

Sociotherapy as a Field of Support and Education for Adolescent Boys

Socjoterapia jako obszar wsparcia i edukacji dorastających chłopców

Olga Modzelewska

University of Warmia and
Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0047-077X>

olga.modzelewska@uwm.edu.pl

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Abstract: Nowadays, sociotherapy as a form of psychological and pedagogical support, as well as a space for assistance and education, is gaining increasing importance. This type of support is based on flexible forms of work, adapts methods to actual needs, and systematically supports emotional, social, and moral development. This is particularly significant when working with young boys and adolescents who face numerous developmental challenges. In the context of cultural change and growing awareness of the diversity of social roles, it is necessary to create safe spaces where they can build their own identities without the pressure of rigid frameworks. Promoting healthy interpersonal relationships, developing coping skills to deal with difficulties, and creating positive models of masculinity and empathy are crucial. In this context, sociotherapy becomes a key element in a new paradigm of education and therapy for young men. The presented considerations include scholarly reflection and a review of the literature in the fields of sociotherapy, pedagogy, and masculinity/masculinities studies. Researchers indicate that boys rarely seek psychological and pedagogical support, which is linked to cultural norms of masculinity and difficulties in identifying and expressing emotions. In this context, it is important to design sociotherapeutic activities tailored to boys' developmental needs. This paper may serve as inspiration for educational initiatives that support young men in shaping constructive models of masculinity and in coping with gender stereotypes.

Keywords: sociotherapy, boys' development, masculinity, identity formation, correction of stereotypes, psychological help-seeking

Abstrakt: Współcześnie socjoterapia jako forma pomocy psychologiczno-pedagogicznej oraz przestrzeń wsparcia i edukacji zyskuje na znaczeniu. Ten rodzaj pomocy wykorzystuje elastyczne formy pracy, dostosowanie metod do rzeczywistych potrzeb oraz systematyczne wspieranie rozwoju emocjonalnego, społecznego i moralnego. Jest to szczególnie istotne w pracy z młodymi chłopcami, adolescentami, którzy mierzą się z licznymi wyzwaniami rozwojowymi. W obliczu zmian kulturowych i rosnącej świadomości różnorodności ról społecznych konieczne jest tworzenie bezpiecznej przestrzeni, w której mogą budować własną tożsamość bez presji schematów. Kluczowe jest promowanie zdrowych relacji interpersonalnych, rozwijanie umiejętności radzenia sobie z trudnościami oraz kreowanie pozytywnych wzorców męskości i empatii. W tym kontekście socjoterapia staje się kluczowym elementem w nowym paradygmacie edukacji i terapii młodych mężczyzn. Prezentowane rozważania obejmują refleksję naukową oraz przegląd literatury z zakresu socjoterapii, pedagogiki i studiów nad męskością/ami. Badacze wskazują, że chłopcy rzadko szukają wsparcia psychologiczno-pedago-



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gicznego, co wiąże się z normami kulturowymi męskości oraz trudnościami w identyfikowaniu i wyrażaniu emocji. W tym kontekście istotne jest tworzenie zajęć socjoterapeutycznych dopasowanych do potrzeb rozwojowych chłopców. Niniejsze opracowanie może służyć jako inspiracja do działań wychowawczych wspierających młodych mężczyzn w kształtowaniu konstruktywnych wzorców męskości i radzeniu sobie ze stereotypami płciowymi.

Słowa kluczowe: socjoterapia, rozwój chłopców, męskość, kształtowanie tożsamości, korektura stereotypów, poszukiwanie pomocy psychologicznej

