

What Challenges Are Boys Facing,



and

**What Opportunities Exist To
Address Those Challenges?**

Initial Findings Brief



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation

A Look at Boys in America

Many adolescent boys are doing well. They graduate from high school, make healthy choices, and reach adulthood prepared for the world of work and the responsibilities of family. For young men like these, opportunities have never been greater.

For some boys, the transition to adulthood is more difficult. Some American boys become victims of crime or commit crimes themselves. Some abuse substances at a young age or suffer from mental health problems such as depression. Some do poorly in school or drop out. And often, there are disparities among boys based on race and ethnicity, family structure, socioeconomic status, and the places where they live.

The challenges boys face have not gone unnoticed by scholars, popular media, and the public. Recent headlines have asserted that there is a “problem with boys,” “a boys’ crisis,” and “a new gender gap” between boys and girls. But not everyone agrees. Some say that the toughest problems are faced only by subgroups of boys, such as African American and Hispanic boys; boys whose parents neglect them, abuse drugs or alcohol, are unemployed, or suffer from mental health problems; and boys with mental health problems such as conduct disorder, bipolar disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

This brief sets aside the debate to present research-based information about the strengths that make boys likely to succeed and the risks, or challenges, that increase the likelihood that they will struggle. It does not make an effort to compare boys to girls; it does not intend to imply that an issue for boys isn’t also relevant for girls. In fact, research shows that many of the same risk and protective factors, as well as interventions, may be relevant for both boys and girls.

Rather, this brief uses research-based information to highlight the positive impact that caring adults in families, schools, and communities can have on the well-being of boys and young men and the concrete steps they can take to help the boys and young men in their lives.

