Guidelines for Working With Young Men
Excerpts from *Young Men’s Work: Stopping Violence and Building Community*

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**FACILITATOR’S GUIDE**

“Our struggle is not easy. … The truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice oneself for others in the nonviolent struggle for justice.”

Cesar Chavez

**YOUNG MEN’S WORK: STopping VIOLENCE AND BUILDING COMMUNITY** is a program to teach young men ages 14-19 alternatives to violence and to celebrate and enhance the strength, experience, creativity and intelligence of the young men with whom you work. Its purpose is not only to reinforce alternatives to destructive behavior, but to enable the young men to support each other’s success, become stronger allies to their peers, and to join the ongoing struggles in this country for greater equality and social justice.

The primary goal of the curriculum is to create and maintain a safe place for young men to talk; to hear each other; to heed the voices of women and men in the community and in history; and to do so in the presence of other young men and at least one adult listening with respectful and caring attention. The challenge for you is to be that listening adult who creates that safe place.

The second goal is to connect young men to the larger community of adults and young people who are struggling to transform our communities into places of mutual respect and commitment, social justice and prosperity. One of the primary features of male gender role training is the isolation men experience living inside the Act-Like-a-Man Box—the rigid set of male sex-role expectations that
pressures men to act tough, aggressive, in control, distant, and emotionless. Bringing them out of the box and into the community as brothers and allies is a primary objective of all of our work with them. We are convinced that, just as with young women, young men’s identity, growth and maturity comes out of their relationship to others. These others may be family, friends, peers, or other caring adults. It is only in relationship to others that young men are able to take on responsibility for their own lives and for their role in the larger community.

THE CROSSROADS: YOUNG MEN ENTERING ADULTHOOD

In statistics about violence in the United States nowhere does serious physical violence—assaults, wounds and homicides—show up more than in the lives of young men between the ages of 18 and 24. What is it about this period that produces so much violence?

Late adolescence in the United States is held to be a time of transition for young men—a period in which, with appropriate education and support, they learn about and prepare to enter the adult world. During this period they move from a dependence on adults into self-supporting independence as adults. They move into manhood and manhood holds out a promise. At ages sixteen and seventeen (and sometimes earlier) young men enter a world in which the benefits of adult life—the chance to live well, to find community and to start a family—will become available to them.

Clearly this promise is broken for many young men. They bring into adolescence a real-life exposure to violence and abuse. One of the major themes of Young Men’s Work is a focus on the special kinds of violence that happen to young men in the male socialization process. Statistically, late adolescence is the time when young people most encounter violence, homelessness, poverty, and incarceration. In the transition to manhood, young men may be badly prepared for the economic realities of adulthood.

Most young men who come to our attention are in trouble in some way. They are sinking rather than swimming through the turbulent years of adolescence. They need the support of people such as you and from curricula such as this one. However, the majority of young men (even those not in trouble) need the same opportunities to examine gender roles and societal violence and to build a safe place with peers to look at their past and plan their future. We know only too well how many “normal” boys become men who
are too quiet, too competitive, too aggressive, too isolated, too controlling—the men who beat their partners, rape their girlfriends, molest or beat their children, get into fights, embezzle funds, file false reports, manipulate others, or make business decisions that devastate communities and the environment.

Consequently, this curriculum is not just for young men who have been identified as having difficulties, or who are already in trouble. This curriculum provides an opportunity for young men to talk, listen, reflect, think critically, plan and problem-solve. It is appropriate for all young men coming of age in this society. Perhaps we can offer them no more—certainly they need no less.

Of course young men already get a lot of attention. Gender bias—giving preference to boys and short-changing girls—is still common in U.S. schools. Young men still demand, and receive, the balance of attention from adults. This is secured through “traditional” male behaviors—talking loudly, monopolizing discussions, or acting out and presenting discipline problems—and through traditional male entitlements, such as more funding for boys’ sports. But as adults, we have not often worked with young men in any coordinated way to counter the socialization process that sometimes leads young men to abuse others or engage in self-destructive behaviors. Beyond this, we have barely begun to address how young men are targets of physical and sexual violence from adults. It is safe to say that facts about physical and sexual abuse of young men are still unacknowledged, under-researched, and largely unknown.