INTRODUCTION

The changes and challenges experienced today in the cultural and social spheres affect individuals across many areas of their functioning. Those who often experience a particular sense of uncertainty, and sometimes even confusion, in the process of constructing themselves and their identity are young people. A particularly important group consists of adolescent boys who, as indicated in psychological studies, are individuals roughly between the ages of 10 and 20-25 (Ogden and Hagen 2018; Green 2016; Peret Drążewska 2021). This period involves exceptionally intense biological, cognitive, and social changes, as well as processes of identity formation and the development of increasing autonomy (Howells 2018; Ogden and Hagen 2018). This phase of life is especially significant when analysing difficulties related to maturation, including risky behaviours and phenomena that marginalise the developmental needs of young boys (Peret Drążewska 2021; Howells 2018). Moreover, during this time boys are constantly exposed to contradictory messages regarding who they should be, what is considered “appropriate” for their gender, and what requirements they must meet in order to be perceived as full members of society. The developmental challenges they face during adolescence are highly demanding, and they are not made easier by additional messages that define rigid boundaries within which their identity is expected to fit.

Society and the environments in which young boys mature are highly diverse. Consequently, each individual experiences different relationships with their family members, their surroundings, and themselves. Those boys who cannot rely on family support, who struggle to navigate social interactions, or who are unable to cope with pressure and instead release it in destructive ways require appropriate forms of support that take into account their individual needs as well as the dynamically changing social environment. In this context, sociotherapy as a form of psychological and pedagogical assistance gains increasing importance, offering not only intervention in difficult situations but also systematic support for the emotional, social, and moral development of young people.

As a form of support and education, sociotherapy enables the creation of safe and supportive spaces in which young boys can freely explore their identity, develop communication skills, empathy, and healthy interpersonal relationships, without the pressure imposed by rigid gender stereotypes. Additionally, throughout

the entire process, participants gain knowledge and experience related to healthy ways of forming and maintaining relationships and coping with various difficult situations. They also develop skills necessary for cooperation, conflict resolution, and conscious participation in different forms of social life.

In light of the growing social awareness of the diversity of gender roles and the needs of young people, sociotherapy emerges as an extremely important tool in the educational, upbringing, and psychological and pedagogical process. Its flexible methods and approach allow interventions to be adapted to the individual capacities and challenges of participants, thereby supporting effective coping with difficulties and the development of constructive behavioural patterns. In this context, particular importance is attached to supporting positive models of masculinity that promote openness, responsibility, and self-awareness, making sociotherapy a key element of the modern paradigm of education and therapy.

1. SOCIOTHERAPY

Sociotherapy, through participation and work in a group, constitutes an important form of intervention directed at individuals who require support and modification of their attitudes. Its aim is to modify beliefs, behaviours, and stereotypical patterns of action. As noted by Jacek Strzemieczny, “it consists in the deliberate creation of conditions (social experiences) for children that enable the sociotherapeutic process to take place (changes in judgments about reality, behavioural patterns, and emotional release)” (Strzemieczny 1993, 45).

One of the most frequently cited definitions of sociotherapy is presented by Barbara Jankowiak and Emilia Soroko, who define it as “a group-based form of psychological and pedagogical assistance directed at children and adolescents from risk groups and/or those exhibiting disturbances in psychosocial functioning, which consists in the intentional activation of helping factors using group processes and the relationship with the sociotherapist” (Jankowiak and Soroko 2019, 10–11). As a form of assistance, sociotherapy may therefore be treated as a means of support addressed to individuals in various life circumstances (Jankowiak and Soroko 2014, 226).

Katarzyna Sawicka defines sociotherapy as “a method of treating behavioural disorders and certain emotional disorders in children and adolescents in the course of group meetings. Sociotherapy may thus be regarded as a form of psychological assistance addressed to children and adolescents, situated between psychotherapy, psychoeducation, and interpersonal skills training” (Sawicka 1999, 10). This demonstrates the broad and versatile ways in which this form of support is perceived and applied, as well as the wide range of goals assigned to such activities.

Scientific literature focusing on the issue of sociotherapy, as stated by Beata Bocian-Waszkiewicz (2016, 148–149), highlights several of its key components, which include:

1. The group-based nature of the work – involving the mutual influence of individuals within the group and through the group.
2. Applicability across different age groups – with participants ranging from preschool-aged children to older individuals; the effectiveness of the sociotherapeutic process may depend on similarities in age and life experience among participants.
3. Identification of factors and symptoms of behavioural disorders as a primary objective, along with the construction of appropriate corrective situations.
4. Therapy, education, and development as core goals – the therapeutic dimension focuses on correcting stereotypical patterns of thinking and presenting new models and role patterns; the educational dimension centres on providing participants with knowledge and information, and the developmental dimension is concerned with shaping participants' competencies and skills.

