privacy, ensuring young people understand that they have rights over their own bodies.’⁶⁴

By the end of **secondary school**, the statutory guidance states that pupils should know:

- The characteristics of positive and healthy friendships (in all contexts, including online), including trust, respect, honesty, kindness, generosity, boundaries, privacy, consent and the management of conflict, reconciliation and ending relationships. This includes different (non-sexual) types of relationship;
- What constitutes sexual harassment and sexual violence and why these are always unacceptable;
- The concepts of, and laws relating to, sexual consent, sexual exploitation, abuse, grooming, coercion, harassment, rape, domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence and FGM, and how these can affect current and future relationships;
- How people can actively communicate and recognise consent from others, including sexual consent, and how and when consent can be withdrawn (in all contexts, including online);⁶⁵
- That there are strategies for identifying and managing sexual pressure, including understanding peer pressure, resisting pressure and not pressurising others.⁶⁶

63 UK Government, ‘[Relationships and sex \(RSE\) and health education](#)’, page 19.

64 *Ibid.*, page 20.

65 *Ibid.*, page 28.

66 *Ibid.*, page 28.

Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) is the statutory safeguarding guidance to which all schools and colleges must adhere. With regard to child-on-child sexual violence and harassment, the guidance states:

'Schools and colleges should be aware of the importance of:

*Making clear that there is a zero-tolerance approach to sexual violence and sexual harassment, that it is never acceptable, and it will not be tolerated. It should never be passed off as 'banter', 'just having a laugh', 'a part of growing up' or 'boys being boys'. Failure to do so can lead to a culture of unacceptable behaviour, an unsafe environment and in worst case scenarios a culture that normalises abuse, leading to children accepting it as normal and not coming forward to report it.'*⁶⁷

What the Education Act 1996 says

Schools have legal obligations to be politically impartial. Sections 406 and 407 of the Education Act 1996 forbid schools from promoting partisan political views. When political viewpoints are raised, pupils must be 'offered a balanced presentation of opposing views.'⁶⁸

The use of third-party providers within RSHE

Schools are permitted to work with external agencies. Statutory guidance states that 'external agencies can enhance delivery of these subjects, bringing in specialist knowledge and different ways of engaging with young people.'⁶⁹

- *They check the visitor or visiting organisation's credentials;*
- *The teaching delivered fits with the schools' planned programme and published policy;*
- *They discuss the details of how the visitor will deliver the sessions and ensure content is age-appropriate and accessible for pupils;*
- *They ask to see materials used and lesson plans in advance;*
- *They agree how confidentiality will work in any lesson and that safeguarding protocols are in place;*
- *Visitors are used to enhance teaching by the school's own staff, not replace teaching by these staff;*⁷⁰
- *They do not agree to contractual conditions that prevent them sharing RSHE materials with parents.*⁷¹

67 Department for Education, [Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024](#).

68 Education Act 1996, [section 407](#).

69 UK Government, ['Relationships and sex \(RSE\) and health education'](#), page 18.

70 *Ibid.*

71 UK Government, ['Letter from Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP to schools about sharing curriculum resources \(October 2023\)'](#).

WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

This chapter will consider the extent to which discourse on ‘toxic masculinity’ has affected schools and in particular the RSHE curriculum.

Everyone’s Invited

In 2020, a new campaign was founded in the UK called *Everyone’s Invited*—an anti-rape movement focused on exposing and eradicating ‘rape culture’.⁷² ‘Rape culture’ refers to the normalisation of sexual abuse and violence. *Everyone’s Invited* encouraged people to share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Thousands of reports were posted on the organisation’s website, where mainly girls would share their experiences of harassment and abuse. Through self-verified submissions, *Everyone’s Invited* published a list exposing the schools and universities implicated. The list, available online, was last updated in 2022. It lists hundreds of primary and secondary schools, as well as over 100 universities.⁷³ Many of these submissions – all published on the website, not only named the schools but in doing so indirectly implicated the pupils accused.

As a result of the campaign, the Government asked Ofsted to carry out a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, which was published in June 2021.⁷⁴ Police also launched investigations into a number of schools identified.⁷⁵ Operation Hydrant (the nationwide police investigation into non-recent child sexual abuse) was asked to co-ordinate the police response to *Everyone’s Invited*. In their 2021 annual report, Operation Hydrant noted ‘challenges for the Analysis and Research team.’⁷⁶ In particular, ‘the classification of offences, which in some cases was sometimes subjective to the reader of the testimony. For example, there were differing interpretations of what ‘sexualised behaviour’ encompassed.’⁷⁷ A Freedom of Information request from May 2023 revealed that no person has been charged with an offence as a result of the investigation.

