

# Boys will be men

School nurses in Gloucestershire have produced a comic to help boys through puberty. **PAUL HOPKINS** and colleagues explain

**A** comic for prepubescent boys? True, some are comedians at that age. But puberty? That's a serious issue. With hormones coursing around their bodies, growing up is as confusing for boys as it is for girls.

When it comes to helping boys learn about sex and puberty, however, health professionals are faced with a dearth of resources. It seems all the attention is focused on girls.

School nurses play a pivotal role in sex education and our role is constantly evolving — pubic lice, rather than head lice, are increasingly a focus of our work. The UK has the worst record on unwanted teenage pregnancies in Europe. If we are to meet the government's aim of halving unwanted teenage pregnancies over the next 10 years, boys' sexual health must be high on the agenda.

The sex education forum of the National Children's Bureau has identified why there needs to be greater focus on boys and young men. The reasons include:

- A failure to address boys' needs may have serious implications for their emotional and sexual health, reinforcing their reluctance to seek help and advice. This is reflected in the rising suicide rate among young men;
- Teaching methods that do not engage boys bore them, which can make them disruptive;
- A focus on the reproductive aspects of sex education can reinforce the message that sex education is nothing to do with boys (Sex Education Forum, 1997).

Steve Biddulph, the author of *Raising Boys* (1997), suggests that 10 is a good age to begin discussions on puberty and adolescence. 'In our society this is when adolescent pressures begin,' he writes. 'It is the time when sexually explicit conversations occur between children at school and often misinformed attitudes are being formed.'

We first discussed the lack of resources for boys



Boys find dense chunks of text off-putting: the comic format uses a language familiar to its target audience

at a school nurses' meeting last year. There was unanimous dismay at the lack of well-developed, appropriate material. Most of us were using publications produced by the manufacturers of sanitary products, which inevitably focus on girls and menstruation.

It was clear we needed to develop a new resource.

## There was dismay at the lack of appropriate material for boys. Most publications focus on girls and menstruation

Paul Hopkins, a nurse with a community background, and two school nurses from the two trusts providing school nursing services in Gloucestershire were chosen to work on the project.

If we were to attract boys' interest and address their needs, we had to ensure that what we

produced was based on their requirements and not on adult perceptions of their needs. Who better to tell us what they needed than boys themselves?

We had to decide on the most useful tool for collecting the information we needed. Looking at previous studies, we found indications that boys preferred group interviews as this gave them safety in numbers.

With this in mind we visited a number of schools and found the boys were only too happy to be consulted. They were open about their requirements, even producing detailed diagrams and cartoon illustrations.

Lessons that expose their ignorance can be seen as a threat by boys. To counter this, we asked boys to write out their questions and put them in a box anonymously so that they could express their concerns without having to put up their hands in class. Another qualitative research tool was used to collect typical questions from boys in year six.

Boys' use of terminology and slang was another important consideration. Again, listening to them provided the material we needed.

We drew up a list of priorities. Certain topics

were eliminated, such as testicular self-examination. The incidence of testicular cancer in this group is almost negligible, so we decided to include only the normal physical and emotional changes experienced during early puberty. For this reason we also excluded information on contraception and sexually transmitted infections.

These and other issues could be explained more

fully at a later stage as part of the national curriculum on sex education. Our research showed there was adequate provision of resources for boys in the later stages of puberty, such as the fpa's '4boys' booklet aimed at 13-16-year-olds, which covers testicular self-examination, sexually transmitted infections, contraception and sexuality. Originally we thought that we would produce a leaflet for use in schools, but our research showed the limitations of this idea as we had a lot of information to impart and needed a format that would hold boys' attention. A booklet in comic format seemed to be the best solution.

Quite early on we realised the enormity of the task we had undertaken. None of us had previous experience of putting together a comic and we had a lot of information to condense. But as we progressed the content and amount of detail needed became more obvious.

Our research showed that boys found dense chunks of text off-putting, so we tried to present explanations of why changes occur in an easy manner, using language familiar to the target audience.



## Health professionals need to be look at ways to increase boys' emotional confidence



The choice of cartoonist was also important. We received a number of excellent submissions of comic artwork and finally chose Mike Higgs, who has experience in illustrating children's books.

As the booklet began to come together, we piloted our material in schools with boys, teachers, school nurses and members of Health Promotion Gloucestershire's sexual health team.

The booklet is intended for use

by health professionals as part of a health education programme, providing a useful resource for boys to refer to on their own. It may also provide a useful starting point for teachers and youth workers — and anyone who finds it difficult to talk to their sons about personal matters.

There has already been interest in the booklet from outside the county and it has been recognised as an innovation in health visiting and school nursing by the Department of Health's Centre for Innovation in Primary Care.

Health professionals need to look at ways to increase boys' emotional confidence and self-esteem. Hopefully we have gone some way towards addressing the lack of materials on puberty for boys, and have done so in a way that takes accounts of their concerns and answers them in a language they recognise. **NT**

*PAUL HOPKINS, RGN, is sexual health project officer, Health Promotion Gloucestershire; BELINDA MATTHEWS, RGN, RM, is a school nurse, Severn NHS Trust; GERRY O'BRIEN, RGN, RM, is a school nurse, East Gloucestershire NHS Trust*

● **Boys Will Be Boyz is free to school nurses and youth workers in Gloucestershire. The comic will also be available via health promotion departments around the country from November**

### REFERENCES

- Biddulph, S. (1997) RAISING BOYS. London: Thorsons.*
- Sex Education Forum (1997) SUPPORTING THE NEEDS OF BOYS AND YOUNG MEN IN SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION. Factsheet 11. London: National Children's Bureau.*