Young men do make the headlines for violence. Most youth crimes are committed by young men; consequently, they fill detention halls and treatment programs across the country. Public fear of violence is often translated into fear of young men, and responses to this fear usually involve arrest, incarceration, and punishment of young men. In many cases these “solutions” to youth violence reinforce the behavior they are meant to suppress. Clearly, they don’t change the underlying issues of young men being trained in violence, and they almost never address the violence committed against young women by young men. These issues, as well as the development of young men’s capacity to become contributing family and community members and allies for social justice, are the concern of Young Men’s Work.

When you decide to work with young men to stop violence by enabling them look at their experiences of growing up male, you are in a courageous vanguard of adults committed to young
people’s safety and freedom. Congratulations and welcome! Every step you take will help young people thrive.

The Oakland Men’s Project Thesis

All young men negotiate the difficult passage from youth to manhood as best they can with the information and skills they’ve been taught. This male socialization process is an integral part of our familial, cultural, religious, educational and governmental institutions. It involves explicit teaching, implicit role-modeling, and incalculable depths of physical and emotional conditioning to push young men into a role that is internally contradictory and confusing and can be abusive. The thesis of the Oakland Men’s Project is the following:

• **Parts of the male socialization process brutalize young men and train them emotionally, physically, and cognitively to enact abusive adult roles.** Boys resist this training, but are given few alternatives.

• **Young men want to and can unlearn this training.** With support from each other and adult allies, they will embrace and practice more positive values associated with being a man.

The crucial assumption: Assume that young men are good, believe in young men, hold them accountable.

You are about to take young men through a process that will, among other things, help them look at ways they have been trained to be men. Some of this training has been painful to them, but much of it they have been trained to ignore, forget about, or refuse to question. The process of looking will be, at the very least, uncomfortable. But it can also be fun. They may be reluctant in various ways. Behind the reluctance, based upon their own experience, is an awareness that they can be hurt by other men. For many, this awareness has solidified as the conviction that men are hurtful by nature. Many young men may have been put in this group because they acted on this conviction, hurting others.

**To do this work well is to assume, to believe, and to express to young men that they are human beings, basically good, basically loving, basically believers in equity and fair play among each other and with women.**

When young men act otherwise, it is often because of their understanding of what it means to “act like a man.” To repeat, one
of the key lessons of this socialization is that men are *intrinsically* abusive and violent and are to be feared. Your job is to demonstrate otherwise, often in the face of their behavior, even your own fear.

You can assume that they are well aware of inequities built into the system, and that they can and are willing to take positive healthy steps to change the system and to build community wherever they may be. Our second thesis, then, is as follows:

**It is essential to young men’s long-term wellbeing for them to participate in and contribute to the historical struggles of their communities to achieve safety, material sustainability, equity and inclusion.**

Giving young men the opportunity to engage in developing community is not only essential to their own growth but to the very survival of our communities. So our work with young men must be about more than individual change. It must be about rebuilding community with young men as an integral part of that process. When these young men present themselves to you: their immediate needs may be great, their horizons limited, their abilities hidden, and their self-destructiveness or violence most apparent. Nonetheless, young men need us, as their allies, to keep this larger vision of their participation in society in the forefront of our work with them. Otherwise they remain casualties and we remain welfare workers, picking up the walking wounded and trying to patch them up to return to the front lines of masculinity only to see them return, ever more wounded, again and again.