Nonetheless, the damage to schools and male pupils was done. The boys implicated had no means to defend themselves, and individual schools suffered huge reputational damage. The campaign successfully manufactured a moral panic within the education system which capitalised on the rising culture of misandry across the UK.

72 *Everyone’s Invited* website.

73 *Everyone’s Invited*, ‘Schools and Universities List; ENGLAND 2022’.

74 Ofsted, ‘Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges’, 10 June 2021.

75 BBC News, ‘Everyone’s Invited: Met investigates school abuse claims made on website’, 26th March 2021.

76 Operation Hydrant, ‘Annual Report 2021’, page 12.

77 *Ibid.*

The founder, Soma Sara, called sex education the root of the problem. In a 2020 interview, she said:

‘Good sex education would have changed all of our lives. Sex education is the root of the problem. We were not given the support, the language or encouragement to have complicated conversations about rape culture and all the different behaviours and attitudes that perpetuate it. Most of these behaviours are internalised – we often can’t even recognise them in ourselves.’⁷⁸

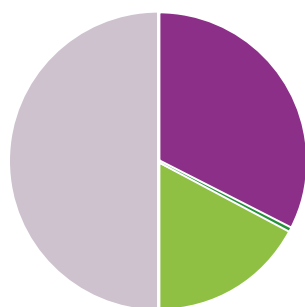
Under such intense scrutiny, it is understandable that schools have turned to their RSHE curricula, as also outlined in the statutory guidance. However, there is a spectrum of attitudes towards this subject, and our survey below explores the extent to which schools are veering into teaching partisan beliefs about masculinity we have explored above.

OUR SURVEY OF SCHOOLS

In June 2024, the Family Education Trust submitted over 300 Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to a sample of maintained secondary schools and academies in England.⁷⁹ The purpose of this research was to understand what is happening ‘on the ground’ in RSHE regarding the subject of masculinity, and how teaching may have developed as ‘toxic masculinity’ discourse has grown. This chapter documents the results of this survey, and highlights notable trends and resources. We have decided to keep the schools surveyed anonymous.

In total, we sent FOI requests to 303 schools, representative of the number of schools in every Local Authority (LA) in England. We excluded special schools from the sample because many of the issues raised in this report are not relevant to these institutions. Where a clear answer to a question could not be discerned, their answer was categorised under ‘insufficient detail provided’.

Our Survey of Freedom of Information Requests to Schools



Responded	197	65%
Refused	2	1%
Not responded	104	34%
Total	303	100%

⁷⁸ [‘Everyone’s Invited: An Interview With Soma Sara’, Last Bus Magazine, 28 October 2020.](#)

⁷⁹ Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, organisations have 20 working days to respond to a request. Schools that responded after 9th September 2024 have not been counted.

What we asked schools

1. Within your school, in the last two years, have you ever taught the following:

- The concept of ‘toxic masculinity’.
- That men and boys possess traits that are inherently toxic and negative for society.
- That young men as a category are in any way problematic.

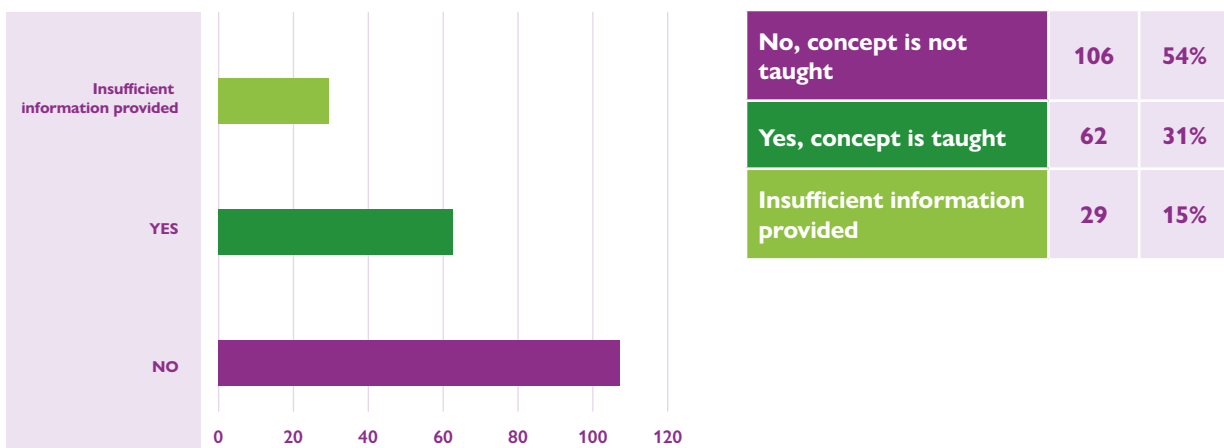
2. If so:

