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Introduction and Rationale

This resource introduces a programme, called 'Boys' World', to support high school boys in developing their confidence, self-esteem and self-awareness. A major focus is also placed upon the development of emotional literacy and the ways in which boys can effectively contribute to peer support structures and mechanisms which aid the inclusion of all boys in both the social and the school arenas. It was originally developed for, and delivered to, a group of boys within the context of a Pupil Referral Unit. However, given that the issues and the content covered are obviously pertinent to all boys, we have compiled the 12 sessions into a programme, which can be delivered to both smaller groups and whole classes of boys at high school level.

The Emotional Mis-education of Boys

Much of the current literature on boys' development reveals that the definition of masculinity within our westernised culture is extremely narrow. Metaphorically speaking, it places boys inside a box that limits their emotional and relational development. Psychologists describe how healthy psychological development has been typically marked by progressive acquisition and integration of new skills and qualities. In contrast to this, the traditional male socialisation described by Terrence Real (1997) reflects a process of disconnection marked by successive 'disavowing' and loss of qualities essential to boys' emotional and psychological well-being.

It would appear that within our culture there exists a set of unique stressors which continue to propel today's young males down a very troubled path. Daniel Kindlon and Michael Thompson (1999) describe the emotional illiteracy of boys that develops from a so-called disavowing process and its bearing on both the personal and the social problems that boys experience in schools. The lack of emotional connection is often mixed with a sense of privilege, power and entitlement that also stems from traditional masculine ideals. Therefore, it is not surprising that such factors may influence boys to behave in disrespectful and antisocial ways towards their teachers and their peers.

For many boys it seems that schools are in a sense 'anti-boy'. When entering Key Stages 1/2, boys will find a curriculum which emphasises the acquisition of basic literacy skills, i.e. reading and writing, and this, to some extent, can restrict their activities. Boys are generally far more active and slower to read than girls and teachers will often discipline boys more harshly than they would the girls within the classroom context. Consequently, sensitivity is not modelled to the boys so we would argue that they do not learn it. Alongside this anti-boy school culture, it would seem that fathers and male carers tend to demand that their sons act tough. Mothers and female carers also tend to expect boys to be strong and protective. Furthermore, their peer group will often enforce the rule that a boy does not cry or show his emotions. Boys are taught not to be 'sissies' and at the same time, are chastised for being insensitive. It is not surprising that boys become confused when they are hearing such different messages, i.e. to embrace an androgynous sex while not becoming too feminine. Also, for many boys, experiences of losing early friends as they enter into adolescence can cause enormous amounts of stress. For many teenage boys the distrust of other boys replaces intimate same sex friendships. Boys are also bombarded with images in the media which have, over time, become more hyper-masculine. Emotionless killing machines such as Sylvester Stallone, for example, have supplanted the strong yet milder heroes like Roy Rogers. Boys are presented with scenarios in which they must learn to hide behind a mask of bravado. Boys are also often victims of ruthless jeering, insults and cussing. Many of them find that words do not stop

the taunting, but physical violence and aggression do. It seems that anger is the only emotion that earns them respect.

James Gabarino (1999) describes how the symptoms of boys' growing dissatisfaction, which had been previously ignored, have been steadily building. Rising numbers of boys are prescribed the drug Ritalin for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), possibly often legitimately. However, in many cases it is over-prescribed to curb acting-out behaviours. It is also evident that boys' academic performance has declined within the last decade while girls' achievements have risen. The same pattern is true for attendance within further education and boys are far more likely than girls to hurt or kill themselves or each other.

The kind of psychological detachment and rigidly defined behaviour for boys that we have described frequently leads to violent or aggressive acts. In his study on violence, James Gilligan (1999) observes that boys and men tend to be preoccupied with the issue of weak versus strong and that this focus may frequently be at the root of aggressive and violent behaviours, alongside expressions of power and personal interactions. As he states, 'it's not too difficult to see how quickly that preoccupation with weakness evolves into a predisposition to prove one's strength by means of violence, particularly if the child does not have non-violent means available to show that he is strong'. That said it is not surprising that 80% of the students diagnosed with social and emotional difficulties in schools are boys while 71% of all school suspensions also involve boys.

A Man's World?