**FROM MANHOOD TO COMMUNITY**

What is the “manhood” which young men are promised? Beyond just being older, manhood typically suggests maturity, control, being in charge, responsibility, being on your own—very much the attributes of the Act-Like-a-Man Box. Some of these qualities can be useful, but the lesson of the box is that boys, pressured to act this way all the time, are entitled to go to almost any length, including violence, to be in charge.

Beyond this, manhood often suggests a mystical or sacred air that men exude. From men in ads to men in government, manhood comes with an assumption or display of unquestioned leadership, prestige, and power that can be recognized in any male who possesses it. It’s found in cartoons, in fairy tales, in religious texts and, like the “sacred male rage” mentioned elsewhere, in the
heroes of many Hollywood action movies. This myth about who men are supposed to be is invested with our deepest feelings and reinforced over and over by popular culture.

Manhood thus becomes the inexplicable thing that every young man has to attain. Mystified in this way, it becomes the thing that young men must find and then defend in themselves. When they have little else in their lives to defend, manhood becomes a quality to defend even more strongly.

Finally, manhood becomes a compact among young men. Learning to be “men” through the compulsory and compulsive conditioning process, they overlook their countless differences and form superficial bonds with one another. As part of this bonding they set themselves over and against women, people who are gay and/or transgendered if they are straight or subscribe to “traditional” definitions of maleness, people of color if they are white, recent immigrants if they are from the United States—and against any part of themselves or other young men that expresses anything other than the heavily-patrolled borders of this very narrow definition of masculinity. Any group with that has little social power, or that is vulnerable to violence or blamed for social ills can become a target of male bonding, the proving grounds of manhood.

Brotherhood is another term with its own aura of mystery. “Brotherhood” has sometimes been used to describe men’s alliance with one another. It can signify a deep closeness among men, but it can also name a superficial bond that keeps members in line. A fraternity whose members routinely engage in sexual harassment may appeal to “fraternal brotherhood” to silence any brothers who object. Brotherhood has been invoked in previously all-male military academies to justify the hazing and mistreatment of new female recruits. The term sometimes describes, as in the Aryan Brotherhood, a bonding among men that proves murderous to others.

Brotherhood in this sense may be what men who feel vulnerable or powerless do to insert themselves in the manhood order. They transform their place in the social hierarchy of men by reordering it with a different group of men on top. The pressure upon young men, primarily from other young men, to police and eliminate these differences in themselves and each other and to establish hierarchies in which some groups enjoy power and privilege over others is terribly destructive.
“Manhood” and “brotherhood” are names that deserve to be rescued from the above usage. There are countless ways to be men; there are innumerable ways to act as brothers. We have a long history of men acting in expansive, community-oriented ways using phrases such as the “brotherhood of man” or forming organizations such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Union. Like the qualities of being a man listed in the Act-Like-a-Man Box, manhood and brotherhood can have salutary as well as terrible possibilities.

When we conduct the Act-Like-a-Man Box exercise, we often finish by asking what it takes for a young man to come out of the box. The responses—courage, strength, self-respect, willingness to show feelings, willingness to ask for help, and others—become our list for what real men can be: men who have learned to act with the "manliness" Cesar Chavez speaks of in the opening statement. These are the qualities of manhood we wish to promote among young men. We may go so far as to call it community: a gathering of people who take responsibility for their own well-being and the well-being of one another.

GETTING TO COMMUNITY

In our work the question we are asked most often is how young men can be re-socialized to unlearn the effects of male socialization. Frequently this request comes from mothers, who usually have the most responsibility for the care of their children. In many of these households, supportive adult men are, with many wonderful exceptions, glaringly absent or destructively present and the women are seeking safe, non-abusive adult male role models for their sons.