- Do you inform parents when you are teaching this subject?
- Have you worked with third party providers to teach this subject? If so, please name the organisation.

We also asked schools to share any relevant resources or teaching plans relating to the matters in question.

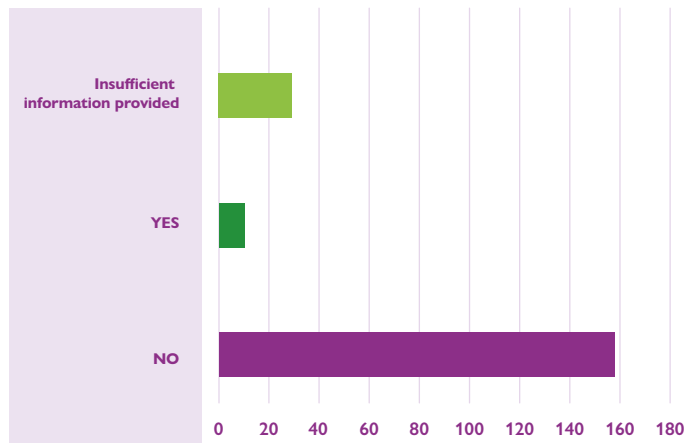
1a To what extent are schools teaching the concept of ‘toxic masculinity’?

3 in 10 schools surveyed are teaching pupils about the concept of ‘toxic masculinity’.



1b To what extent are schools teaching that men and boys possess traits that are inherently toxic and negative for society?

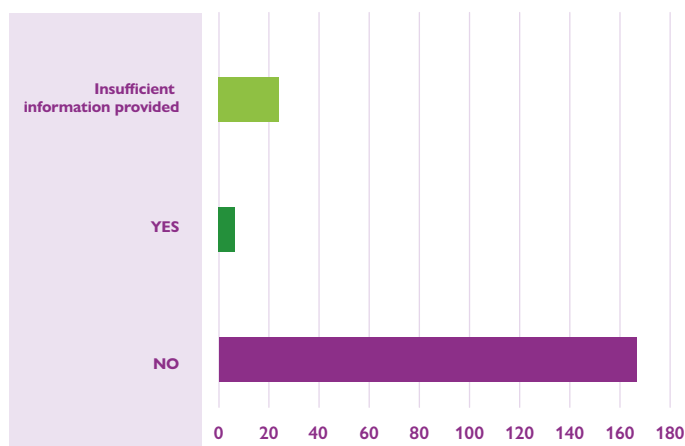
5% of schools surveyed are teaching that men and boys possess traits that are inherently toxic and negative for society.



No, schools are not teaching this	158	80%
Yes, schools are teaching this	10	5%
Insufficient Information Provided	29	15%

1c To what extent are schools teaching that young men as a category are in any way problematic?

