

## A workshop by Peter Slattery for the Youth Action and Policy Association Conference

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### Working with men and boys

#### Workshop description

Sometimes there is a fine line between a stereotype and something which is true. While there does seem to be something different about working with males, they do tend to be more physical, perhaps more direct, perhaps less verbal, possibly not so emotional, I am also inclined to think that there is also an element of self-fulfilling prophecy to many of these ideas. So this workshop takes a look at the idea of working with men and boys - and strategies for doing so - by exploring some important ideas as suggested below, and at the same time suggesting a general attitude and approach that help the less expected aspects of males to emerge. So we will take a look at:

- What is the place, the role of men and boys in our society?
- Power and aggression
- Feelings. Where do you get them and what do you do with them?
- Relationships: with lovers and partners, with friends and with family
- Communication. What is it and what's it for? And are males really so bad at it?
- What does becoming a good man mean? And being a good man in Australia in this day and age?

#### Key Dynamics to explore

While there are clearly physiological differences between the sexes, including the all-powerful testosterone, I am always concerned that thinking and talking in terms of male and female characteristics can trap men and boys into roles and behaviours which are defined by unhelpful and limiting stereotypes. At the same time, there do seem to be differences. So how are we supposed to proceed? I am suggesting that there do seem to be a number of ideas or dynamics, whatever we want to call them, which are, in different ways, important to men and boys across the planet, although with clearly differing expressions across cultures.

I find these dynamics useful to bear in mind because, in various forms and intensities, they surround the idea of maleness. And they give us a way to start to look at possible differences between the sexes yet not be trapped by limiting generalizations. As therapists, educators, mentors or whatever active role we

take on in relation to those we are working with, we can be mindful of and attend to these dynamics both in the nature of our interactions as well as asking the boys and men we work with to explore how these dynamics appear in their lives.

This means we can pay attention to what might be considered aspects of maleness but not get caught up in and fall prey to, stereotypes and clichés. We can work with these dynamics in ways which are simultaneously respectful, creative, challenging and which create opportunities for the best to emerge.

### **What is a 'good man?' Ideas about masculinity**

Most males grow up with some sense of what being a man is. These ideas can be liberating or enslaving. Closely linked to the following point, the changed role of males today, the idea of what it is to be a man and to be masculine, is fundamental to how males see themselves and this runs through all interactions and relationships.

#### *What this means for our conversations*

We can be mindful of this person's sense of themselves and can be simultaneously respectful and challenging of the view. What does it mean for how we work together, for this man to be a man? For this boy to be a boy? To be growing into a man? Where does this person's culture fit for them in defining masculinity and what does this mean for how we proceed? What ideas would it be useful to explore? What has been most important in helping shape this person into the boy/man that they are?

#### *What this means for the person's life*

What does masculine/feminine mean for this person? What does it mean for how they see themselves? For what they expect of themselves? For what others expect of them? For what they offer and contribute to relationships? With males and with females?

### **The role of males today**

It has simply changed! And I dare to say that a significant number of males are uncertain as to what their role now is. Boys too are unclear as to how they become men, and when they become men.

#### *What this means for our conversations*

What does this boy or man see as the role of boys/men in our society? What do they think about these roles? What roles do they see for each of us in our work together? What do we each do if we seem to be stepping out of role?

#### *What this means for the person's life*

How do these roles appear in this person's life? In their family? With their friends? Partner? At work or school? On the street? In the pub? In how they are

in the world generally? Are they as they would like them to be? How would they like them to be? How does this fit with their own sense of themselves as a boy/man? As a person? What would happen if they stepped outside the expected role?

## **Physical stuff**

Males, especially younger males, do seem to enjoy physical movement, physical activity. Not all males and not all the time, but many males do and in many situations.

### *What this means for our conversations*

Is it possible to move while talking? To write or draw? To physically move to express an idea? To move objects about on a floor or table top to represent for instance, relationships?

### *What this means for the person's life*

How does this person's physicality impact on their life? At a very practical level are they involved in the physical things they need to do? How does this physicality impact on how they relate to other males? Females? How important is their physical self to their sense of self?

## **Power**

This seems to be an issue for many males world-wide. A not very attractive aspect is a need to win, to conquer, to be in charge, to compete, to test, to prevail. A more attractive and a reasonable aspect is a person's desire to be in charge of their own destiny, to be able to make decisions that matter and will make a difference to their life.

### *What this means for our conversations*

We can make sure that the boy or man we are working with has privacy in our conversations, that they are in charge of at least some aspects of the process, in charge of what is explored and how it is explored. In charge of what they tell us and what they keep to themselves.

### *What this means for the person's life*

How does this man or boy exist in the world? What does 'person of power' mean to them? Where does power fit in how they relate to others? Where does their sense of meaning and worth come from? What do they need to be in charge of? And what not?

## **Communication**

Males are often traditionally considered less verbal than females. Yet there are many forms of communication.