This has led society, particularly mothers, to seek ways to put adult men back into young men’s lives. Programs that provide mentoring or “rites of passage” for young men, for example, often receive government and private funding. As a society, we have come to believe that rituals can help men become re-socialized. We may look to male initiation ceremonies for young men from traditional societies for examples of how to provide rituals. The men’s movement of the 1980s popularized the picture of adult men going away to the woods to relearn or reclaim their manhood through rituals, unfortunately very often in the form of European-American men appropriating what they understood to be Native American or other non-European ceremonies—another version of male bonding through the stereotyping of another group.
But rituals are also the forms in which most hurtful male socialization takes place. From military basic training to competitive sports practice to fraternity hazing to incarceration, young men are exposed to toughening-up rituals that often serve to accent violence. The call for alternative rites of passage, in turn, may play into the notion of mystified manhood, reinforcing the call upon young men to be in charge without taking responsibility for promoting relationships of equality with women or building healthy communities.

In fact, few real markers exist for the transition from boyhood to manhood. Some traditional rites may have been invented precisely because of the lack of such markers. The current cry for rituals comes at a time when traditional gender roles and the two-gender system itself are being challenged and may in fact be part of the male socialization box: a need to “prove” one’s manhood, along with a fear about gender ambiguity in response to changing roles for women and the recognition of greater sexual diversity. And, because the demands of the Act-Like-a-Man box are so severe, the call for rituals may also be an attempt to find instructions for meeting those demands. For just these reasons, we should be very cautious about appealing to rituals at all. The danger of rituals is that it is difficult for any one process to reflect the many different kinds of masculinity there are; the call for such a unifying process is exactly what we should challenge.

Given all these factors, some kind of alternative “unlearning” process for young men makes sense insofar as such a process might involve regular, repeatable steps. It could be said that your group offers some of the features of ritual. The group meets regularly; each session follows a prescribed pattern for beginnings and endings; the Agreements are rule-like reminders of appropriate ways to act in the group; there is even an Ally pledge.

More important, the group happens during an important time of transition for young men. Inevitably what you do will be standing in for and taking the place of rituals for young men to enter manhood. For this reason, it is important to think about how to avoid promoting the mystified forms of manhood and brotherhood indicated above. Use the time to train young men to recognize their differences, to unhook themselves from the demands of a monolithic one-size-fits-all compulsive masculinity, and to enable them to step into the role of one who builds community.
BEING WITH YOUNG MEN

You

Before you begin your work, it’s good to assess why you’re here, what’s in it for you, and how you feel about young men.

• What is it like for you to be with young men?
• What do you love about them?
• What gets hard or feels hopeless?
• When do you find yourself a little frightened?
• What negative or hurtful experiences have you had with boys or men?
• How will this experience help you?
• How might it get in your way?
• How will your own gender help or hinder your work with young men?
• Finally, what kind of backup and safety do you need in order to be there for young men?

Them

Here they are, in a circle, the 6 to 10 young men you will be working with. They might be noisy or quiet; careful, testing, or rebellious. They might be playful, funny, even hilarious; silent, shy, or grim. More likely than not they will feel a little embarrassed, a little confused, or a little resentful about being in the group. They probably all feel inadequate to some degree.

II. DOING A GROUP WITH YOUNG MEN

It’s Not Therapy

Of course this group has therapeutic elements. It is a gathering of people going through a process together. The facilitator must pay attention to the feelings of the participants. One of the primary goals of this group is for the participants to learn to act differently then they have been acting. In all these senses something like therapy will be happening. But it’s important to remember that therapy is not the goal. It is not therapy. Nor is it just education. The group is a complex process of unlearning and re-education, reclaiming, healing, practicing leadership and new skills, reconnecting to self and others, and a time to reflect on choices and
make decisions. The goal is larger than individual change, although that is important. The group, with your leadership, is a process of reweaving a community in which young men are colorful, vital and essential threads.

You can expect that young men who come or are sent to you will have some preconceptions about what this group is for. They probably will be resistant. Especially if they have been identified as “problems,” they will have been lectured, counseled, or advised “for their own good.” Quite likely some will have experienced such a process as manipulative; and some will have been manipulated. Certainly they will have discomfort about paying attention to any feelings besides anger. So it’s important to be clear about what this group is for.