Statistics on men's health, happiness and survival clearly show that the old adage 'it's a man's world' is simply a lie. Being a boy or a man in the early twenty-first century is clearly not an easy option for the following reasons:

- ▶ Men on average live for six years less than women do.
- ▶ Men routinely fail at close relationships: 40% of marriages break down and divorces are initiated by the women in 4 out of 5 cases.
- ▶ 90% of convicted acts of violence will be carried out by men and 70% of the victims will be male.
- ▶ In school around 90% of children with behavioural problems and 80% of children with learning problems are boys.
- ▶ 1 in 7 boys will experience sexual assault by an adult or older child by the age of 18.
- ▶ Men comprise over 90% of inmates in prison and make up 74% of the unemployed.
- ▶ The leading cause of death among men aged between 12 and 60 is through self-inflicted means. In 1993 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures, suicide accounted for 1 in 38 male deaths overall (Biddulph, 1995).

Suicide Rates among Young Men

Suicide rates among young men in the United Kingdom rose significantly during the 1980s and the early 1990s. This has led to a significant amount of political attention being drawn to this topic and rightly so, given that suicide rates in England and Wales of young men between the ages of 15 and 24 rose by approximately 60% from 1981 to 1999. This led the government to set a goal in 1991 (Health of the Nation Strategy Document) to reduce the rates of these suicides by 15% by the end of the century. The rate has been reduced from approximately 16 in 100,000 in 1990 to 12 in 100,000 in 2000.

In order to further support the government's health strategy in this area, a specific 'National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England' was issued in 2002. This strategy has six identified objectives, including: reducing risk in key high-risk groups, e.g. men; promoting mental health and well-being in the wider population; and reducing the availability and lethal nature of suicide methods. It is still the case, however, that young men are far more likely to commit suicide than young women. The risk factors have been clearly documented between both primary and secondary factors. Obviously no one young person would experience all of the factors but they are likely to experience a significant combination. This kind of combination could then lead to an increased risk of suicide. Primary factors include the following:

- ▶ Alcohol and drug abuse.
- ▶ A sense of real hopelessness concerning the future.
- ▶ Serious depression.
- ▶ A previous attempted suicide or some form of psychiatric disorder.

Secondary risk factors include:

- ▶ Severe dent to self-esteem which may lead to a sense of guilt or shame.
- ▶ A recent loss or bereavement.
- ▶ A family history of suicide.
- ▶ Experiencing a friend or significant adult committing suicide.

Most significant for us in developing this particular project were the risk factors related to lack of self-esteem leading to a sense of guilt or shame. In our culture boys generally are led to believe that in order to be manly they must stay 'on top of their feelings'. They consequently live in psychological conflict because they are attempting to control feelings that may be too powerful or too complex to be controlled. As Kindlon and Thompson (1999) state, 'the results can be deadly: combined depression and its shame, emotional illiteracy, and the impulsivity so common among boys: mix in access to weapons and a familiarity with violence, real or through the media – and you have recipe for suicide'. Clearly not every boy who confronts emotional hardship will develop severe depression. Whether or not depression is biological or situational in origin, the recovery from it is far more difficult for boys who, according to Kindlon and Thompson, have been 'trained away from emotional interaction and steered instead towards emotional silence and stoicism' (1999, p. 167).

Combating Emotional Illiteracy

According to Biddulph (1995) men's difficulties are primarily with isolation. The prisons from which they must escape are:

- ▶ Loneliness.
- ▶ Compulsive competition.
- ▶ Lifelong emotional timidity.

Consequently, a significant aim of this programme is to promote the boys' levels of emotional literacy in order to also foster and protect their mental health. The latter is key given that, 'since the 1940s the number of children experiencing mental ill health has increased to 1 in 5' (The Big Picture Report, 1999). This Mental Health Foundation report also stated that:

mental health problems in children and young people will continue to increase unless there is a coherent and holistic programme implemented to develop the emotional and mental health of our children. ... Emotionally literate children are less likely to experience mental health problems and, if they develop them, are less likely to suffer long term. Emotional literacy is derived from a combination of parents, schools and wider social networks.

Daniel Goleman (1995) defines emotional literacy as 'the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves and for managing emotions within ourselves and in our relationships'. Consequently, this programme attempts to begin to promote boys' emotional literacy and mental health within the educational context while also promoting the notion of emotional learning as an important lifelong goal in every sphere.

