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Strong, Not Toxic

Boys, role models, and the vacuum Mindset Warrior fills

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Schools across the country are now wrestling with the same problem: what online manosphere influencers are doing to their boys. Most of the responses on offer, assemblies about misogyny and lessons on 'toxic masculinity', are the ones the research says backfire. This briefing sets out the evidence for a different position, and it is Mindset Warrior's position: the problem was never masculinity. The problem is a vacuum where the real thing should be, and grifters filled it. You don't beat a counterfeit by banning money. You beat it with the genuine article.

1. The problem, in numbers

The scale is not anecdotal. YouGov polling of children found that **one in six boys aged 6–15 holds a positive view of Andrew Tate, rising to nearly one in four among 13–15-year-olds**. 84% of boys aged 13–15 know exactly who he is. In BBC survey work, more than a third of secondary teachers reported misogynistic behaviour from pupils within the previous week, and around 40% said they felt unprepared to deal with it. An NASUWT poll of 5,800 teachers found nearly 60% believe social media is damaging behaviour in their schools, with accounts ranging from boys refusing to engage with female staff to pupils writing persuasive essays in praise of Tate.

Underneath the influencer problem sits a role-model famine. The Centre for Social Justice's Lost Boys research (2025–26) reports that more young boys now grow up with a smartphone than with a father figure in the home; that only 27% of boys aged 10–15 describe themselves as completely happy with life (down from 36% fifteen years earlier); that England has lost around a thousand youth clubs in fifteen years; and that barely one in twenty older men volunteers with local clubs or schools. As the CSJ's research director put it: 'Boys need a roadmap to becoming a man, and if they don't see it in their lives we cannot be surprised if they look elsewhere.'

More boys grow up with a smartphone than a father figure in the home. Tate didn't create the demand. He walked into an empty room.

2. Why the standard response backfires

The instinctive institutional answer (condemn harder, run anti-misogyny classes, name masculinity itself as the hazard) is the one the evidence warns against. Dublin City University's Anti-Bullying Centre reviewed the literature on the Tate phenomenon and found that zero-tolerance responses to boys voicing problematic views leave them feeling unheard and drive disengagement; that some well-intentioned interventions produce a documented 'boomerang effect' in which harmful attitudes get stronger; and, notably, it recommends avoiding polarising terms like 'toxic masculinity' altogether, in favour of shared language.

The logic is simple once said aloud. A boy who hears the adult world describe his masculinity as a pathology concludes the adult world is against him, and the algorithm is waiting with someone who says the opposite. Shame is a recruitment tool for the other side. None of this means the misogyny is acceptable or that schools should soften on it; the behaviour teachers are reporting is real and serious. It means the delivery mechanism matters, and lectures delivered as accusation reliably reach everyone except the boys they are aimed at.

3. What actually works: the counter-offer

The DCU review's recommendations read like a design brief: meet boys where they are; build programmes with them rather than at them; use strengths-based rather than shame-based engagement; use language they don't have to defend themselves against. The CSJ's headline remedy for the role-model famine is the same: trusted male mentors and guaranteed access to sport. It explicitly calls for a 'Right to Sport' with two hours of after-school activity a week, framing sport and community as the most effective counter to online influence. And the sport-and-masculinity research covered in the companion paper (BMC Public Health) shows why: sporting environments are where young men will accept guidance and open up, because the setting protects their status while they do it.

Put plainly: boys are not looking for a lecture about what men shouldn't be. They are looking for a live demonstration of what a man should be: close enough to touch, consistent enough to trust.

4. Where Mindset Warrior fits: the genuine article

Everything the manosphere sells is a counterfeit of something boys legitimately need. Strength, but theirs is dominance over others. Discipline, but theirs is a sales funnel. Brotherhood, but theirs is a subscription. Respect, but theirs must be extracted from women rather than earned among men. Mindset Warrior's offer is the original of each: physical strength built through work; discipline inherited from martial-arts tradition, where the first person you master is yourself; brotherhood in the training group; respect practised bow by bow, round by round, tap by tap, including the humility of losing well, which no influencer has ever once modelled. And at the centre of it, the thing the CSJ says is vanishing: a real man, in a real room, week after week, holding a standard and holding the space when the emotion comes over the top.

This gives a school a position it can defend to any audience. Not 'we are running anti-Tate lessons', which invites the backfire, but: **'We don't tell boys their masculinity is toxic. We show them what strong actually looks like, and the evidence supports that approach.'** For parents, it lands as common sense. For governors, it is evidence-led. For the boys, it is the first offer in this whole debate that doesn't begin by insulting them.

You don't argue a boy out of a counterfeit. You put the genuine article in front of him and let him compare.

5. Talking about women without lecturing: respect as strength

The misogyny itself still has to be addressed. Dodging it would be a dereliction, and schools will rightly ask. The question is the frame. The failed frame is prohibition: 'don't say this, don't think that', delivered as accusation to a room of boys who switch off by the second slide. The frame that fits everything else in this briefing is aspiration: respect for women presented not as a rule imposed on boys but as a marker of the strength they are already in the gym to build. Not 'misogyny is bad' but 'needing to dominate women is weakness, and here's what strength actually looks like.'

Martial arts hands the programme this material almost ready-made. Every fighting tradition ties strength to restraint: the entire point of the discipline is that the most dangerous man in the room is the calmest and has the least to prove. From there, the reframe of the manosphere's core claim writes itself: a man who needs to control women is displaying insecurity, not status; contempt for half the population is fear wearing a costume. Delivered by a coach the lads rate, that lands as a status argument, not a moral one, which is precisely why it works on the boys a PSHE slide can't reach. It flips the manosphere's own currency (strength, status, self-mastery) against it.

Three practical carriers run through the programme. First, **modelling**: boys copy what high-status men do, not what they're told, so the way coaches speak about women in ordinary conversation (partners, mums, female colleagues) is the curriculum, every week, without ever being announced as such. Second, **demonstrated competence**: the everyday sight of women training and competing in combat sports does its own arguing; it is hard to hold 'women are lesser' in your head while a woman outworks you on the pads. Third, **the relational hook**: most of these lads have a mum, a nan or a sister they'd fight for. 'Be the man the women in your life deserve' asks a boy to grow, not to grovel, and it's a sentence he can repeat to his mates without losing face, which is the true test of whether any of this sticks. That last point matters: an idea a boy can't say out loud in front of the group was never really installed.

Not 'misogyny is bad'. Every boy has heard that and shrugged. 'Needing to control women is weakness' lands, because it's spoken in the currency they actually trade in.

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Published by Mindset Warrior, Warrior Combat Gym, 51 South Road, Waterloo, Liverpool L22 5PE. Companion to 'Why the Tears Come After the Pads: The science behind emotional release at Mindset Warrior'. The two papers are designed to be read together: this one describes the challenge facing schools; its companion explains how the programme works. Enquiries: info@mindsetwarrior.academy · 0151 476 0762