The crucial task in this group to understand and unlearn the destructive parts of male training. The goal is not individualized treatment for each member, or psychic healing for personal hurts. Rather, the purpose is to provide education and to support for the young men during this process. This model of education uses real-life experience and emotions as crucial components, but that doesn’t make it therapy. To uncover and face the destructive parts of male socialization, both to get rid of what’s been hurtful and to call upon what’s been helpful, is both personal and social. It requires individual work but within the social context of interactions with peers.

Male Socialization and the Group

In any gathering of boys active male socialization is at play: boys check each other, try on attitudes, try to figure out how to act, or just pretend they know. What is great about young men’s groups is the camaraderie, humor, trust, and loyalty to one another. What is not so great is the putdowns of each other, even in the form of jokes; the putdowns of women and gay men as a way of bonding with each other; physical touch that borders on aggression; and the avoidance of speaking from one’s own experience. It makes sense, though, that these kinds of interactions happen, given what pressure is placed on boys to figure out how to be men.

Why Are They Here?

You might have called your group together to develop young men as leaders. They may be volunteers you are employing to undergo a leadership task. Or you may simply be building this into an all-male class or a sports team in a school. In these instances, young
men will have chosen to come and will already have some commitment to going through a process with you.

More likely, however, this group is happening as a result of something negative. Either young men in general at your institution, or these young men in particular, may have been identified as “problems.” The behavior of young men is often at odds with institutional decorum. They may be violent; they may have been labeled as violent. Depending upon the setting, they may be mostly youth from lower-income families, or youth of color, or immigrant youth, or youth being pushed out by the system. Or, they may be victims of violence or offenders, ranging from young men in therapy to young men in detention. They are tagged as young men who need to be “fixed.” In these cases, young men will enter the group with uncertainty, humiliation, resentment, or outright hostility. They may walk in, see who is present, and want to walk right out again.

Obviously your specific goals will vary widely, depending on the reasons the group is called together. But it is crucial to understand and plan for the attitudes and feelings the young men may bring in. You will have to assist them to make the room safe for these issues to surface and face them directly. This will be some of the most important work of the group, because just being in a room in safety with other men enables young men to begin to reduce competitiveness and potential abusiveness toward others.

Creating Physical and Emotional Safety

For any group of young men the primary concern, whether they tell you or not, is safety. After all, much or most of their experience of threat or danger or outright hurt in the world has come from their relationships with adults who may seem like you or with young men who may seem like them. Whatever else will happen in the group, each person will be monitoring or testing to see if it’s okay to be here and if he is going to need to keep up appearances, tell jokes, hide out, or go up against whoever looks toughest.

What you are attempting to do with the group is create new paradigms of manhood, social containers that will allow young men to explore being a man a little differently from how they have been taught.

The following section outlines some dynamics that may make it difficult to create safety in the group, as well as some suggestions for responding to them.
What you’ll see

Jokes and Putdowns

One way to handle the pressures of growing up male is to joke about everything. Part of this is a healthy attempt to express feelings about this difficult process. But often it takes the form of testing each other, enforcing the socialization process, and putting one another down.

Physical Touch

Young men often roughhouse, punch each other—or don’t touch at all. Many young men grow up with little affectionate touching from parents, and physical punishment ranging from what some adults believe to be “normal” discipline to what we would all agree is outright abuse. This is supposed to “toughen” them up. Surprisingly large numbers of boys have also been sexually manipulated and abused by adults. As a result, almost all physical contact is uncomfortable for many young men unless it takes the form of joking or outright physical confrontation.