According to Suzy Orbach emotional literacy is achieved by registering emotions, recognising our emotions, querying them for validity and then being able to put them aside after having experienced them (Improving Mental Health for Young People Conference, October 2000). The essential aim of this programme is therefore to ensure that boys have access to experiences which encourage them to develop the skills of emotional literacy within the solution-focused forum, which rejects the notion of compulsive competition. We are not attempting in any sense to negate differences but rather to validate students' own experiences and to encourage them to develop the motivation, resilience and trust with which to become be emotionally successful and stable human beings.

Objectives

The main objectives of this 12-session programme are to:

- ▶ Encourage students to become more aware of the importance of supporting each other and the benefits of forming strong and positive links with other males.
- ▶ Develop students' understanding of emotional literacy and the importance of being aware of their feelings and being able to manage them effectively.
- ▶ Ensure that students understand the importance of self-motivation and positive thinking.
- ▶ Raise students' self-esteem and levels of confidence.
- ▶ Encourage students to develop the ability to make their own decisions in life.
- ▶ Encourage students to become more aware and questioning of the impact that the media has on the way that they behave and the way in which they see themselves.
- ▶ Enable students to further develop and appreciate the perspectives of others – to empathise.
- ▶ Further develop students' awareness of gender differences and the way in which stereotypes can be imposed and built in to the way in which we behave towards each other.
- ▶ Develop students' awareness of what it is to be healthy and the way in which risky behaviours can mitigate against both mental and physical well-being.
- ▶ Encourage students to develop problem-solving skills within a solution-focused framework.
- ▶ Develop students' tolerance of difference and rejection of stereotypes.
- ▶ Raise awareness of the importance of relationships and the ways in which our behaviour can mitigate against maintaining positive relationships.

- ▶ Further develop the facilitator's awareness and understanding of a range of strategies to effectively manage one's self and one's emotions.
- ▶ Encourage facilitators and support staff to adopt a consistent approach towards developing students' emotional literacy, social skills and self-esteem.
- ▶ Further encourage facilitators to review the current policy and practice in terms of managing the emotional, social and behavioural needs of students in their care.
- ▶ Further develop healthy initiatives and programmes which promote inclusive practice for those students who present as being most at risk.
- ▶ Encourage facilitators to reflect further upon how the school and curriculum are structured so as to ensure the inclusion of boys, i.e. that the curriculum and adults who teach it model positive images of the male sex and that the curriculum is suitably differentiated to ensure the inclusion of boys within all subject areas.
- ▶ Further develop and encourage facilitators' awareness of the need to provide adequate pastoral support for boys within Key Stages 3 and 4, e.g. the use of mentors.

The success of this programme will clearly depend upon how closely these objectives are followed and achieved.

The Structure of the Programme

The Programme is divided into 12 sessions. Each session includes an Introduction in which the main aims are recorded and discussed. A similar format is then adhered to which includes a brainstorming activity, a 'quick' activity/icebreaker, Circle Talk, A Problem Scenario, a range of Activity Sheets for Students to complete and a final Plenary session. The sessions are arranged in the following sequence:

Session 1: Identity

Session 2: Appearance

Session 3: Girlfriends

Session 4: Friendships

Session 5: Sex

Session 6: Problem Solving

Session 7: Talking about Feelings

Session 8: Drugs Awareness

Session 9: Tolerance

Session 10: Crime and Punishment

Session 11: Future Goals

Session 12: Evaluation

The Structure of the Sessions

The sessions generally follow a similar structure as follows.

Introduction

The main aims of the session are recorded by the facilitator on a flip-chart or whiteboard and these are discussed with the students at the outset. A list of key words is brainstormed and also recorded.

Brainstorm

Students are asked to brainstorm in order to identify all the words or phrases that they can which relate to this particular topic. A completed brainstorm is provided for facilitators in order to prompt thinking and provide relevant ideas.

Quick Activity

A range of quick activities or icebreakers are used to break down barriers and create a comfortable and unthreatening context in which students can begin to form positive relationships and relax in order to subsequently engage in the activities presented to them.

Circle Talk

The circle talk element of the session encourages students to begin to articulate ideas and feelings. A series of questions are presented which relate specifically to the topic being introduced. A Circle Time approach is adopted in which students adhere to rules regarding turn-taking and respect for each other's views. The group rules which are identified and agreed by students in the first session will clearly be reinforced in each of the subsequent circle talk sessions.

Problem Scenario

The students are presented with a problem scenario in which a boy is experiencing a difficulty or problem. They are then asked to consider a series of questions which focus on the ways in which the boy might find a solution to the dilemma that he is currently facing and how he might deal more effectively with the problem.