Scientific publications indicate that sociotherapeutic activities encompass “a strand of affective education aimed at shaping proper personality development, and above all at correcting personality and emotional deficits” (Ostaszewski 2001, 13). Maria John-Borys (2005, 351) points out that the sociotherapeutic process is closely linked to broadly understood prevention, as it enables the presentation and promotion of alternative patterns, perspectives, and behaviours, for example in relation to substance use, lifestyle choices, or the development of health-promoting attitudes.

Currently, in Poland, sociotherapy is primarily defined as group work “with children and adolescents who present behavioural difficulties and are therefore at risk of social exclusion, which allows it to be described as a form of psychological and pedagogical assistance” (Wilk 2023, 49). In addition, sociotherapeutic work is often undertaken with individuals belonging to so-called risk groups, those exhibiting various disorders, or those experiencing difficulties in psychosocial functioning (Jankowiak and Soroko 2021, 56).

It can therefore be stated that sociotherapy constitutes a support-oriented field directed at individuals who experience difficulties in everyday functioning across various domains of life. As a result, it has attracted scholarly attention from representatives of numerous disciplines. M. John-Borys notes that those who popularised sociotherapy as a form of support include both educators and psychologists who engaged in “work on the development of interpersonal skills and self-realisation within the framework of humanistic psychology. The basis of training consisted of interpersonal skills training groups, therapeutic groups, personal development groups, and various forms of psychological workshops” (2005, 349–350).

The central focus of the sociotherapeutic process is the individual resources of participants, which are continually sought, strengthened, and highlighted. In sociotherapy, the primary aim is to identify internal characteristics, namely psychological resources, and to direct them towards the achievement of positive personal and

social goals. Equally important is supporting young people in finding meaning and satisfaction in interpersonal relationships and in developing responsibility for their decisions. Such outcomes can only be achieved within an appropriately structured sociotherapeutic environment, which constitutes one of the key factors influencing behavioural change. For transformation to occur, “an appropriately organised social structure is required, forming an educational and therapeutic context. This is referred to as the sociotherapeutic environment or sociotherapeutic community. An appropriately organised community (...) enables social influence to occur through processes of human communication” (John-Borys 2005, 351–352). This influence is realised both through the presentation of appropriate behavioural models and through attitudes characterised by kindness and acceptance, which facilitate the learning of socially approved behaviours and attitudes.

Providing young individuals with the opportunity to be part of a supportive environment and to experience positive aspects of relationships and social interaction constitutes an invaluable element of the entire corrective and sociotherapeutic process. In the case of boys, such an environment becomes a developmental space in which flexible models of masculinity can be shaped. By being grounded in relationships, building a sense of safety, and contributing to the creation of corrective emotional experiences, sociotherapy becomes a valuable area of support in work with boys who today may face numerous challenges related to fulfilling their gender role, particularly during the process of adolescence. In this context, sociotherapy can help boys address challenges related to social pressure and gender stereotypes in the formation of masculine identity.

2. THE FORMATION OF MASCULINITY

The formation of masculinity, similarly to femininity, begins in early childhood. Eugenia Mandal (2003, 38) emphasises that gender stereotypes belong to the earliest and most fundamental social categories that individuals acquire through socialisation already in early childhood. Adults transmit behavioural patterns, modes of conduct, and gender-related perceptual scripts to children. This process applies even to three-year-old children, as demonstrated by Linda Brannon (2002, 217), who observed behaviours exhibiting features of gender stereotyping at this age.