“Sacred” Male Pain or Male Rage

Young men have seen the profoundly ambivalent responses our culture makes to male expression of anger. Anger is often the one emotion a “real” man shows, and it often helps him get his way. But anger expressed this way almost always leads to some kind of violence. Young men are hardly ever allowed to express their own anger fully and healthily in a safe, controlled environment where no one gets hurt. As a result, young men learn that their anger is to be feared and that it will hurt others or themselves. This means:

- They will be wary of talking about feelings in front of each other.
- Any talk of feelings, even anger expressed in a healthy way, will feel very uncomfortable or unnatural.
- Young men may have difficulty even identifying how they feel.

Because it seems so hard for boys to show any feelings, when they do it often takes all their attention. This can but should not become the ongoing focus of the group. For example, when a man expresses pain, our own responses may range from fear to deep, mesmerizing empathy. We may fear, because many of us have experienced violence at the hands of a man who is in pain. Men are
supposed to be in control of themselves, and if this man is out of control, it could happen to any man. We feel empathy because all of us, especially women, have been taught to care for men when they are expressing pain. The expression of male pain, and more obviously, male rage, has a hypnotic affect on us—ask any Hollywood action-movie director! Don’t allow the group to be mesmerized by the expressions of pain that my occur. Allow the nonviolent expression of anger, pain, and other feelings to occur—in a context of positive acceptance in the group—and then move on.

**Need for Respect**

All young men understand the word “respect.” They have all more or less been taught that if they don’t achieve anything else in their lives, respect is the thing they have to have. The insistent demand for respect is in fact a clear sign that young men don’t feel that they have much respect and in large degree lack self-respect. Behind this there may be a grimmer feeling. Seeing the pressure, the drive, and the outright violence in adult men around them, they may carry underlying hopelessness about being a man—that part of being a man will almost inevitably involve being hurtful, abusive, and bad.

**Shame**

To be told all the time to measure up is to be told that you are failing to measure up. In countless forms, from public discipline to jokes about penis size, boys are taught to feel humiliation about making it as a man. It is likely that young men will perceive being sent to this group as a failure to measure up. The models of masculinity in the minds of many young men are impossible to live up to, so you can assume that many young men are continually dealing with and attempting to overcome feelings of humiliation or shame.

**Sexism**

We use the word “sexism” to mean the society-wide, day-to-day discrimination against and mistreatment of women by men—the structured one-down status that women carry, most visibly in rape, battery and sexual harassment, lower pay, greater levels of poverty, more responsibility for child care and less political representation and power. Sexism is recycled again and again in the socialization of each new generation of young men.
Not surprisingly, then, you’ll find sexism active in the group—from jokes and put-downs to a lack of information or outright misinformation about women. You’ll hear anger toward women and participants may blame their girlfriends or mothers for their problems. Putting down women establishes superficial bonds in the group. At the same time, pressure to make it with girls brings about rivalries. The belief that women are mysterious and have a lot of control over how men feel causes young men to fear women. Finally, if young men are in this group specifically because of problems with young women, or as young fathers, their feelings may be overlaid with guilt or resentment.

Boys often learn to relate to each other by belittling or harassing women. When things get difficult among young men, they may tend to reach for this method of bonding. From the outset, you must be clear and be prepared to interrupt, gently and firmly, every gesture to bond at the expense of women. You must make it clear to the group that it not only contributes to the continued endangering and victimization of women, in however diminished a form, but it also reinforces the flawed parts of the socialization process for boys, by permitting them to ally with each other around belittling others. It never helps them, even when it looks like an attempt at humor. When you hold this line well, it will encourage young men to begin to do the same with each other, which is a crucial skill in stopping violence.

Here are some questions to ask yourself.

- How might young men in the group bond by putting women down?
- What might be hard about interrupting these kinds of put-downs?
- How might you do it effectively? (talk with co-workers)
- What happens if you don’t challenge this kind of bonding?

If you are a man:

- How have you bonded in the past with other men at the expense of women?
- How might you be doing it now? Be as specific as you can.
- How else have you seen this happen when men get together?
Homophobia

In thousands of ways young men are taught that physical closeness or intimacy between men, not to mention sexual contact, is dangerous and reprehensible. Being labeled homosexual can get a young man in big trouble from other young men.