Central to this activity is the need to ensure that all boys feel able to participate. There is consequently no recording here. The activity is entirely verbal. The key aim is clearly to encourage boys to articulate thoughts and feelings. Given that they are not being identified as personally experiencing this problem, we hope that students will feel more inclined to discuss the feelings that the character in each of the scenarios may be experiencing and to offer solutions, i.e. developing empathy en route.

A 'solution focused' (Rhodes and Ajmal, 1995) sheet is provided for each of the scenarios and students are asked to identify the problem and to explore how the central character feels. They are then asked to identify how he might feel if things were different or better: if a miracle happened and the problem went away, how would the character feel? They are finally asked to identify three things that the character in the scenario can do now in order to remove the problem from his life.

These scenarios will hopefully reflect some of the problems and pressures that the boys are currently experiencing. This format should also allow them to develop their skills particularly in the areas of empathy and problem solving, which can then be transferred into their own real-life experiences and problems.

Activity Sheets

In order to further clarify and reinforce specific skills and concepts, the students are presented with a series of activity sheets. These can require students to either work

individually, in pairs or in smaller groups. The aim of these activities is generally to promote the development of personal skills and particularly to foster students' ability to cooperate and work effectively as a member of a group. What is also important here is the fact that the majority of these activities demand very little recording. When trialling this programme within the context of a Pupil Referral Unit, we were obviously dealing with many boys whose literacy skills were not all that highly developed. There were also issues around attention and motivation. Consequently, asking these boys to adopt a learning style which would reinforce any difficulties or problems they might be encountering would not have been productive. For many young men at this stage, the main aim of any such programme should be to focus on developing their ability to express their feelings, thoughts and ideas verbally – opportunities which many boys do not have access to within the social, or possibly within their own school, context.

Plenary

During the final part of each session, the brainstorming approach will again be utilised in order to elicit the students' views of the session. Not only is this an opportunity to summarise the skills and concepts covered, but it is also important to encourage the students to reflect upon the usefulness of the tasks, and begin to identify ways in which they might be able to further develop their own skills. A list of key questions is provided in order to promote thinking and to encourage participation in this part of the session.

Notes for Facilitators

The sessions can be used in a variety of ways either within a small group context or within the whole class. Although the programme has been developed within the context of a Pupil Referral Unit and subsequently used with smaller groups of students, it would be feasible to utilise these resources within the larger group and adapt them as appropriate for specific groups of students.

It may be helpful, however, to consider and take into account the fact that these resources have been developed to specifically target the needs of boys. Although some of the resources could be adapted for use in mixed gender groups, it should be noted that they are intended to provide a programme that can be delivered to boys within the context of a safe and nurturing group in which they can express their feelings, views and ideas without embarrassment or fear (i.e. feelings that adolescent boys may well experience if observed by adolescent girls). It is not felt that the gender of the facilitator is particularly important as it is assumed that he/she will have the requisite skills in managing this type of group work. However, it may be helpful, in a mixed gender school, to consider the possibility of running two groups simultaneously (i.e. one for boys and one for girls).

When initially trialling this programme, both the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and the Educational Psychologist were allocated to the target group in order to deliver each of these sessions, and to provide ongoing weekly mentoring support with individual students. However, it does not necessarily follow that similar arrangements should, or could, be made in other contexts. The allocation of resources and attempts to work in such a multi-disciplinary way clearly need to be appropriate to each context. However, it is important to ensure that those delivering this programme have some interest in both emotional literacy and social and behavioural skills themselves, and that they are able to function within an emotionally literate and supportive environment. It is also useful if facilitators have had some experience of managing groups and some understanding of group processes.

Focus on Boys: Some Useful Tips

Alongside experience of managing groups and understanding how these may and may not function effectively, it is also useful for facilitators to specifically consider how they initially approach groups of young men and perhaps agree both their philosophy and a range of useful strategies and approaches. The latter is particularly important when the individuals being targeted present as disaffected or disengaged with the learning culture. Clearly, the facilitators will be aware of positive behaviour management strategies, but when first approaching a group of less engaged young men, the task can appear somewhat daunting. When initially delivering this programme within the Pupil Referral Unit context, we agreed a range of strategies and approaches. Many of these may appear obvious to the more experienced professional, but we felt that it might be useful to present them as a list of 'useful tips' for working with young men. It may be useful for facilitators to discuss the list prior to delivering the course, during the course (as a direct result of delivering specific activities) and subsequent to completion of the course. Our list was as follows:

