



Healthy Teen Network

POSITION STATEMENT ON ENSURING EQUITY FOR YOUTH BY APPLYING GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

Adopted by the Healthy Teen Network Board of Directors on September 21, 2017



Position

Healthy Teen Network believes that organizations that deliver sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services should apply gender transformative approaches to their service delivery. When so doing, professionals who provide sexuality education, clinical, and supportive services to youth should be cognizant of the environment and social norms within which the youth reside and remain respectful of their cultures while attempting to mitigate potential negative effects of strict binary gender roles.

Issue

Gender, the social and cultural assignment of people into male and female categories, is an important determinant of sexual risk taking behaviors (Rolleri, 2013). Gender beliefs that promote sexual conquests among young men as ‘manly’ and sexual activity among young women as ‘what you do to keep your man’ are debilitating to both genders and result in risky sexual behaviors, thus increasing the risk for sexually transmitted infections (STI) and unplanned pregnancies.

Gender socialization begins at birth with clothing color and toy selection based on gender (e.g., blue baby clothes for boys and pink for girls), and continues into adolescent development. Young people receive messages at school, through media, and from their peers, parents, and communities to act in certain ways because of their assigned gender. While some gender role assignments can be relatively benign, others can have very real and significant impacts on youth behavior.

Rigid, binary gender roles can have harmful effects on youth health and well-being, especially with regard to their sexual and reproductive health. Traditional gender roles are not in themselves harmful but can be if held to rigidly and perceived as they only way one can behave.

Gender transformative approaches are the best practice for countering rigid gender norms and promoting gender equity. Gender transformative approaches recognize that gender norms are malleable and that young people can be trained/retrained to demonstrate traditional gender roles, such as toughness for men and too much attention on appearance for women, in healthier ways. Offering healthier expressions of traditional traits, such as toughness (for example running a marathon versus fighting) can accommodate culture while building healthier behaviors overall. These approaches are often ecological in nature (ACQUIRE Project, 2008), and thus aligned with Healthy Teen Network’s Youth 360° approach to youth health and well-being.

Supporting Information

There is extensive research to support that traditional male and female gender roles lead to sexual risk taking behavior.

Male Gender Roles: Young men are often taught to be tough, competitive, self-reliant and risk-takers (Rolleri, 2013). These traits may not in themselves be harmful, however, if young men think they have to act this way all the time, or they are not taught how to exert these traits in a positive manner, then they can have very real emotional and physical effects.

Data from the Annual Survey of Adolescent Males, a nationally representative sample of adolescent males, ages 15-19 (Pleck and O’Donnell, 1985; Pleck et al, 1990; Pleck et al, 1993; Marcell et al, 2007) tell us that young men who abide by strict gender norms, compared to their peers who do not, are more likely to report:

- More sexual partners in the previous year;
- More negative attitudes toward condoms;
- Less condom use;
- Less of a belief that it is a male responsibility to prevent pregnancy;
- More of a belief that pregnancy validates masculinity;
- Fewer intimate relationship at last intercourse (i.e. more intercourse outside of relationships);
- More of a belief that male/female relationships are adversarial, and
- More homophobic attitudes.

Female Gender Roles: While one could argue that women and girls are less restricted to specific gender roles that they once were and compared to their male counterparts, we still have a great deal of room for improvement, and not just within more traditional cultures. One only has to consider the sustained emphasis on women’s appearance, and the continued labeling of girls as either virgins or sluts to recognize that gender norms persist. Jewkes and Morrell (2010) termed the feminine gender norm of accommodating to the interests and desires of men above ourselves as “acquiescent femininity.” Acquiescent femininity works in tandem with traditional male gender norms. Data from multiple studies (Jewkes and Morrell, 2010; Connel, 1987; Heise et al, 1999; Stewart, 2003; Ickovics and Rodin, 1992; Nahom et al, 2001; Ott et al, 2011; Wingood and Clemente, 2000) report that women who subscribe to more acquiescent female norms state they are:

- Less likely to be educated on sexual health issues;
- Less likely to plan for sex;
- More likely to have an unintended pregnancy;
- More likely to give birth at a young age;
- Less likely to use condoms consistently;
- Less likely to be able to negotiate safer sex;
- Less likely to have the self-efficacy to avoid HIV;
- Less likely enjoy their first sexual encounter, and
- More likely to experience an abusive relationship.

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