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## **Locker room culture turns boys off physical education; Girls not the only ones suffering from poor body-image, researchers find**

by Matthew Pearson, The Ottawa Citizen

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Scholars from Australia, Canada, Britain and the United States will gather in Ottawa next week for what organizers say is the first-ever symposium to explore the issue closely and forge a connection between declining participation rates in physical education and overall health.

The three-day conference, funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, is being convened by leading experts in the fields of education, health sciences and physical education.

Co-organizer Michael Kehler, who teaches in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario, said people often mistakenly believe girls are the only ones with body image issues.

While perceptions of beauty and how it is marketed are often central in discussions of female body image, for boys the discussion instead revolves around what the body represents in terms of one's masculinity. And no one really talks about that, Kehler said "There's no common public discourse in which schools in particular are actually acknowledging that boys struggle with what their body looks like," he said.

Part of the problem is that traditional forms of sport are rooted in rugged masculine ideologies and place a high value on lean, muscular bodies. That leaves many boys on the margins of this stereotypical ideal, feeling unsafe or unwelcome in gym class or the locker room because of the often merciless teasing they receive at the hands of other boys.

The locker-room image he conjures is that of a Wild West, with no adults, no rules, and where women are objectified, sculpted bodies are valorized and everyone else is mocked.

Kehler said boys who are deemed by others as too fat, too thin, not as physically capable and who don't compensate by engaging in other masculine activities — namely booze, bikes and fast cars — are labelled as feminine or their sexuality is questioned.

Faced with such a rigid climate, it's no wonder some boys report feeling nauseous or anxious before gym class, while others develop coping strategies to avoid undressing in front of others, such as wearing gym clothes underneath street clothes, changing in toilet stalls and steering clear of the showers.

For athletically-inclined kids such as Miles Weekes — he plays soccer, hockey and used to swim — gym class and the locker room were a breeze. But the Grade 12 student admitted other kids aren't as lucky. Some are teased about their athletic abilities or for lining up to change in private stalls, but never — at least as far as he's seen — about their bodies or sexual orientation.

"There's no relation to athletic skill and getting teased about sexuality," he said. The head of physical and health education at Nepean High School agreed. "I think kids are a lot more accepting of each other than in the past," said Wayne Bifulchi.

Still, he knows some students try to avoid the locker room, so he tries to find safe, alternate places in the school for them to change. Nepean also enforces a dress code in gym class, meaning girls and boys alike wear baggy shorts and T-shirts with sleeves. Spandex and tank tops are outlawed.

Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia all require students up to Grade 8 to participate in a minimum amount of physical activity every day.

But at the high school level, where Ontario students need just one physical education credit to graduate, Kehler said not enough is being done to deconstruct the pervasive culture — and that's turning away a growing number of boys from taking additional classes.

"If we're not able to allow all boys to participate in a healthy, active environment, then we need to look closely at what we can do to change that climate both in the locker room and the gymnasium," he said. Bifulchi said Nepean tries to engage students by offering a wide range of school sports and outdoor adventures, as well as a popular personal fitness class, which appeals to the children who want to be fit but don't necessarily like the competitive side of team sports. He'd also like to see physical education made mandatory for all four years of high school.

Kehler said education ministries should reform the physical education and health curriculum so body image as it relates to boys is raised much sooner. He also urged parents, teachers and the public to rethink long-held beliefs about masculinity and physical education, noting research has shown disengagement from physical activity in early life can lead to sedentary behaviour in adulthood.

Many of Kehler's insights come from one-on-one interviews with dozens of boys from Vancouver, London and Halifax. Many tell him it's not the actual physical education class they hate, but rather the macho culture that surrounds it.

Kehler said he's struck by how familiar the story is and how little it appears to have changed since he was in high school.

"We're in 2011," he said. "We, as educators, have a responsibility to ensure that all students are safe and respected and I think from the research and from what we're hearing these boys saying, there's something amiss here and we're not being attentive to it."