

DIVERSITY ISSUES IN BOY-FRIENDLY PROGRAMS

By Frank Robertson...Feb., 2003

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The center of gravity of boys' groups is far more physical and outwardly competitive than girls' groups. As a Minister of Religious Education, I have seen that very thing again and again in church school classes where boys are present in large numbers or in the homes of families where children happen to be boys. Generally, most boys are out there attacking evil as Spider-man or going directly to the toy trucks. Most girls are dancing with a ribbon or going directly to pick up a doll.

The UU Men's Network has been trying to help churches understand what it means to be boy-friendly and provide more active, physical, outwardly competitive opportunities for boys. Our church programs seem to need that encouragement right now because so much of church school is centered on activities in small rooms where discussion and the arts are high priorities. Our men's movement is calling us to get more active in those rooms and organize more trips outside with muscle-centered programs.

In the midst of this encouragement, all of us know that a few of the young males listen to the sound of a different drummer. They are the boys whose central being propels them to dance with a ribbon or play house. They also soon learn to hide themselves somewhat from other children—and, of course, a few girls hide their longing for rough play, too. As we strive to become more boy-friendly in our churches, we should continue to affirm the unusual boys and girls, but also recognize their natural tendency to hide who they really are. Perhaps we should also recognize that many boys feel confined in a passive RE program and may be hiding their true feelings in order to "behave" as they think they should.

Added to the challenge is the inevitability of a few children with special needs in most of our church schools. Boys with special needs seem to stand out the most because their behavior can be *too* physical, sometimes even violent. In training sessions during the last few decades, religious educators have been seeking advice about how to understand and minister to the needs of such children. A lesson learned from this training is that one should be careful not to assume that a more active program will, by itself, meet the needs of a boy who is uncontrollably active.

It is clearly possible to raise the activity level in a religious education program if one sets out to include situations where young people run, climb, jump, build, lift, etc. Many times additional organizing by leaders is required in order to provide such opportunities for young people, but the results make it all worthwhile. I have always

found that teachers are eager to lead a more dynamic program, even if it takes more of their time, if they can see how such a program meets the physical, social, and religious needs of their students.

More Suggestions for a Boy Friendly Church School Program

1. Organize a progressive dinner to three or four of the homes of children (about age 7 to 10) where at least two of the host families have boys in the group. The meal is served in stages at the various homes in sequence and each host child and family is responsible for some sort of game or activity for the group.
2. Plan a game where everyone can participate regardless of their skill level but which welcomes muscle use, such as volleyball, broom ball, or a tug-of-war.
3. Hold a "Boys and Men's Night" at the church but plan it well in advance so that boys whose dads may not be able to attend can still be involved by coming with a mentor. Keep the diversity of boys in mind but plan some physically active parts of the program.
4. Take the group on a hike on a nature trail or up a small mountain.
5. Rent the use of a pool for a church school class for an hour and arrange to eat lunch together at a theme restaurant.
6. Arrange a trip to another UU church, especially where there is a bell tower to climb. A video of that bell tower and the group's visit might be fun to share with the congregation during a coffee hour.
7. Help a group of dads and their sons make a cabinet or bookcase for one of the church rooms.
8. Try games where kids pick up teams and run around in the classroom related to a curriculum theme. For example, develop a series of about twelve sentences with key words missing that retell the story for the day. The teachers hide those words about the classroom in advance of the session and two teams try to find the missing words around the room. The team that gets their sheet completed first wins. (Include a code number with each word and require that all of the words be found with their code numbers.)

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