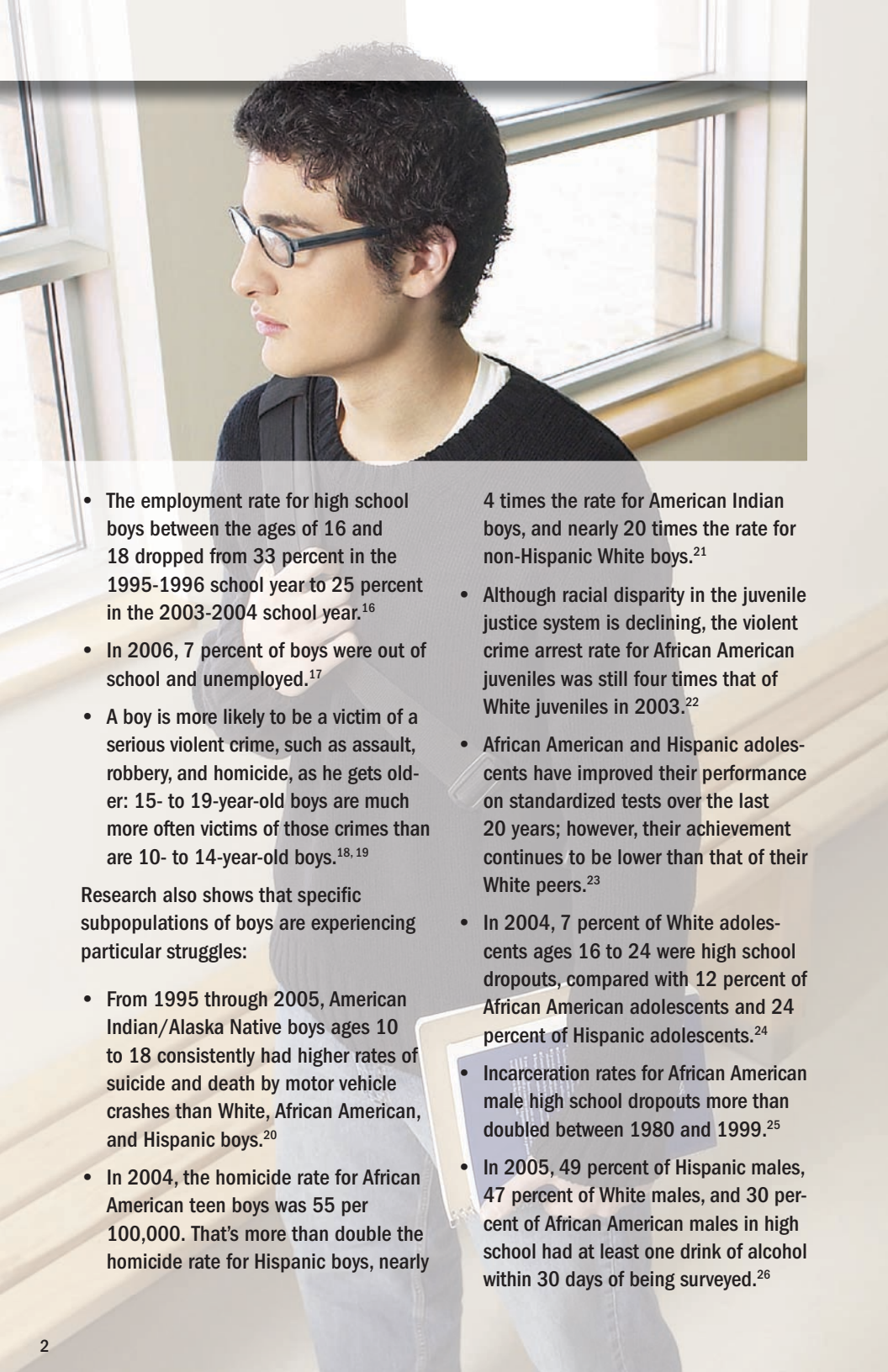


In Brief: Facts About How Boys Are Doing

There's both good news and bad news about how boys in America are faring.

Boys are doing better than they did a decade or more ago across a variety of indicators, including juvenile justice involvement, dropout rates, and substance use.

- Today, boys commit fewer property crimes, such as burglary, car theft, and arson, than they did in the late 1980s.¹
 - Boys' smoking rates are lower today than in the mid- to late 1990s. Their drinking rates have also declined.²
 - Since 1995, boys' dropout rates have fallen.³
 - Between 1994 and 2004, fewer boys between the ages of 10 and 18 have died each year.⁴ (Boys are most often killed in accidents, such as car crashes, followed by homicide and suicide.)
 - Boys are using their time constructively: one study found that nearly half of high school senior boys play a sport, more than a quarter take part in community affairs or volunteer at least once or twice per month, more than a quarter are part of a school club or activity, and about one-fifth play music or do other performing arts.⁵
 - A greater percentage of high school senior boys volunteered their time in 2006 than in the early 1990s.⁶
- However, boys are still facing challenges in many areas:
- In 2004, almost three-quarters of young people prosecuted in juvenile courts were boys.⁷ Their most common law-violating behaviors were vandalism, theft, and assault.⁸
 - From 1997 to 2003, around 85 percent of all juveniles in residential placement were boys.⁹
 - More than 1 out of every 8 tenth grade boys surveyed in 2006 had smoked at least one cigarette in the previous month.¹⁰
 - About 1 in every 6 eighth grade boys surveyed in 2006 had drunk alcohol in the previous month.¹¹
 - Nearly 40 percent of twelfth grade boys surveyed in 2006 had used illegal drugs in the past year.¹²
 - While adolescent boys report depression less frequently than girls, depressed boys are more resistant to treatment and more likely to commit suicide.¹³
 - While overall dropout rates have declined, in 2004, boys still represented over half (56 percent) of school dropouts ages 16 to 24.¹⁴
 - Almost twice as many boys as girls ages 3 to 17 have been diagnosed with ADHD.¹⁵



- The employment rate for high school boys between the ages of 16 and 18 dropped from 33 percent in the 1995-1996 school year to 25 percent in the 2003-2004 school year.¹⁶
- In 2006, 7 percent of boys were out of school and unemployed.¹⁷
- A boy is more likely to be a victim of a serious violent crime, such as assault, robbery, and homicide, as he gets older: 15- to 19-year-old boys are much more often victims of those crimes than are 10- to 14-year-old boys.^{18, 19}