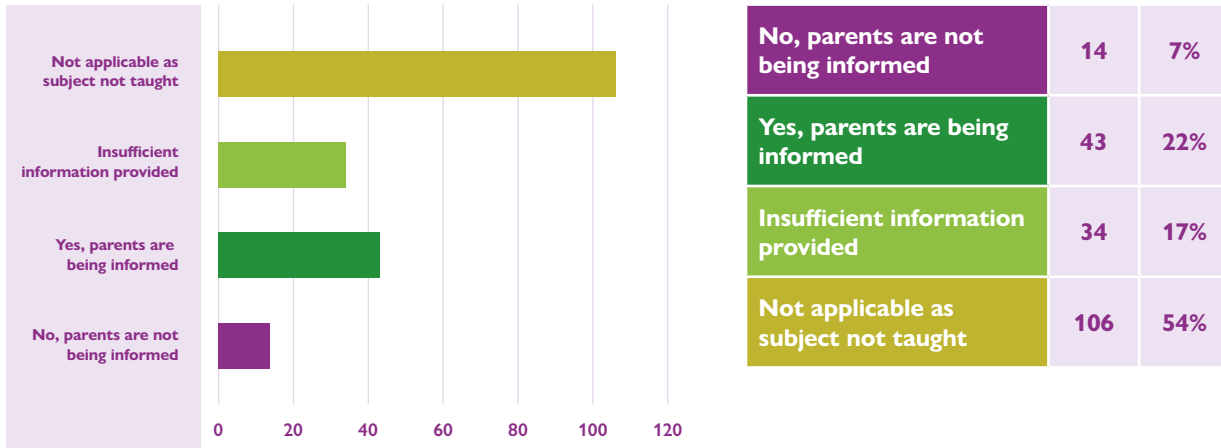
4% of schools surveyed are teaching pupils that young men as a category are problematic.



No, schools are not teaching this	166	84%
Yes, schools are teaching this	7	4%
Insufficient Information Provided	24	12%

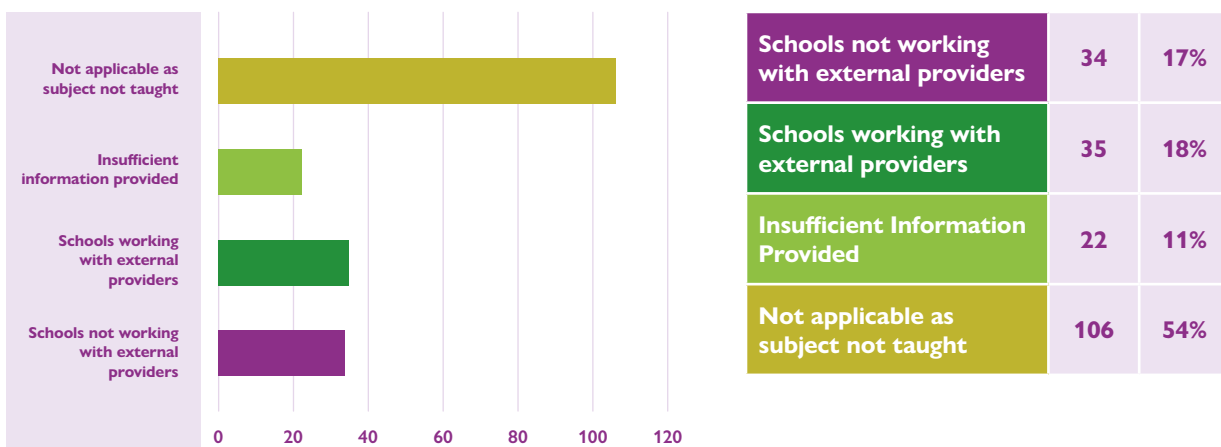
2a Where 1 A) B) or C) are taught, how many schools inform parents?

7% of schools are not informing parents when they teach the concept of ‘toxic masculinity’.



2b How many schools are working with third party providers to teach 1A, B and C?

8% of schools are working with external providers when they teach the concept of ‘toxic masculinity’.



NOTABLE CASE STUDIES AND THEMES

Masculinity is viewed exclusively through a feminist lens

A common theme within the resources and lesson plans shared with us was the portrayal of masculinity exclusively through a feminist lens. On occasion this was overtly political, such as in *figure 1* below, however often it was more subtle, with some lesson plans asking pupils directly questions around how they engage with feminism, for example.

Figure 1 shows two slides from a school's RSHE presentation on feminism. Intersectionality is a highly contentious framework, which focuses heavily on the identities of groups over the actions of individuals. The second slide focuses on privilege and suggests pupils must 'check their privilege' – to the extent that someone who describes something as 'lame' is insensitive to someone with a physical impairment. Again, there is very little focus on anything other than group identities.

Intersectionality and feminism

- The work towards women's rights must be intersectional – any feminism that purely represents the experiences of white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual etc. women will fail to achieve equality for all.
- Violence women and girls experience isn't just based on their gender. [44% of lesbian women experience intimate partner violence](#), compared to 35% of heterosexual women. [Women and girls with disabilities are 2 to 4 times more likely to experience domestic violence](#) than women without disabilities.

What can we all do?

