Why Don't Girls Misbehave More Than Boys in School?

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Reviewing research on sex differences in school misbehavior and delinquency, the author speculates on six possible reasons why girls appear to misbehave less than boys despite the fact that girls are characterized by more personal problems during adolescence. Several reasons including the possibility that girls' misbehavior is inaccurately reported are rejected as insufficient to account for the discrepancy between boys' and girls' misbehavior. On the basis of existing evidence, the author concludes that a combination of personal characteristics (i.e., high need for affiliation and low aggressiveness) and external pressures (parental and teacher expectations and attitudes) function to inhibit misbehavior in girls. Some indications that the situation is changing are reported.

INTRODUCTION

Many people who work in or study schools have noted the increasing concern over student behavior and school discipline. Reports of flagrant disrespect for authority, chronic absenteeism, and drug use abound. A congressional subcommittee has even probed the increase in school violence. In all the discussions related to student misbehavior, however, little is heard that pertains specifically to girls. Those who debate, chronicle, and confront misbehavior in schools seem to assume that the problems result primarily from the actions of boys. This article is an effort to investigate the validity of such an assumption and to describe certain issues relevant to the study of girls' misbehavior in schools.

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HOW DO GIRLS' PROBLEMS COMPARE TO BOYS' PROBLEMS?

As early as the first years of elementary school some girls manifest problems in school. In a longitudinal study at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, male and female future delinquents were matched with nondelinquents (Conger, 1973). Future delinquents of both sexes evidenced poorer adjustment socially, emotionally, and academically. Such girls were less poised, less cheerful, and less friendly than nondelinquent girls. They also demonstrated less respect for authority and for school rules. Of particular interest was the finding that negative affect (unhappiness, moodiness, humorlessness, and discouragement) differentiated significantly for girls, but not for boys. Contrarily, leadership ability differentiated delinquent and nondelinquent boys, but not girls.

The later elementary and junior high years during which most girls begin to mature physically appear to be a critical point psychologically as well. Peterson (1961) found that throughout middle childhood boys consistently displayed more severe conduct disturbances than girls, but that around the end of elementary school girls started to experience more problems than boys. Albert and Beck (1975) administered the Beck Depression Inventory to students in a parochial junior high school and discovered that girls reported less depression than boys in seventh grade, but greater depression in the eighth grade. Girls also indicated a shift from family to peer confidants by the eighth grade, while boys went from family to no confidants. All students rated “excellent” by their teachers had low depression scores, while those with high depression scores were all rated “poor.” This perfect correlation could suggest that teachers’ judgments of student quality actually were shaped by their assessment of student mental health (the self-fulfilling prophecy effect).

Several studies using the Mooney Problem Check List (Amos and Washington, 1960; Clements and Delke, 1967; Garrison and Cunningham, 1952) reported that pre-adolescent girls indicated more problems than boys. While the first two studies found that boys expressed more problems in the specific areas of “school” and “money, work, and the future,” the last one showed girls outscoring boys in all problem areas. Abel and Gingles (1965) administered the Mooney Problem Check List to 2500 Nebraska girls in grade 9 and 10. Like Garrison and Cunningham, they found that girls checked more problems related to “adjustment to school work” than any other category. The only problem with the Mooney instrument is its implicit assumption that the number of problems checked is indicative of the significance of the problems.

Interestingly, parents also perceived that problems increased as their daughters approached adolescence (Campbell and Cooper, 1975). Using the Walker Problem Behavior Indentification Checklist, parents indicated that their adolescent daughters had greater problems with acting out, withdrawal, disturbed peer relations, and immaturity. Only on the distractibility scale did sons outscore daughters.