Adolescence is a period in which every individual, regardless of gender, confronts transformations in both the physical and psychological domains. For some, the process of growing up may evoke fear, uncertainty, or a sense of confusion. During this stage, young boys may encounter neglect, misunderstanding, or unrealistic expectations and rigid social frameworks. These issues were highlighted in research conducted by infuture.institute and Fundacja moonka, which resulted in the report *Dojrzewanie polskich chłopców* [Adolescence of Polish Boys] (2023). The report draws attention to numerous significant issues related to boys' development that have long been neglected in both public and academic discourse. One of the opening statements notes that “unfortunately, the frameworks into

which we continue to place boys, cultural norms and stereotypes build in them the belief that they **MUST** cope on their own” (infuture.institute and Fundacja moonka 2023, 4). This message may be interpreted as an ongoing attempt to construct a fictional ideal of the “real man” who does not require support or help and who, as an independent individual, is expected to confront adversity successfully.

The persistent pressure to fit boys into rigid frameworks often results in precisely such detachment and in limitations on experiencing the full range of natural human emotions and experiences. Moreover, “an individual experiencing social pressure that requires him to adapt to appropriate norms, most often adapts to the requirements of the role, not wanting to risk the collective stigma caused by violating these norms” (Dobosz 2022, 70–71). Strict adherence to externally imposed roles may not only disrupt an individual’s internal sense of self but also undermine both internal and social coherence. Stereotypes, as primary mechanisms shaping the social worldview, define rigid behavioural frameworks, particularly in relation to the male role, and lead to the simplification of attitudes considered typical for a given gender. As Magdalena Grabowska notes, they construct an image of the man as “relatively insensitive, rational, strong, and courageous” (2007, 20). The issue of stereotyping has been addressed in numerous studies, which emphasise that “gender stereotypes pose a threat to individuals’ life chances and developmental opportunities – both for women and for men” (Chmura-Rutkowska and Ostrouch 2007, 29). Consequently, it may be concluded that decisions and life choices become narrowed and limited to those that fit within stereotypically defined roles (see Bem 2000).

When applying these considerations to boys and their development, it is important to reflect on how the restriction of opportunities, the specific “profiling” of personality, and the reduction of developmental autonomy (see Bem 2000; Brannon 2002; Mandal 2000) affect young people during a period of intense internal change. As researchers indicate, “men are subject throughout their lives to strong social pressure stemming from beliefs about traits and behaviours culturally assigned to masculinity” (Chmura-Rutkowska and Ostrouch 2007, 44; see also Arcimowicz 2003; Pankowska 2005). Boys experience this pressure from early childhood, as society demands the demonstration of “typically masculine” traits from boys at a very young age. Common expressions such as “be a big boy” or “boys don’t cry” are directed at children who are only a few years old. This illustrates that from early childhood boys are expected to prove their masculinity (or, as noted by L. Brannon (2002, 214) and Elisabeth Badinter (1993, 120), to deny who they are not: a woman, a homosexual, or a child). Furthermore, boys are still frequently raised and socialised in contexts where stereotypes play a significant role. During adolescence, when they search for their identity and rely on social norms, and thus often on stereotypes, they may reproduce socially circulating patterns of so-called “toxic masculinity.” These patterns involve the glorification and affirmation of male “naturalness” expressed through violence, brutality, dominance over others, or emotional insensitivity.

For this reason, it is crucial that those involved in supporting individual development strive to help young people shape their personality and identity from an early age in ways that are free from prejudice and rigid frameworks. One possible form of support is sociotherapy, directed at individuals who have not had the opportunity to grow up in a supportive environment or who, for other reasons, experience difficulties in social functioning. Moreover, through its therapeutic, educational, preventive, and supportive functions, sociotherapy may constitute an important area of work with boys facing challenges related to the construction of gender identity, behavioural patterns, and social roles, supporting them in building an accepted position within society.

3. SOCIOTHERAPEUTIC SUPPORT FOR BOYS

The support provided through sociotherapy may constitute a space in which young boys, living in today's highly demanding times, can find what they need most. By participating in the sociotherapeutic process, young individuals can acquire soft skills such as enhanced ability to cooperate within a group (contrary to the model of dominant and competitive masculinity), effective communication, and empathy. As noted by Maciej Wilk (2024, 50), the fact that sociotherapy is rooted in psychology, pedagogy, sociology, anthropology, and social work enables group work to be conducted within a socio-cultural context. Consequently, this context can be taken into account in the process of correcting inappropriate, stereotypical perceptions of the world, society, and the individual.

