

boys2MEN Project

a Music Arts & Life Experience

Social Inclusion Groupwork Programme for young males in need or at risk of social exclusion

Coram Leaving Care Services, London

Summary: A project working with disaffected young men (especially those from black and ethnic groups) and fathers who are considered to be 'at risk' or 'in need' or who have been looked after. Providing a range of groupwork programmes, support them in their transition from boyhood to manhood and assisting them in realising their potential as both responsible adults and caring fathers. The acronym M.A.LE. in the project title, illustrates the methodology that underpins the delivery of the interventions employed. The use of *Music* and the creative *Arts* offers a stimulating conduit of learning and self-expression. By combining arts such as music, video work, drama, poetry and photography and outward bound residential trips and also one-to-one support from group facilitators and mentors - with - *Life Experience*; experiential group based discussions that assist group members to make sense of some of their life experiences, many of which will have been negative, and to draw positive learning experiences from them. Within this, there is a strong emphasis on fatherhood which is significant not only in relation to Britain's current concerns around the high numbers of teenage parents, but for those young people who have being brought up within the public care system. The challenge of parenting is more daunting, especially if your own past experiences of being parented has been a negative one. Unless some of the issues around family and parenting that go along with growing up in care are resolved within these young men, then the likelihood is that the same issues will be continued with their own children and families.

Background/Context: The project grew out of recognition that young men leaving care had had poor experiences of parenting and especially of fathering. There was concern that these young men would struggle to become good fathers themselves (or even value being a father), as they had no or few positive experiences to base this on. Even if they had experienced the strong support of their mother - the father role was either absent, dysfunctional or devoid of affection.

The project was originally supported by a Family Support Grant from the Home Office, which had recognized this gap in provision for looked after young people. The project was set up by the Coram Leaving Care Services and originally took referrals from all over the London area. The boys2MEN Project now provides localised programmes either in partnership with other services, agencies or on behalf of other organisations.

Project Description:

The project has four primary aims:

1. To discover how young men in care are affected by the 'in care' experience and by the absence of their father or a positive male relationship and to determine the impact of this on their ability to become responsible fathers
2. To devise a programme of intervention to enable looked after boys and young men to draw strength from their negative and positive childhood experiences and become responsible individuals and committed fathers
3. To assist boys and young males in the development of their male identity as a means of affecting change in their personal development, aspirations, behaviour, self-esteem and social responsibility.
4. To enable disaffected young people to become re-connected to their potential by reframing the often-negative life experiences into positive and empowering ones.

Young men are referred by voluntary and statutory agencies across London to join one of two groups:

- The boys2MEN Project - meets twice weekly in the evenings. The first group met for two years and was open to Black boys and young men in care aged 15 to 19 years. However the group attracted other young men who were not in care but were considered 'at risk or in need'. These young men were often invited

to attend by their 'in care' friends and so self referred on to the project. Many of the young men are now in training to become peer educators.

OR

- Two newer groups focusing on offending behaviour (these groups tend to meet for 3 months as a minimum) again for young men aged 15 to 19 years and are open to non-care leavers.
- We also run workshops or give presentations in schools or community groups on a range of subjects affecting disaffected young people.

The boys2MEN Projects seeks to provide a holistic service for boys and young men and to assist in their often-accelerated transition from boys to men. Group sessions explore how their life experience to date has affected the person they are now and gives them the opportunity to consider the person they would like to become. The group aims to help the young men become more self aware, raise their self esteem and restore their capacity to care for others, learn social values and develop individual responsibility.

In addition to participating in a group young men will also have regular one to one sessions with a project worker. This will include working on a personal development plan (that is eventually shared with the group once sufficient trust and support develops within the group) and is monitored by regular appraisals to map progress or redefine goals.

Achievements:

- To date the project has worked with over 70 young men aged between 14 and 19 years. 80% were from black ethnic minority groups and 20% were already teenage fathers. The majority of these young men became actively engaged with the project and many now think that you cannot be as good a father at 17 as you could be if they waited until they were 25. All of the young fathers are now more actively involved in the lives of their children.
- From the first boys2MEN group 3 young men have chosen to trace their fathers and although this has been a difficult process for them, it has enabled them to come to terms with a number of issues to do with their fathers and their relationship with him. It has allowed the young men to acknowledge what has happened and now move on with their lives. One of the young men described how he felt he had to do this for himself and another explained " I no longer feel the rage when I think about him, seeing him for the first time has closed an anger gap in me".
- One young man who had been given up on by all of the services involved with him has just completed a Windsor Fellowship (he focussed on work with the elderly) and is getting on with planning for his adult life.

Key Learning:

- It is vital that the group work programme for boys and young men seek to widen the definition of masculinity to incorporate nurturing as a 'normal' masculine trait. Phrases such as 'new man,' or being in touch with our feminine sides makes it seem that males need to become effeminate in order to be perceived as good parents/carers. Instead of perceiving such males as feminine we need to recognise these as shared traits not feminine ones.
- Many young men who have been in care have little experience of nurturing from male figures (and often their experience of 'care' may have been more about control and discipline). These young men are also less likely to have benefited from any parent education available (due to frequent school moves or exclusion). The young men may have had no experience at all of nurturing as something men can do. The re-education process is a slow one, in recognition of the fact that to challenge their perception of masculinity is to also undermine their sense of self. One example of this is the meal shared at the end of the session, it is initially served to everyone by the facilitators, who are all male, but gradually group members are encouraged to serve each other, thus

practising what it is like to look after someone else. The group provides a safe environment for the young men to begin to learn how to become vulnerable and give and receive nurturing from other males.