- **Check your privilege:** And look beyond just skin colour. Middle class? University level education? Able-bodied? Cis-gender? All your social identities play into your 'privilege', even if you didn't ask for it. Reflect on these and consider how this impacts the discriminations you do and don't experience.
- **Listen and learn:** At its very core, intersectionality is about learning and understanding views from other women. Listen to, include and meaningfully collaborate with diverse groups of women. Hear and honour their words. But remember it's not the responsibility of marginalised groups to do all the work in educating people on their experiences. This often takes up lots of emotional labour and should never be taken for granted so be prepared to help undertake some of the labour by doing your own research.
- **Make space:** Ask yourself if you're the right person to take up space or speak on certain issues. Centre stories and actions on those with the lived experiences. Don't speak for them, don't speak over them.
- **Watch your language:** So many of the words we use every day are ableist, exclusionary and downright offensive to marginalised communities. When was the last time you said "ah, that's so lame!" when you were annoyed about something? Consider how someone with a physical impairment might hear this. Recognise and correct your use of such terms. Accept criticism and call others out. As we become more intersectional and better at understanding differences, our language evolve to simply reflecting experiences from people of a singular identity.

Figure 1

Below *figure 2* are slides from entire presentations on ‘toxic masculinity’, which are geared towards assessing which behaviours might be considered toxic and which are not. There is no equivalent presentation for girls, and the slides suggest masculinity can be defined as positive only if women and girls do not feel they are limited by it.

Is it bad?

- Masculinity in and of itself is not necessarily a harmful thing. For some people, the traits associated with masculinity are of high importance and high value. After all, courage and strength are widely seen as positive traits for a person to have.
- However, the way that masculinity is traditionally defined in society can be problematic, especially as it can be seen as limiting.
- Also, not all men prioritise traits that are traditionally associated with masculinity, like being strong or tough.
- These traits can be limiting for women, girls and other people who don't identify as men, who are not expected to display these traits.

YOU CAN BE MASCULINE WITHOUT BEING TOXIC BRO. #TRUTHTOPOWER

What is the difference between Toxic Masculinity and Misogyny?

Check your answers as a class

Toxic Masculinity		Misogyny	
Ordering a man a beer without first asking what he wants	Presuming someone is more manly because they have a beard	A woman behaving sexually makes her a "slut" but a man is fine	Expecting women to "make you a sandwich?"
Calling a man gay because he is drinking a cocktail	Telling someone to "man up"	Being disgusted by women's body hair but ok with men's	Thinking women are too emotional to be good leaders
		Laws that prohibit women from doing things, such as diving	Trying to control what your girlfriend wears

Figure 2

Figure 3 features a slide from one school's presentation on masculinity. The slide asks 'What does the law say?' and discusses the political decision by the previous Conservative Government not to legislate against misogyny. There is no mention anywhere else in the presentation about the existing protections in the Equality Act 2010 regarding the protected characteristic of sex which applies to both males and females.

What does the law say?

Following the death of Sarah Everard in March 2021 the campaign to make misogyny and violence against women a hate crime gained momentum.

Currently it is not classified as a hate crime therefore often goes without prosecution.

What does this suggest about the reason government are not wanting to make misogyny an act of law?

Home Office Minister Victoria Atkins said: equality of protection was "a crucial element of ensuring public support for hate crime legislation", adding: "In other words, if we were to have hate crime in relation to gender, we would have to think carefully about whether that would apply to the entire population or just to half of it."

Figure 3

All behaviour (good or bad) is intrinsically intertwined with masculinity

Another common theme within resources was the association of any kind of behaviour or trait (good or bad) as intrinsic to masculinity. A number of schools also stated that they endorsed or taught ‘positive masculinity’ – which essentially operates among the same philosophy as ‘toxic masculinity’ – it is the pathologisation of naturally occurring traits as either good or bad regardless of the individual in question.

Similarly, *figure 4* shows two slides from different schools and is representative of the focus within this lesson of ‘What should men be?’ There were no similar resources asking the question ‘What should women be?’ There was a strong emphasis that traits such as strength when inhabited by men could very quickly lead to misogyny. Anyone can display toxic behaviour, but schools are confusing behaviour taken to extremes as the standard archetype of masculinity (see *figure ?*).

