Books published on fathering and raising boys are becoming increasingly popular. These books claim simply to describe boys and fathers. However we suggest that they make only specific identities available. We make this suggestion on the basis of a critical analysis of six books published since an initial study by Riggs (2008). In this article we extend Riggs’s analysis by identifying how the books analyzed draw upon hegemonic masculine ideals in constructing boys’ and fathers’ identities. The analysis also suggests that biological essentialism is used to justify the identities constructed. Five specific implications are drawn from the findings, focusing on understandings of males as well as females, the uptake of dominant modes of talking about males, and the ramifications of biological essentialism. The findings emphasize the need to pay ongoing attention to popular parenting books since, rather than offering improved strategies for raising boys, these books present assertions of what boys and fathers should be.
In contemporary Western cultures, masculinity is typically associated with personality traits such as independence and competitiveness, role behaviours such as being the primary provider and initiative-taking, and physical characteristics such as muscularity and a deep voice. However, the form of masculinity occupying the hegemonic position in a culture at any particular time is always contestable.