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Op-Ed 2: The Mask You Live In

From a very early age, children are extremely impressionable where everything in their environment acts to socially construct their attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and much more. The socialization of gender typically begins the day of birth, but the parents set this trajectory considerably early (Carter 2014). When decorating a nursery, families who expect a baby girl may choose to paint the walls a shade of pastel pink and adorn the space with butterflies, stars, and baby animals. For families who expect a baby boy, walls are often painted a solid, strong shade of blue, adorned with airplanes, sports memorabilia, or a nautical theme. These two nursery scenarios are drastically different, beginning the process of socializing a child into their “appropriate” gender role.

It is very apparent in the documentary “*The Mask You Live In*” that boys in the United States are socialized into masculine gender roles and that these socializations impact their lives from youth into adulthood. So, what is the definition of masculinity? Who decides the definition of masculinity and who enforces that definition? Is there enough tolerance in our society that this term can have a flexible definition or is it destined to be forever rigid and non-forgiving? The implication from the documentary is that masculinity is seen as a rigid definition, where any deviation is automatically labeled as feminine.

Beginning in youth, boys are being taught that, in order to solve problems, one must be aggressive. They are being taught that to show emotion is to show weakness and to show weakness is to not be a man. These lessons are reinforced through toxic language and phrases such as “man up,” “suck it up,” “don’t be a sissy,” “grow some balls,” and “be a man.” It may seem harmless to those using this language, but to young boys it is everything but harmless. These corrections resonate with young boys, preventing them from ever feeling secure about their selves. Therefore, boys feel like they constantly have to prove their masculinity to others, so they begin mimicking the same phrases they are accustomed to hearing to their peers. On the playground, a boy can quickly start a fight by asking “who is a sissy around here.” This is a performance to show other boys that they are fearless and strong.

There are ways to combat the influences of social construction of masculinity and the pressure boys feel to adhere to this false ideology of masculinity. First, we can raise awareness so that we begin to question the traditional and rigid definition of masculinity. We can impact the way our society looks at manliness and promote a more flexible definition. This will not be an easy or quick process, but it must begin without ourselves then spread to others. Second, our schools need more programs to support young boys. Dr. Branch, in the documentary, developed a support group for young men so they can talk about their feelings and create relationships with one another. He asked these boys to complete a “mask assignment” where most of the boys expressed that they had a lot of fear, anxiety, and anger behind their masks. Many of our nation’s boys do not know how to cope and overcome many of the obstacles they face in life. Promoting a more flexible definition of masculinity and implementing more interest and support groups would be highly instrumental in the encouragement and development of boys.