Research also shows that specific subpopulations of boys are experiencing particular struggles:

- From 1995 through 2005, American Indian/Alaska Native boys ages 10 to 18 consistently had higher rates of suicide and death by motor vehicle crashes than White, African American, and Hispanic boys.²⁰
- In 2004, the homicide rate for African American teen boys was 55 per 100,000. That's more than double the homicide rate for Hispanic boys, nearly

4 times the rate for American Indian boys, and nearly 20 times the rate for non-Hispanic White boys.²¹

- Although racial disparity in the juvenile justice system is declining, the violent crime arrest rate for African American juveniles was still four times that of White juveniles in 2003.²²
- African American and Hispanic adolescents have improved their performance on standardized tests over the last 20 years; however, their achievement continues to be lower than that of their White peers.²³
- In 2004, 7 percent of White adolescents ages 16 to 24 were high school dropouts, compared with 12 percent of African American adolescents and 24 percent of Hispanic adolescents.²⁴
- Incarceration rates for African American male high school dropouts more than doubled between 1980 and 1999.²⁵
- In 2005, 49 percent of Hispanic males, 47 percent of White males, and 30 percent of African American males in high school had at least one drink of alcohol within 30 days of being surveyed.²⁶

What Works for Boys?

Researchers have found that having supportive families, teachers, and peers makes boys more likely to succeed. They've also found that facing certain challenges—such as doing poorly in school or being exposed to violence in the family or community—increases the likelihood that they will struggle. Of course, these strengths and challenges are not unique to boys. But researchers have found that boys and girls do have gender-specific social, emotional, and developmental needs and respond differently to the pressures of adolescence.

(A full list of the strengths and challenges that, according to research, can influence whether boys succeed or struggle is available on the Helping America's Youth Web site: <http://guide.helpingamericasyouth.gov/programtool-factors.cfm>)

Based on their understanding of these strengths and challenges, researchers have studied various strategies for helping young people become healthy, happy, productive adults. These studies often

are not exclusive to boys; however, they provide some strategies that research suggests help to build boys' strengths and lessen the obstacles they face.

Building Individual Strengths

Pair young people with caring adult mentors. Youth who perceive that they have support from adults in their lives develop personal qualities, such as life skills, problem-solving skills, and social skills, that allow them to thrive even in the most difficult life situations and the toughest environments.²⁷ Mentoring is one way to help young people know that adults care about them. Studies have found that youth with mentors often feel better about themselves and are less likely to use drugs.²⁸ Mentoring programs have been used effectively with various racial and ethnic groups, including White, African American, and Hispanic youth. Research suggests that mentoring programs that use the fol-

How This Brief Was Developed

This brief is based on a comprehensive review of scientific literature on the strengths and challenges that affect boys ages 10 through 18. Major literature databases, articles that summarize research into the wellbeing of boys and youth, and the directories listed in the box on page 16 were searched for relevant information. Although the review focused on materials published in 2000 and later, influential earlier reports and articles are also included.

The strategies for helping boys that are listed here have been evaluated in peer-reviewed scientific studies and have strong evidence to suggest that they work. Where appropriate, this brief provides information about whether the interventions included have focused on specific subgroups of boys.

lowing practices are more likely to help young people:^{29, 30, 31}

- Providing intensive screening of potential mentors
- Training new mentors for a total of at least 6 hours and providing ongoing training and support

How You Can Help

Parents can contact schools, faith-based organizations, and community organizations for boys (such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Boy Scouts of America, and the YMCA) to determine if mentoring programs are available nearby. In choosing a mentoring program, parents should use the elements of effective mentoring programs, as defined by MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, as a guide.³²

Community members can volunteer to be mentors. They should sign up for programs that include MENTOR's elements of effective mentoring. People interested in mentoring can search for volunteer opportunities at http://www.mentoring.org/mentors/find_an_opportunity.

Local businesses, such as movie theaters, miniature golf courses, and bowling alleys can host mentor-mentee days. For more information about how to get involved, they can contact their State mentoring partnership. (For a list of State mentoring partnerships, see http://www.mentoring.org/find_resources/state_partnerships.)