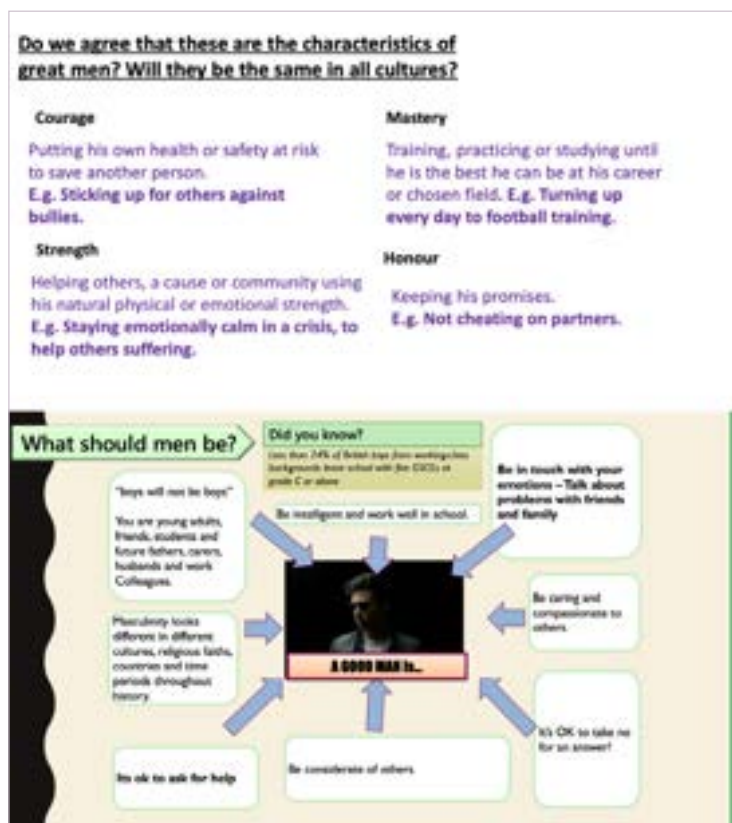


Figure 4

Versions of the ‘pyramid of sexual violence’ was also presented in several resources. **Figure 5** presents the idea that a man displaying ‘traditional gender roles within the family’ might go on to commit rape.

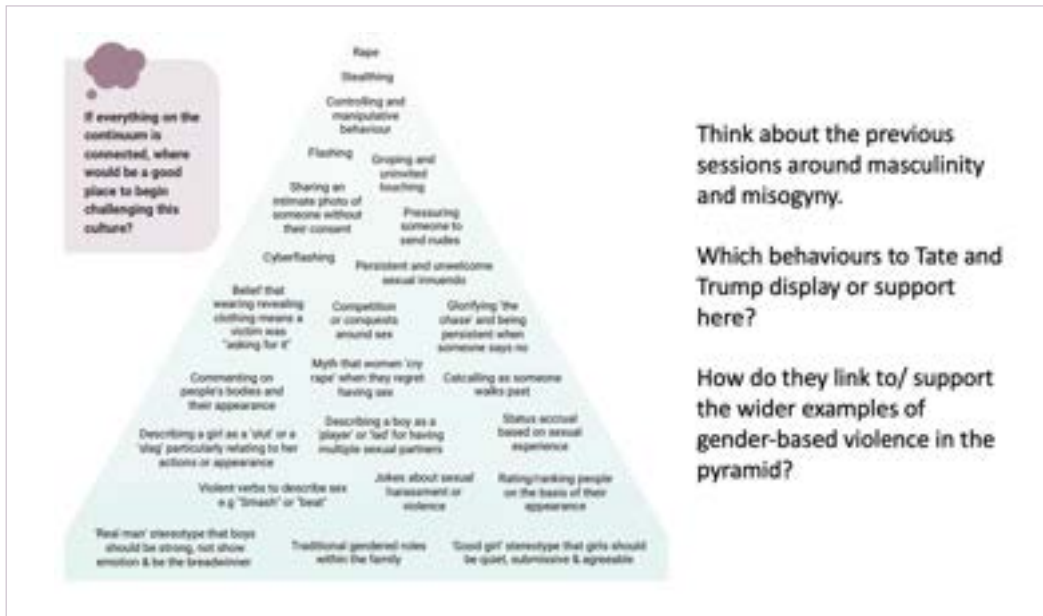


Figure 5

Discussions on masculinity are a gateway for gender identity to be incorporated into lessons

A final common theme among resources shared with us was that resources on sex stereotypes were often attached to resources on gender identity beliefs. Resources that focused on gender non-conformity often then went on to the possibility that a gender non-conforming boy who did not conform to masculine stereotypes might actually be transgender (see **figure 6**).