Sociotherapeutic activities are primarily directed at individuals who experience difficulties or are at risk of encountering them. Those who are less affected by demoralization or social marginalization may participate in such meetings in centres that, in a sense, become an alternative educational environment. This allows for corrective interventions, the release of anger and frustration, overcoming fears, and helps prevent social exclusion, the reinforcement of negative reaction patterns, and the resulting stigmatization (Wilk 2023, 48). In this way, a specific educational microenvironment is created, which helps prevent various undesirable behaviours, including self-destructive behaviours and the process of labelling (Wilk 2023, 48).

Sociotherapy can be characterized as "a specific type of group therapy for the behaviour of children and adolescents, the aim of which is to create conditions for the emergence of a process of correcting one's own behaviour" (Jagięła 2007, 9). It involves changing negative beliefs about oneself and others, experiencing emotionally corrective events that replace earlier traumas, and testing new, more effective patterns of behaviour. When such activities are directed toward young boys, they can be shown various ways of coping with difficult situations encountered in everyday life. Additionally, work during sessions focuses on self-esteem, which is not based solely on fulfilling stereotypical male roles but rather on a subjective sense of self, one's strengths, and personal resources.

The support that can be provided through sociotherapy aligns with the concept proposed by Helena Sęk and Roman Cieślak (2004, 11), who emphasize the importance of social relationships and helpful behaviours in difficult situations. The authors also point to the role of meeting needs in crisis situations, which is particularly significant when support comes from significant others and reference groups. This perspective is crucial in sociotherapy, where assistance is based on social relationships and building trust, allowing individuals to cope more effectively with difficulties (Jankowiak and Soroko 2014, 226).

The sociotherapeutic process constitutes a multidimensional area of support for the individual. Jankowiak and Soroko (2014, 227–228) indicate that this support may be understood as social support of both a structural and a functional nature. Structural support encompasses social networks whose availability makes assistance possible to individuals in difficult situations and constitutes an important source of support and personal resources. Its key component is availability, as well as characteristics such as prosociality and altruism (Jankowiak and Soroko 2014, 227). The authors identify these networks with the sociotherapeutic group, which strengthens participants and supports them in their everyday functioning. Functional support, in turn, refers to social interactions in which, in stressful situations, emotions are expressed, information is exchanged, and concrete forms of assistance are provided. In this context, the principle of adequacy is crucial, as support should be tailored to the actual needs of the individual.

Providing assistance to individuals experiencing difficult life situations constitutes one of the support strategies that can be directed toward young boys. The fact that they experience social pressure related to fulfilling the male role may lead to a sense of inconsistency or even an identity crisis. As indicated by numerous researchers (Brzezińska 2000; James and Gilliland 2008; Kubacka-Jasiecka 2010; Pilecka 2004), the phenomenon of crisis is highly complex and analysed from various perspectives. Dorota Kubacka-Jasiecka defines an emotional crisis as a set of “temporary, periodic disturbances of psychological balance caused by threat and related to life-meaning values in confrontation with an important life problem” (Kubacka-Jasiecka 2010, 26). Linking the confusion experienced by young boys in a world full of stereotypical conceptions of the male role with an emotional crisis seems justified, as imposed patterns often limit the freedom to express emotions, leading to internal frustration, a sense of loneliness, and difficulties in understanding and accepting one’s own identity. Such pressure may result in the repression of sensitivity and fear of showing weakness, which deepens emotional conflict and hinders the development of healthy relationships and self-esteem.

Sociotherapeutic meetings are conducted in such a way that the group serves as a medium through which influence on the individual is possible. Each participant learns healthy social roles, ways of functioning in society, and how to establish and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships, while also gaining experiences that allow for the reconstruction of cognitive judgments (Wilk 2023,

51). Thus, engaging individuals in sociotherapeutic activities may become a source of acquiring new competencies and developing new ways of perceiving themselves.