- Ensuring regular meetings between mentor and mentee that total 4 hours or more per month for at least a year
- Recruiting mentors who maintain a steady presence in their mentees' lives by showing up for scheduled meetings, giving advanced notice when they need to cancel a meeting, and calling or e-mailing when they can't meet face-to-face

For boys in particular, features of effective mentoring programs include:

- Matching boys with male mentors who share the same culture, race, ethnicity, or interests
- Having mentors focus on teaching specific skills rather than simply trying to develop emotional connections

Help youth understand the harmful effects of drinking, smoking, and using drugs. When adolescents think drugs such as marijuana and cocaine are bad for them and when they encounter social disapproval of drinking and using drugs, they may be less likely to use substances.^{33, 34} By changing young people's perceptions of smoking, drinking, and drug use, educators have been able to keep some adolescents from experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.^{35, 36, 37, 38, 39} Research is also beginning to show that smoking prevention programs in schools can work even better when paired with programs that teach parents and families how to prevent their children from smoking.⁴⁰ Overall, programs and interventions that prevent adolescent substance use tend to target general populations. However, these programs can be adapted to meet the needs for ethnic minority youth. Elements of effective programs include:

For teachers, in the classroom:^{41, 42, 43, 44, 45}

- Conducting classroom discussions about the perceived acceptability of smoking, drinking, and doing drugs and developing lessons aimed at changing those perceptions
- Incorporating lessons about the physical and social harm that use or misuse of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco can have, both in the short- and long-term
- Initiating classroom conversations about the types of things that may cause youth to use substances, such as peer pressure, messages in the media, and personal pressures (wanting to fit in, feeling depressed)
- Teaching young people to communicate effectively, make good decisions, and reject peer pressure



*For parents, at home:*⁴⁶

- Talking to children about drinking, smoking, and using drugs as well as about everyday problems and concerns
- Monitoring children's behavior, their whereabouts, and their friends
- Applying consistent rules and fair discipline

How You Can Help

Parents and caregivers can talk to their children candidly about the harmful effects of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. They also can model responsible drinking by not drinking too much and not drinking and driving. And they can make clear their expectations for their children by not allowing anyone under legal age to drink in their homes and agreeing with other parents not to allow drinking at their children's parties.

Parents and concerned community groups can make sure school-based substance abuse prevention programs include the elements of effective interventions described above.

Schools can provide evidence-based prevention programs to their students and train teachers on how to appropriately broach classroom discussions with youth. School administrators can search for proven prevention programs on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov>. (See box on page 16 for more information about the registry.)

Building Strengths at Home

Strengthen family support through school-based programs or in-the-home therapy. Boys who have supportive, involved parents and families are less often bullied and victimized, get into less trouble with the law, and have fewer mental health problems.^{47, 48, 49, 50} They are more likely to do well in school and less likely to drop out.^{52, 53} Bolstering family support by teaching parents and children to cope with stress and communicate well with one another can improve their behavior in school and help keep boys

How You Can Help

Parents can ask community organizations or their county's human services department about where to find parenting classes and mental health resources that support the whole family. They should look for programs that include the elements listed above.

Schools can set up programs to help strengthen families by partnering with local mental health facilities and other community organizations that support families. School-based family support programs should include the elements described above.

Community organizations can make it easier for families to access services by offering free parenting classes at convenient hours and locations, providing family therapy programs and parenting resources in multiple languages, and offering onsite childcare.⁶⁶

from committing crimes such as stealing and vandalizing.^{54, 55, 56} Similar to the substance use prevention and intervention programs, family strengthening and support programs are developed for general populations but can be adapted to incorporate ethnic values, family values, and other cultural and contextual factors that meet the needs of minority families. Elements of these efforts include:^{57, 58, 59}