- The young men don't leave the group - even though they may no longer attend - they will still need occasional support. The young men may have less contact but they remain in touch. One to one support is available from the project workers if needed and the group members also act as a support network, newsletters etc are sent to all members. The young men referred to the project may not have access to other supportive adults. The ethos of this project is long-term investment and recognises that the young men will continue to need support and some for a long time. One of our many mottos is 'never too late, never too early'.
- Male workers are essential to the success of the group. They provide role models of what ordinary men can be like and are willing to share their life experiences (the more colourful the better) of what it is like to grow to be a man. They see their role as exploding the myths about what men are and moving away from the pressure of stereotyping. Catering to the differing learning style is also key and one aspect of this is the openness of male workers talking to other males – showing their vulnerabilities - and by so doing making it okay for them to do the same.
- The groupwork programme is delivered over the course of two years as opposed to 12 or 16 weeks. This approach recognises that many of the young people referred are already disaffected and distrustful and have social impairments that impact on their ability to engage in a group setting. They need much longer periods to start the process of learning to trust and engage, especially in a totally male orientated environment. Also they need to be prepared emotionally and cognitively to address the issues, attitudes and patterns of behaviour that they have come to rely on as a part of their identity but also need to explore, challenge and have undermined in order to motivate and empower them to change.
- Many of the young man have experienced such a catalogue of negative experiences at such an early age, with very little adult support and guidance that they consider themselves an 'adult'. Even though they lack social and academic skills they have come to trust to themselves and their own resources (survival skills) to get by. Having grown up so quickly they have missed out on many of the developmental stages of childhood that promote resilience, tolerance of others and builds self-esteem. Programmes for 'hard to reach young people' such as these need to be adequately able to assess their unmet needs and slow them down to enable them to revisit gaps in their personal development needs.

Difficulties/Challenges:

- The group receives referrals from all over the London area and this has created some difficulties in getting the group to work together in the early stages because the young men were so territorial and concerned with area rivalries. The group facilitators decided to take the view that it was a team building exercise and focused on getting the group to work together so that gradually for the young men being part of the group was something they really wanted to do. Groups are now more locally based and each creates a powerful identity that caters to the need to belong.
- It is really hard to work on issues of fatherhood and parenting with this group of young men because their own experiences are so painful to look at - they may not know who their father is, or if they do, they may have been neglected, abused or rejected by him. The group facilitators are intensely aware of how important it is to create a safe environment within the group for this to be explored. This demands great sensitivity - activities are used as vehicles for discussion and reflection - for example music and lyrics are used as ways to raise and discuss painful issues. Often the young men with the toughest exteriors are those who are most angry and vulnerable. These are also issues that most men would not discuss with other men - the facilitators have undertaken their own training in this as a preparation for the work.
- Recruitment of staff. We have had a lot of interest from male workers to join our project but unfortunately too many of them lacked the required skills and experience. As the demands on the project grows we have had to start our own training programme to enable the project to keep pace with the demand.

Materials and Resources used:

All the materials used have been specifically devised for the various boys2MEN Project's and are adapted from various sources or directly derived from the life experiences of group facilitators and/or group members. These include programmes on self-esteem, developing nurturing fathers, identity, sexual health, crime prevention, victim support, Lifeskills, Preparation for work and a Rites of Passage programme.

Contact Details	
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Setting/Context	Community or school based venues. We are able to devise or deliver programmes for other organisations or provide training or consultancy in setting up similar projects.
Target Group	<p>Young men, boys and fathers aged 11 to 19 years. (this includes young men who are African/Caribbean, African, Mixed Race and Asian, and who may have been in care)who are considered to be at risk or in need.</p> <p>boys2MEN also provides school and community based programmes for young people aged 11+ on issues of self esteem, personal development, identity (rites of passage), crime prevention, and sexual health issues.</p>
Identification of risk/need	<p>Looked after boys and young men At risk of or persistent offenders At risk of social exclusion or educationally disaffected Young fathers Living in temporary accommodation</p>
Young People's Involvement	<p>The young men are actively involved in selecting and planning the programme for the group and in developing their own personal development plans. All participants are encouraged to become peer mentors and those who undertake the training are paid or receive payment in kind, as co-group facilitators.</p>
Evaluation	<p>One to one appraisal sessions are held with young men throughout their time in the group to discuss progress (they all draw up a personal development plan) Qualitative attitudinal surveys are used pre, and post group, to measure change (for example on issues such as self-esteem, parenthood and offending behaviour).</p>
Funding	Currently Youth Justice Board Funding

Staffing & Management	1 Project Manager (F/T) 1 Project Coordinator (F/T) 1 Administrator 3 Sessional Workers 6 Volunteers
Lifespan	The project commenced in 1999 and is ongoing.