

Prevention work with Boys and Young Men

A national '**Promising Practice**' seminar held in March 2002 identified a number of key issues for successful practice in prevention work with boys, young men (including young fathers). Seminar participants were very experienced in this work and were using different approaches in a wide range of settings across the country. They came together to share and reflect on their practice and to agree what they have found to be the key issues for successful work in this area. All participants found it useful to hear about and learn from other practice around the country.

The following issues emerged and may be useful for practitioners to consider when setting up and developing prevention work with boys and young men.

Key Issues

- Work with young men and young fathers should be a mainstream part of work around teenage pregnancy and parenthood and not an additional extra.
- For many young men the important issues in their lives are to do with their lifestyles, growing up, self-image and self-esteem. Young men may engage in high risk taking behaviour, have low emotional literacy, low motivation, low levels of educational attainment, suffer from depression, and place an over emphasis on material wealth. Projects need to deal with these issues before tackling issues such as parenting.
- Projects need to be broader than just giving information on contraception and need to address personal issues and work with these core emotional lifestyle factors.
- Difficult issues arise when working with young men who did not want to be young fathers – the pregnancy was unplanned or they may have wanted the girl to have a termination.
- Some young men may have very strong anti-termination views. There is very little provision of emotional support for young men dealing with the issue of termination. Research indicates that where the young man is involved in decisions around the pregnancy, even if he does not get his preferred choice, he is emotionally better off.

Structural Issues:

- Multi agency working is important to ensure that the work is linked into mainstream provision and is not happening in isolation.
- Services should be based on the young men's needs. Develop consultation and involvement methods so that they can be involved in developing the project/service.

Service Delivery Issues:

- A number of factors can influence young men's attendance at a project/service such as distance, transport, amount of free time, confidence, and explaining to parents/peers where they are going. Develop services with comfortable, safe environments within which young men feel special and valued. If possible there should be flexibility around when the service is available.
- Outreach work is important, going out to find the young men where they are already. First antenatal sessions may have young fathers attending and may be an opportunity to target them.
- If appropriate use incentives such as travel expenses/travel cards, phone vouchers, and free child care facilities to encourage young men to attend.
- It can take time to develop relationships with boys and young men. It can take the length of a programme to engage them and to get them to trust the workers.
- Find creative and fun ways of attracting and engaging young men such as through music, art and sport. These can be used to mask some of the issues you want to work with them on. Other ideas include encouraging them to bring their friends along to the services and giving out free condoms. As the trust of the young men is built up they may ask questions and stay to talk. It is important to maximise any contact with them.
- Group work can be combined with one to one support, using both approaches may enable the young men to maintain their image in the group and deal with sensitive issues in one to one sessions. However group work can be used to assist them to discuss embarrassing and sensitive issues with their peers. Both approaches can help develop young men's emotional literacy.
- Positive images of boys and young men need to be displayed. Messages and interventions aimed at young men should be gender positive rather than gender negative.

- Young men may behave in ways that staff find uncomfortable but this has to be worked with if trust and rapport are to develop.
- Services/Projects need to consider the needs of homosexual and bisexual young men and challenge homophobia.

Staffing Issues:

- Staff need to be comfortable working with young men and to believe the work is worthwhile. It is important that staff understand their own feelings and fears around masculinity and identity before they can effectively engage and understand the young men that they work with.
- Flexibility, empathy, enthusiasm, commitment, energy, a level of personal honesty and a good sense of humour are all necessary attributes to work with young men.
- Young men can sometimes feel threatened by female staff and may be less likely to engage with them. It is useful to have sessions run by male and female staff.
- Staff should always maintain professional boundaries.
- Young men want staff who respect confidentiality, understand youth culture, are non judgemental and treat each young person as an individual.
- Staff should have ongoing supervision and training.