- Teaching parents, through group or one-on-one sessions, to reward good behavior, communicate better with their children, put in place ways, such as weekly family meetings, for the whole family to communicate, set rules and expectations for their children, and discipline fairly and calmly
- Encouraging family bonding through shared activities and meals with other families
- Teaching young people, through group or one-on-one sessions, a range of skills including how to cope with stress, set goals, be aware of and control their feelings, solve problems, deal with peer pressure, and communicate better
- Providing families with access to appropriate mental health screenings, and with the skills, tools, and supports needed to address their child's mental health needs
- Fostering parent-child bonding through therapy sessions, including "play therapy" in which parents and children do activities together in the presence of a trained therapist

Give parents the skills they need to raise their children with fair discipline and adequate supervision. Young people who are disciplined harshly and

whose parents do not supervise them are more likely than their peers to get into trouble with the law. They are also more likely to become aggressive or violent.⁶⁰ Programs that teach basic parenting skills, such as how to provide consistent rules and fair discipline and how to model good behavior, can, at least in the short term, help parents lessen their children's aggressive behavior.⁶¹ Such programs may be combined with school-based efforts to improve the ways teachers manage their classrooms, interact with students, and teach social

skills and self-control.⁶² Elements of effective parenting programs include:^{63, 64, 65}

- Teaching effective family communication skills
- Emphasizing the importance of being involved in children's education and proactively identifying effective resources to help struggling students
- Providing opportunities to discuss children's problems and concerns
- Providing a range of approaches to family management and emphasizing the importance of monitoring children's activities, friends, and "hang outs"
 - Specifying strategies for fair and appropriate discipline with firm and consistent rule enforcement
 - Developing components designed to improve parents' wellbeing and reduce stress and anger

Developing Strengths Among Peers

Give young people ways to support each other. Most parents would say they want their children to hang out with the "good kids." In fact, boys whose friends and schoolmates are supportive, rather than mean and bullying, are less likely to get in trouble with the law, to suffer from mental health problems, or to smoke, drink, or use drugs.^{67, 68, 69} And boys who have friends who act out in class may be more likely to drop out of school.⁷⁰ School-



based peer support groups and peer tutoring programs can help young people build better relationships with fellow students. They can also keep young people from drinking, change their minds about dropping out of school, and improve their grades, standardized test scores, and school attendance. Peer tutoring has been shown to have positive academic outcomes for African American

and other minority students, as well as for White students.^{71, 72, 73}

Elements of effective peer support programs include:^{74, 75, 76}

- Organizing support groups on bullying, resiliency skills, staying sober, dealing with divorce or remarriage, coping with depression, or sharing feelings. Peer support groups may also provide academic help.
- Providing adult facilitators, both from the school and the community
- Including peer facilitators who have a semester's worth of training in listening and communication skills
- Ensuring that meetings occur weekly for regular periods of time (about an hour)
- Using a social skills curriculum that teaches good social behaviors, such as communicating clearly, listening, resolving conflicts, sharing, and helping others
- Providing young people with opportunities to practice acquired skills
- Having conversations with young people about how they define positive support from their peers

Elements of effective peer tutoring programs include:⁷⁷

- Training tutors
- Training teachers to handle issues students face during the tutoring program
- Ensuring that tutoring lasts about 12 weeks
- Pairing tutors with tutees of the same sex, when possible

How You Can Help

Schools can implement peer tutoring programs and provide training for tutors and teachers who organize these programs. Schools can commit to creating a positive school climate, in part by encouraging students to report rewarding interactions with their peers, rather than just reporting meanness, bullying, and other bad behavior.⁷⁸

Young people can communicate with teachers and administrators about the kinds of support groups that would interest and help them. They can also ask about whether their schools offer peer tutoring programs and sign up to be a tutor or to be tutored.

Community centers can sponsor peer support groups that incorporate the elements of successful school-based programs.^{79, 80}

Parents can encourage their children to attend support groups or peer tutoring sessions by researching options and showing an interest in the sessions' content.

How You Can Help

Teachers can lobby school administrators to provide ongoing training in classroom management and interactive teaching techniques.

Community members can volunteer to tutor students preparing for college.

Parents can monitor how their children are doing in school from an early age and, if necessary, seek help immediately from enrichment programs.

