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Op-Ed

The Mask You Live In

Boys are being taught too early that violence solves problems. At an early age constructing an image that a man is someone who relies on violence can be detrimental to the child’s development. This is a dangerous way for children to learn what defines manhood. While watching *The Mask You Live In* it is painfully obvious the toll these lessons on masculinity take on young boys because boys are often taught that they are not enough. To me, it is no wonder we have problems with gun violence, violence against women and violence against the LGBT community. The “boys will be boys” sentiment used to excuse their violent behavior has horrible consequences when boys grow up. I believe it is far past the time for us to redefine masculinity.

Mentoring is an important step in the right direction of having adults help redefine masculinity for boys. Much of what boys learn about being a man they get from their fathers or male adults in their life. A lot of the boys in the movie had problems expressing their emotions because of fears of being singled out or misinterpreted as being gay. One boy put it perfectly when he said “if I can man up, why step down from that?” (Newsom 2015). It is not only important, but healthy for these adult males to teach these children it is okay to express themselves in different ways. After boys are taught to shy away from their emotions, when they do express them, these emotions often emerge in the form of aggression and anger. This is why it is important for programs like My Brother’s Keeper and the small mentoring group we saw in the movie to exist because they are teaching boys valuable lessons about what it means to be man.   
 The effect that male parents have on children is an important factor into how they define masculinity. Boys who may not grow up with a father in the household, from the movie, seem to also be effected by their absence, something My Brother’s Keeper is trying to address. But, parents set the standard of masculine and feminine behavior that boys buy into. Expectations set forth by their parents or parental figures influence how they interact with others. This is how boys pick up a lot of who they are supposed to be. Violence among boys has come to be an expected part of a boy’s growth. Our culture even rewards boys who are able to assert their dominance through violence. Some fathers may even pat their sons on the back for fighting in school and encourage sons to showcase their masculinity through violent sports. Fathers are an important socializing models and can help instill appropriate character traits that boys will imitate. Fathers are in a position to teach their sons valuable lessons and have the opportunity to break the association of violence and masculinity.

Citation:

Newsom, Jennifer S. 2015. The Mask You Live In. DVD. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming.