

# Gender equality creates new school boys

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The boys at the primary school where Stian Overå conducted his field studies were considerate and inclusive, and very concerned about their appearance.  
Credit: [www.colourbox.com](http://www.colourbox.com)

According to new Norwegian research, decades of gender equality measures have helped to change children's upbringing and their understanding of gender.

"It's not that [boys](#) used to be naughty and now they are nice," says Stian Overå.

"But compared with previous classroom research, I've found a change in how boys relate to emotions. Being personal and talking about feelings was not problematic or feminine in their eyes. It was almost an ideal. And it was more important to be kind than to be strong."

Overå, a social anthropologist, recently defended his doctoral thesis on gender in primary schools. For an entire year he followed two groups of [pupils](#) aged 6–12 in a modern primary school in a suburb of Oslo. The area does not have a distinct working-class or middle-class profile. About 15 percent of the pupils had a [native language](#) other than Norwegian.

## **Gender equality measures work**

Much of what Overå found was known from previous research. His study documents gender-stereotyped behaviour, such as girls who prefer to play in pairs and be best friends and boys who play in larger groups and have visible [hierarchies](#) with clear leaders.

But the boys observed by Overå behaved differently than the boys described in previous studies. So differently that it makes sense to talk about a change in the way boys behave

"Gender equality measures work," Overå states.

"Gender roles in the Nordic countries are changing. Several new Nordic studies have had similar findings. Gender used to be rooted in tradition. Today it is more fluid."

## **Scratch each other's backs**

According to Overå, the boys aged 6–8 had the most relaxed attitude

towards feelings and touching. These boys had "positive touching" as a daily school activity in which the pupils learned to touch each other. The objective was to create a sense of belonging to a group where everyone can touch and stroke each other regardless of whether they know each other and regardless of gender.

"The pupils liked it a lot. It was not strained in any way," says Overå.

"The youngest boys could scratch each other's backs and hold hands during recess."

When Overå presented the phenomenon of "positive touching" for a group of researchers at the University of California-Berkeley, they were flabbergasted.

"It's not coincidental that these measures are developed in Norway or the other Nordic countries," says the researcher.

"I think the changes I've observed are connected with Nordic ideals of gender equality and measures that are introduced as early as pre-school."

## **Considerate boys**

The older boys, aged 9-12, did not have such a relaxed attitude towards bodily contact. They had to be on guard for being called "gay".

In spite of this, both the younger and older boys were considerate towards each other.

Other studies have found that boys' interactions are characterized by rough attitudes, aggressiveness and rule-breaking. In contrast, the groups of boys observed by Overå were friendly, inclusive and good-natured. And they talked about their feelings.

"Boys are not aggressive or emotionally incompetent. That is not my experience. In many situations the boys talked openly and thoughtfully about girls they had crushes on, difficulties at home, and anxiety and expectations about the future," says Overå.

"When one boy opened up, the others tried to support him and shared similar stories about fear or vulnerability."

## **Strong and kind**

There was a lot of play fighting and other physical tests of strength as well, but this was mainly done at the beginning of the school year, before hierarchies were established.

"The boys organize themselves in a hierarchy with a clear pecking order and role differentiation with regard to leadership. Some would interpret this as a sign of aggression. I perceived it more as a game and a friendly form of contact," says Overå.

Physical strength, excelling at football and wearing fashionable clothes could win popularity points. But the most important factor for securing a high position in the boys' hierarchy was being a nice guy – someone who is kind, funny, extroverted and relaxed with a "good personality".

## **The importance of hair wax**

However, a boy's position in the hierarchy determines how much latitude each boy has, such as how physically intimate or fashionable he can be.

"The fear of being called 'gay' works like kryptonite on the boys' attempt to construct their masculinity," explains Overå.

Boys who cared too little about their appearance risked being called childish, boring or a nerd. The ones who cared too much risked being called feminine or gay. Two of the coolest boys wore eyeliner.

"Their masculinity and heterosexuality was not threatened by it," says Overå.

A less popular boy, however, should not try to do the same. The general rule was that boys do not wear make-up. Their hair, on the other hand, should be styled.

"Boys have fewer cards to play than girls when it comes to aesthetics, so their hair becomes a sacred domain," says Overå.

In a group interview, the boys talked about a day at school when a cool teacher had let them eat cake during home economics class. "I remember that! It was the day when I didn't use hair wax!" exclaimed one of the boys. The researcher was taken aback, and the boy explained: He got so much grief from the other boys that he understood he had better not go to school again without wax in his hair.

"It's not new in itself that boys are concerned about their bodies and appearance. What is new is the extent of their concern. They talk about it a lot. And there is a great deal of unseen work involved," explains Overå.

## **Metrosexual role models**

A strong, well-defined, athletic body was the ideal for the older boys, who talked incessantly about each other's bodies in the locker room. One boy had read that football star Cristiano Ronaldo does 3,000 sit-ups every day, so he had started to do sit-ups every evening. He thought his ab-muscles were becoming more visible already and gladly lifted his

shirt to demonstrate for the other boys.

"For young people today it's legitimate to try out new masculine expressions inspired by metrosexual idols like Ronaldo and David Beckham, who have their own lines of hair products and boxer shorts. This is different compared to 20 years ago when the role models were more traditionally masculine," says Overå.

## **Effortlessly successful**

The boys need to be concerned about their bodies and appearance, but this concern must not show. In the same way, they should do well at school, without giving it prestige or putting work into it.

"It was an ideal to succeed in an effortless kind of way," says Overå.

"The boys did a great deal of unseen work, both with regard to their appearance and to their schoolwork. Many of them worked a lot at home, but claimed before a test, for example, that they had only studied for five minutes. They had to hide how much it meant to them to do well and look good, and how much effort they put into it."

## **The problem with boys**

The focus of Overås' thesis is gender as such, but he has chosen to focus mainly on boys for two reasons: Descriptions of boys' lives and perspectives are underrepresented in the literature from school research, and today's society is especially worried about the situation for boys in school and society at large.

The debate about boys as losers in a gender-equal society and the feminized school arose in the 1990s. In the 2000s, stories about boys

who did poorly in school dominated the debate.

But the differences in school have more to do with socioeconomic class, particularly when it comes to school performance, according to Overå. The fact that girls perform slightly better than boys in school has been known since measurements began in the 1950s. Concerns about boys arose only after girls started to maintain their advantage at higher educational levels.

## **Socioeconomic class more significant**

"It's a mistake to let the overall discussion focus on gender when large-scale qualitative and quantitative studies show that socioeconomic class is far more significant than gender with regard to grades in school," says the researcher.

Overås' data confirm previous studies that find that girls handle the demands of school better than boys. A few more girls than boys were moved to higher levels in those subjects in which the [school](#) offered this.

"But when I controlled for class, it was clearly more significant whether a pupil came from the working class or middle class than if the pupil was a girl or boy," says Overå.

"It's problematic to talk about differences in the schools only regarding gender. Just as there are boys who do very well, there are girls who struggle. Using gender as an explanation for this is discriminatory for both sexes."

Provided by Kilden

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