Building Strengths at School

Improve boys' academic achievement and classroom behavior through comprehensive programs that focus on social skills as well as academics. Boys who disrupt class or are low achievers may be more likely to drop out of school.⁸¹ And dropping out of school can put boys at risk for a host of other problems, such as poverty, unemployment, and criminal activity.⁸² Programs that are successful at helping boys do better in their studies and get into less trouble at school tend to combine a number of different approaches, including:^{83, 84}

- Intervening immediately when students begin to miss school
- Focusing on truancy and school attendance in the early years – even elementary school and kindergarten
- Involving parents in school activities and providing them with communication and parenting skills
- Enhancing competency in reading and math
- Training teachers on how to better manage their classrooms and teach in interactive and cooperative ways
- Making summer sessions, mentoring, and extra tutoring available for high school students preparing for college



For boys, in particular:

- Focusing on boys' education before problems arise, as early as preschool
- Teaching boys ways to relate positively with peers and adults

Empower boys in the classroom. Boys who feel connected to their schools and supported by teachers do better in their studies and are less likely to misbehave in class.^{85,86} When schools and teachers empower students by involving them in day-to-day decisions about classroom rules and procedures, boys are sent to the principal's office less often, have better attendance, and generally do better in school. Such efforts can also increase teacher attendance. Because teachers spend less time disciplining students, class time becomes more efficient and enjoyable for both teachers and students.^{87,88} Elements of these efforts include:⁸⁹

- Empowering teachers and students to create a climate of mutual respect and caring in and out of the classroom
- Training teachers to involve students in classroom management strategies
- Establishing expectations for behavior and learning at the beginning of the school year
- Creating partnerships between teachers and students in which they share responsibility for planning classroom activities
- Encouraging teachers to show students they care by eating lunch with them or arranging one-on-one time if a student needs extra help with an assignment
- Assigning students roles as helpers and managers in the classroom through a fair application process
- Involving parents and other adults as classroom speakers and role models



How You Can Help

Teachers can work with students to create a "class constitution." They can also create job postings and job application processes in which classmates interview each other for classroom helper positions.⁹⁰

Schools can invite parents to talk to students about how school rules about good behavior relate to real life and work settings.⁹¹

Fostering Strengths in Communities

Give youth a sense of connectedness through community partnerships.

Young people who grow up feeling connected to their communities have better health, greater social competence, and more self-confidence.⁹² Young people who grow up in distressed and disconnected communities—those characterized by crime, gang activity, and deteriorated housing—are more likely to act violently.⁹³ One way to help young people feel connected to their community is through community partnerships that create opportunities for youth and demonstrate to young people that the community cares for them. Studies have shown that partnerships in diverse communities can successfully support youth.^{94,95,96} Elements of effective community partnerships include:

- Identifying potential partners at the outset, including community leaders, residents, youth, schools, faith-based institutions, and businesses
- Encouraging participation from all members and inviting youth to be active partners
- Establishing a motivating mission, as well as specific and realistic goals for what the partnership wants to accomplish
- Encouraging the formation of relationships both within the group and with the larger community
- Respecting the community's values and cultural beliefs
- Developing consistent messages and actions around the importance of creating more positive environments for youth

Create community-wide efforts to prevent substance use and abuse among adolescents. When young people can easily get their hands on drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol in their neighborhoods, they are more likely to use drugs, smoke, or drink early on and, as a result, more likely to abuse substances or become dependent on them.⁹⁷ When communities band together, pooling the energies of parents, schools, policymakers, and

How You Can Help

Community members can join a community partnership and volunteer some time to help a local coalition or task force accomplish a goal.

Local businesses can donate space for community partnerships to meet. They can also host a community forum to discuss community challenges and opportunities.

Community-based organizations can collect local data and produce a community report that tells the community how it measures up on youth issues. Community organizations can also encourage and reward adults who provide positive opportunities for youth.

Police can find ways to develop relationships with young people in high-crime neighborhoods, for instance by visiting schools and drop-in centers. Police officers and community members can also discuss common concerns and ways to work together.

How You Can Help

Business owners can educate themselves about State and local laws and regulations regarding underage access to tobacco and alcohol. They should train their staff to understand these regulations, know how to request IDs, and be aware of the repercussions of violating local regulations.