### *What this means for our conversations*

Even if a person is less verbal, it does not mean 'unable to speak.' It may just mean fewer words. There are many other forms of communication, one of which is verbal. Simple thought and reflection in response to an important topic, question or moment can be profound. Writing and drawing is both an expression and form of communication if the person chooses to show others what has been drawn or written. Physical symbols, objects to represent ideas and feelings can be powerful communications.

### *What this means for the person's life*

What needs to be talked about and what may best be kept in silence? What happens if something that needs to be said is not said, and what happens when things better left unsaid are spoken? How does this person decide when to speak and when to remain silent? How does his style or preference fit with those close to him?

## **Feelings**

Males are also traditionally considered to be less emotional than females, less in touch with their feelings and less able to express the feelings they do have. Yet it may be more useful to assume that men do have feelings, that they are able to both access them and to articulate them if given the right opportunities and possibly for some, the right tools.

### *What this means for our conversations*

We can actually ask the person what they both thought and what they felt about an idea, an event or someone's actions. We can ask them what feelings they thought were behind their actions at different moments in their lives. What are the most potent feelings they have ever experienced? What is the place of feelings in our conversations together? What feelings are likely to arise in our conversations and how should we each respond to them?

### *What this means for the person's life*

How do they know what they are feeling? What names would they give to different feelings about certain events? Do they keep these feelings to themselves or let others know what they are? How do they make these decisions? What would happen if they told someone how they were feeling? How do they deal with their emotions? Do these ways work for them?

## **Relationships**

Given that roles have changed, and are changing, how do men and boys want to relate to females and to each other? What are some of the important ideas that males and females share? And are there differences?

### *What this means for our conversations*

How do I relate to this person in front of me? What can we expect of each other in our conversations? Is the fact that we are of the same sex or different sex, important here?

### *What this means for the person's life*

Is this person happy with the relationships he has? Are those around him happy? What does friendship mean? What does a partner type relationship mean? What is the nature and form of intimacy, connection, communication for this person?

## **Comment**

I have found these ideas useful to think about in my work with men and boys. They are dynamics that do seem to continually have relevance in one form or another. They are also presented here simply as ideas to bear in mind. You may choose to actively take them up or just be aware of them, or you may well attend to other dynamics which you consider are more relevant on that occasion. All this is expected. And if your conversations travel through other areas, seemingly unrelated or unexpected, then enjoy them. And throw these ideas in when and if they seem appropriate and it is useful to do so.

## **Strategies**

All of these activities are about starting and developing conversations. They can be done playfully or seriously, or both. It will be clear that some are more appropriate for groups, others for individuals or couples. However, with a little thought most activities can be re-jigged to fit pretty much any situation or topic.

## **On being male**

To open a process. Complete these sentences:

- When I was young....boys...
- Today, boys...
- Men today...

## **Exploring ideas about maleness**

What is your immediate response to these words?

- Boy?
- Man?
- Male?
- Masculinity?
- Sex?
- Gender?
- Sexuality?

Influences in your life

In terms of who you are today as a person, and how you approach life, what would be the % of importance you would give each of the following?

- Your sex
- Your gender
- Your age
- Your culture
- Who you are as an individual

## **Relationships**

What do men and women value?

- What do you most value in relationships? And in life? Write two lists, and then choose one from each list and each on a card
- Lay them out in two groups
- Sort cards into categories of sameness
- Chat!

This can obviously also be used to look at male/male relationships as in friends or as partners.

## **Men and women today**

Body pics

Using our bodies to create images of an idea. In this case the males in the group create an image of what they think are some of the ideas that women hold about men. Females in the group create an image of what they think are some of the ideas that men hold about women.

Note

It can be useful to comment that there are many differing views held by different people in our society. This activity aims to highlight some of them. Participants are welcome to create an image of the one thing that they most want to say.

## **Developing understanding and empathy**

A view of a view

This can be done with groups, individuals families or couples. Ask each person to think of the idea of an intimate friendship, and to then to write down what they consider to be the most important elements of such a relationship. Secondly, to think of someone who they are in such a relationship with and to write down what they think that person's answer would be to the same question. So you are actually asking them to write down what they think the other person thinks. They can later talk with this person if they choose or then and there if the person is present.

*Caution*

This can be a really warming and bringing-together activity. It can equally be quite disturbing for those who are distanced from each other or in conflict. It can still be very useful, just painful.

## **Feelings**

A series of questions that can just be asked at the right moment. The responses can be drawn, thought about, discussed, kept private or made public. Simple, but believe me, powerful!

- What makes your heart soar?
- What do you fear?
- What does your soul crave?
- What do you cherish?

## **Power**

- Write a simple script
- Give numbers from 1 to 10 in terms of personal power
- People read the scripts and the group guesses the power rating that each person is playing. People can be invited to also comment on the 'style' of power
- Develop some discussion around the nature of power, as part of human nature? As part of maleness? How it is expressed?