- ▶ Always explain 'why' a task is being done and what the purpose of the activity really is. For example, we need to become emotionally literate in order to be successful in our relationships and future jobs, etc. There is a reason for doing this work.
- ▶ Ensure that the students are not targeted individually to 'give their views, thoughts or feelings' in front of the group. When they are clearly not ready to do so, don't push them.
- ▶ Use examples of other men's or boys' experiences rather than asking directly 'What did you do when ...?' This can come across as confrontational to a young man who is experiencing low levels of confidence and self-esteem. Focusing on others' experiences feels 'safer' and can encourage the students to relate back to personal experiences at a later stage.
- ▶ Always ask for students' thoughts and opinions and don't judge them. They need to know that their views are valid (no matter how sexist or inappropriate they may appear).
- ▶ Always model the behaviour you wish to see and join in the activities. It is really important that embarrassment is always reduced to a minimum. If the facilitator is always first to 'have a go' and willing to share his/her own experiences, this can help to deflect difficult emotions and alleviate any stress. However, the facilitator will need to be very clear as to the extent he/she wishes to disclose more personal information and the usefulness or otherwise of adopting such a strategy.
- ▶ Use humour to deflect difficult situations and/or emotions but never use it as a put-down. This is entirely unproductive.
- ▶ Always use praise to reinforce the boys' contributions and appropriate behaviours and 'catch them' as frequently as possible 'doing the right thing'. It is vital to highlight the positives and, as far as possible, ignore the negatives.
- ▶ Move on quickly to the next activity or another point in the structured conversation at the first hint of any embarrassment. Never insist on each student making a contribution but simply praise those who do and thank them every time.
- ▶ Always allow time for talking. This is particularly important. Boys need time to think and respond and you may often have to allow them to talk 'round' a topic for some time before they feel able to address a specific point or key issue.

- ▶ Ensure that activities are mainly practical and that they are presented so as to incorporate a range of learning styles. Providing visual and kinaesthetic prompts and activities are vital for boys who exhibit more limited concentration sparks. Activities should always, to some extent, be specific and time limited.

Most important, in our view, is probably the first item in this list: why are we doing this? Why do we need to learn these skills? We would always emphasise not only the need to protect and foster emotional well-being but also the 'real world' value and importance of developing the skills of emotional literacy. These are the skills that they will need in the real world if they are to work effectively in teams, solving problems and communicating appropriately with work colleagues. These are the life skills that will ensure they are successful in both work and personal relationships and that they can remain resilient and motivated when they do experience problems and setbacks.

Hartley-Brewer's (2001) rationale is probably most apt:

Boys must learn how to be in touch with their own and others' feelings and perceptions because technological progress and greater global competition are creating jobs that require creative team work, collective problem-solving, constant communication and joint approaches to risk.

We do hope that these 'tips' are of use, particularly to the facilitator who may have less experience of working with young men who may present as somewhat disaffected and unwilling to engage. In order to further support implementation of the programme, we have included 'Tips' throughout each of the subsequent session plans. These are designed to help the facilitator pre-empt and avoid difficulties (mainly those we have experienced ourselves) and to support a smoother and more confident delivery.

Notes on Aspects of the Sessions

It is helpful to have the aims of each session written up on the flip-chart prior to the start of the session, alongside any key words pertinent to the topic being covered. These can be added to by the students within an initial brainstorming activity.

Brainstorm

Students are then asked to brainstorm all the words or phrases that they can which relate to the particular topic of the session. The facilitator can record students' answers on a flip-chart before asking them to transfer the words or phrases onto the 'Key Words Brainstorm' sheet provided. Alternatively, students could take time to work on the sheets individually, but answers should be discussed as a group at some point. Facilitators can use the completed brainstorm in order to prompt thinking and provide relevant ideas.

Quick Activity

Quick activities are icebreaker activities which usually consist of a quick game. The idea here is to break down any barriers and create a positive climate for the remainder of the session.

In the introductory session, the students initially agree to group rules and it is vital that an appropriate amount of time is allocated for this aspect of the course so as to ensure ownership of the rules. This will also allow each student to then adhere to the rules in subsequent sessions. Reinforcing group rules prior to clarifying the aims of each session is also helpful.