What do we mean by gender?
Match the terms relating to gender with their definitions. Answers on the next slide.

Sex	a) Having the same gender identity as our sex assigned at birth	b) The label assigned at birth based on genitals, hormones, and chromosomes
Gender identity	c) Personal sense of having a particular gender (could be the same or different as our assigned sex)	d) Having a gender identity different to our sex assigned at birth
Non-binary	e) Identifying as a gender other than male or female	f) The label we give ourselves based on who we're attracted to
Transgender		
Sexual orientation		
Cisgender		

Figure 6

Poor male mental health is frequently associated with wider class discussions on ‘toxic masculinity’

Many schools used the concept of ‘toxic masculinity’ to talk about poor male mental health. While it is with many good intentions that schools are attempting to encourage boys to discuss their feelings, there was an implicit and sometimes explicit association that men who express their psychological needs differently are exhibiting ‘toxic’ behaviour. See *figure 7*.

Key Statistics

- Just over three out of four suicides (76%) are by men and suicide is the biggest cause of death for men under 35 (Reference: ONS)
- Men make up 95% of the prison population (Reference: House of Commons Library)
- Men are nearly three times more likely than women to become alcohol dependent
- Men are more likely to use (and die from) illegal drugs
- 12.5% of men in the UK are suffering from one of the common mental health disorders
- Men are less likely to access psychological therapies than women

What do these statistics show?

LIFE LESSONS
WE NEED TO STRIVE FOR TO BE FORWARD

Life Lessons - Toxic masculinity & how to combat youth crime by David Brockway and Fern Estroff - BBC Sounds from 0:00-06:26

Listen to the following audio clip, from David Brockway the founder of the Great Men Project. David speaks about why it is important for young people to understand the negative effects of toxic masculinity. In the space below write down some key facts, what David is trying to do through his charity and why he started it.

Some further information and statistics...

Just over 3 out of every 4 suicides (76%) are by men. Suicide is the biggest cause of death for men under 35.

In 2018, 2 million adults in the UK experienced domestic violence. 1.3 million of these were women.

When men were asked what characteristics they associated with 'masculinity', those scoring highly included: strength, gaining respect, not learning to cook and clean, and even shunning [ignoring] gay friends.

Men are nearly 3 times more likely than women to become alcohol dependent, and men are more likely to die from the use of illegal drugs.

In a recent survey, 55% of men said crying in front of other men would make them feel like less of a man.

... Do you think that any/all of these statistics can be linked back to the culture of 'toxic masculinity'?

Figure 7

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Relationships, Health and Sex Education (RSHE) is unique from most other subjects taught at school. This is because of its nature as containing highly sensitive and personal material which deals with contemporary issues that bear societal significance far beyond the remit of the schools in charge of teaching it. Although outside of the scope of this report, there is a legitimate question to be asked as to the extent to which the State should yield any responsibility at all for matters which relate so intrinsically to private and family life. However, this paper contributes to a growing body of literature which aims to think critically about the content our children are being taught, regardless of the good intentions of the education system discharged with teaching it. Children and young people should be encouraged to view themselves beyond the narrow confines of their protected characteristics. We start from the premise that equality of opportunity for every child should be prioritised, without imposing on them partisan ideas that atomise people into separate groups.

Our Recommendations

- The new Government should reinforce schools' obligations to publish all Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) materials online and the parental right to view this material, as well as having an established route by which parents can raise concerns.
- No State-funded school should subscribe to external agencies where the concept of 'toxic masculinity' is covered and where these organisations are involved in political campaigning.
- Schools must ensure that issues surrounding healthy relationships are dealt with without stereotyping either sex. Where facts around sexual violence are explored, this must be taught holistically, without pathologising either sex as inherently 'good' or 'bad'.
- More research must be conducted into the developmental differences between girls and boys and how they learn. This should be incorporated into teacher training.
- Parents should have the right to withdraw their child from all elements (Relationships and Health) of RSHE, not just sex education.



Address

7 Bell Yard
London, WC2A 2JR
United Kingdom

Phone: 01784 242340

Web: familyeducationtrust.org.uk