With reference to boys, the sociotherapeutic process enables the correction of social attitudes and behaviours that have been disrupted or inadequately developed. During sociotherapy, boys learn how to respond to various social situations, how to establish relationships, and how to cope with emotions in a constructive manner, thereby breaking rigid stereotypes of masculinity. This is particularly important for individuals who experience difficulties in accepting or understanding social norms. Such difficulties often result from traumatic experiences, a challenging family environment, a lack of role models, or other external factors that hinder appropriate social development. Sociotherapy creates safe conditions for experimenting with new forms of behaviour and building positive habits. Additionally, the group provides opportunities for mutual support, acceptance, and understanding. Young participants may realise that they are not alone in facing difficulties and that others experience similar challenges, which can positively affect their self-esteem. Through sociotherapy, individuals gain a sense of belonging, which contributes to an improved quality of life, the development of a positive self-image, and the ability to find their place within the social structure.

Corrective and creative changes in the perception of one's self that occur as a result of sociotherapeutic work enable boys to become full members of society. By accumulating positive experiences and analysing relationships with others and with themselves, participants gain tools for better understanding themselves, their emotions, and the surrounding world. This approach allows for the development of healthy behaviour patterns, which is crucial for their future functioning as responsible and empathetic adults. In this way, the process of sociotherapy becomes a foundation not only for correcting disorders but also for creating lasting and positive changes in boys' personality development (Sawicka 2024, 18, 21).

An analysis of the literature indicates that effective engagement of boys in sociotherapeutic activities requires moving away from an exclusively deficit-oriented perspective on their functioning toward an approach grounded in resources, relationships, and experience. Such activities can become a space in which boys not only receive support in coping with emotional and social difficulties, but also learn alternative ways of self-expression, relationship-building, and constructing their own identity free from the pressure of stereotypical expectations. Sociotherapy, based on active methods of work, group experience, and dialogue, therefore emerges as a particularly promising area from both a supportive and an educational perspective for young boys.

CONCLUSION

Viewed from a socio-cultural perspective, sociotherapy supports the development of human potential by offering new, corrective experiences and providing education to individuals. In this way, it encourages the introduction of positive changes both in individuals' personal lives and in their relationships with the social environment (Wilk

2023, 52). In the context of the issues discussed in this article, it can be stated that sociotherapy may play a key role in supporting the development of boys, offering them not only tools for coping with emotions and stress, but also opportunities for building a healthy identity. This process creates space for shaping attitudes that challenge stereotypes associated with the traditional male role – dominant, aggressive, or emotionally distanced. Instead, it enables the development of qualities such as empathy, emotional openness, and the ability to build healthy interpersonal relationships.

Sociotherapy provides boys with opportunities to better understand themselves and receive support in building a healthy identity, coping with stress and emotional difficulties, and developing social skills. Recognising sociotherapy as one of the approaches that support development allows for a focus on the holistic process of shaping “healthy masculinity” and redefining one’s identity. Through a gradual evolution in self-perception, boys gain new corrective experiences that help them develop a positive self-image and greater self-acceptance. Participation in structured group situations offers opportunities to acquire new social skills and to develop attitudes based on cooperation, respect, and mutual understanding. Learning through experience in sociotherapy involves intrapsychic processes, including emotions and psychological states emerging during group meetings, as well as self-reflection in various contexts and self-evaluation. However, it should be emphasised that changes in self-perception and self-experience during the sociotherapeutic process occur gradually rather than suddenly. Rather, they constitute a gradual evolution based on the systematic acquisition of self-knowledge, its transformation, and the continuous testing and verification of new experiences (Sawicka 2024, 22). Young individuals gain new corrective experiences and analyse them in order to integrate what is currently occurring in their thoughts and emotions. All of this enables them to work through ongoing problems and challenges within a safe environment. Ultimately, sociotherapy not only helps boys overcome difficulties, but also fosters their capacity to develop healthy and meaningful social roles.

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