Local community organizations and businesses should support no-drinking and no-smoking messages aimed at youth.

Community resources such as local newspapers and civic organizations should recognize those businesses that adhere to regulations and condemn those that do not.

Parents who smoke or have a drinking problem should get help to quit.

businesses into comprehensive prevention efforts, they can reduce underage smoking, drinking, drunk driving, and sales of tobacco products and alcohol to minors.^{98, 99, 100, 101} Elements of these efforts include:

- Involving local media outlets in spreading messages that condemn underage drinking, drunk driving, smoking, and illegal drug use
 - Improving the enforcement of laws that prohibit selling alcohol to minors and establishing laws that create drug-free zones around schools and parks
 - Holding “awareness days” around drunk and drugged driving
 - Initiating telephone hotlines for reporting drunk and drugged driving
 - Restricting young people’s access to tobacco products by educating
- merchants about why they shouldn’t sell tobacco to minors and strengthening and strictly enforcing laws around those sales
 - Informing retailers about how and why they should prevent underage youth from buying alcohol
 - Training bar staff on how to responsibly serve alcoholic beverages
 - Increasing enforcement of drunk driving laws
 - Implementing effective school-based curricula to prevent smoking, drinking, and drug use
 - Educating parents and creating avenues for them to get involved in keeping their children from using smoking, drinking, or using drugs





What Works for Boys?

Boys' problems are not intractable and their strengths are many. Research has shown that, sometimes, simple steps can go a long way toward helping support boys as they confront challenges: Showing them that adults care about them.^{102,103} Talking to them candidly about drugs, tobacco, and alcohol.^{104,105,106} Encouraging them to help, rather than bully, each other.¹⁰⁷ Providing them with positive, supervised ways to spend their time when they are not in school.¹⁰⁸

Caring adults in families, schools, and communities can also come together to build comprehensive solutions to boys' challenges—solutions that focus not just on individuals, but on the social networks that surround them.

Researchers don't yet have all the answers. In particular, more research is needed into ways to help boys navigate through poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, and violent crime. Solutions must also be studied that address the challenges specific subpopulations of boys face.

There is no one right answer. Some boys may respond well to simple interventions, while others require years of additional support. What we do know is that, despite challenges, there is great opportunity to prepare all boys in America to develop their capabilities, reach their potential, and transition successfully to adulthood.

Where To Learn More About Strategies That Work

To learn more about ways to help boys, start with these online Federal directories:

The What Works Clearinghouse

U.S. Department of Education

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>

Information about interventions that improve educational outcomes for children and youth. The site lists various strategies that can help students succeed.

Model Programs Guide

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

http://www.dsgonline.com/mpg2.5/mpg_index.htm

Searchable database of scientifically proven programs that target a range of problems adolescents may have. Programs are rated as “promising,” “effective,” or “exemplary,” depending on the strength of the research that supports the program’s use.

National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices, or NREPP

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

<http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov>

Searchable online directory of mental health and substance abuse interventions for people of all ages. Each intervention is reviewed and rated by independent experts according to two sets of criteria: “quality of research” and “readiness for dissemination.” Users can search for interventions specifically tailored to adolescents and young adults.

Helping America’s Youth Program Tool

The White House, in partnership with 10 Federal agencies

<http://guide.helpingamericasyouth.gov/programtool.cfm>

Searchable database of programs that help put young people on the right track. All programs in the database have been shown in studies to be effective. Programs are rated as levels 1, 2, or 3 depending on the strength of the research supporting their use.

Promising and Effective Practices Network, or PEPNet, Index to Quality Practices

U.S. Department of Labor and National Youth Employment Coalition

www.nyec.org/page.cfm?pageID=110

Searchable database of more than 1,000 things that effective youth employment programs do to prepare young people for the world of work.

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A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several black graduation caps (mortarboards) being tossed into the air. The caps are in various stages of flight, some near the top and others lower down. The background is a bright, overcast sky. The overall mood is celebratory and hopeful.

Additional Resources

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