Young men bond through homophobia—hatred and fear of gays and the fear of being thought to be gay, and through fear of any deviation from a prescribed “male” gender role. Young men often prove they are “men” by displaying toughness and hiding weakness. Fear-based peer pressure encourages young men to be reckless, callous, and to brutalize others. It is crucial that you interrupt and question any testing or teasing involving use of words such as “wimp,” “sissy,” “fag,” “girl,” “mama’s boy,” etc. Even a little of this behavior can make every young man in the group feel unsafe, not to mention those who, whether in the open or closeted, may be gay or transgendered or simply in question about their sexual identities.

In order to notice and interrupt it in yourself as well, you’ll need to examine ways that you may have participated in this kind of bonding with young men in the past, consciously or not.

Ask yourself these questions.

- How might homophobia show itself in the group?
- How might you have participated in bonding within a group in the past by exhibiting anti-gay remarks or actions or by “proving” yourself to be heterosexual?
- What attitudes might you carry and display, consciously or not, that steer young males toward conforming to traditionally-defined, binary gender roles?
- What might be hard for you about interrupting antigay put-downs or other expressions of homophobia or transphobia in the group?
- How might you do it effectively?

Any group of young men will likely include some who are clearly heterosexual, some who are not sure about their sexual identity, some who have not addressed sexual identity at all yet, and some who are gay or bisexual or transgendered. Most groups will have boys who have been sexually abused, which complicates and confuses any question of sexual identity. But because of homophobia and transphobia, almost everyone in all groups will appear exclusively heterosexual.
What You Can Do

Names

Think about how you refer to group members. Ask each group member what he would like to be called. When referring to the group in general, use names like “men” or “young men” to promote pride. Don't use words like “kids” or “boys” that subtly label, trivialize or misrepresent them. Some names have been used to discipline boys and will turn young men away. They might use some names with each other but resent your usage of these names, whether they tell you or not.

Respect and Pride

Beyond how you address the young men individually and as a group, you will have to make two basic commitments. First, commit to showing open respect to each person, regardless of what he does. Interrupt any temptation you may have to joke about or put down a young man for messing up or breaking the agreements. Always distinguish the person from the action. Second, commit to calling on young men’s experience of pride, inviting them to talk about what qualities they are proud of and what gets in the way of their believing in themselves.

It is also helpful to have group members think of men in their lives they look up to. Remind them of men in history or in their school or neighborhood who have bravely and powerfully taken stands against violence against women and other forms of injustice. Encourage them to believe in other men and hold out for them that they don’t have to hurt, control, or be abusive to be men.

Agreements

The “Agreements” that you will be making with the young men in the opening group are the basic tool for safety in the group and for the building of relationships based on listening, respect, commitment, and safety in the group. These Agreements are an effective method we have found for establishing ways that boys in the group will communicate with each other and you—ways sometimes highly divergent from how they have learned to be together. Just making and keeping the agreements with each other may be the most important purpose and work of the group. You’ll notice the agreements prohibit physical or emotional putdowns. They call for confidentiality and require all members to speak for themselves from their own experience. Everyone in the
group gets to be treated respectfully, set his own limits, and share responsibility for respecting everyone else.

Some groups may take several sessions until the agreements are fully operating. For other groups the agreements come easy—until there is challenge, disagreements, frustration, or insecurity. When these occur the group can go deeper into understanding what power and control, abuse and respect are all about. Until the group sees itself push against, and be supported by the agreements the necessary safety for more in-depth work will probably be missing. You will have to resist the tendency, as the group members grow more familiar with one another, to let agreements like “no crosstalk” slide. Enabling group members to remind each other respectfully of the agreements, or setting up timed and structured exercises in which debate or cross-talk is allowed, for example, will help to strengthen the long-term practice of the agreements. It should be a long-term goal of your work to have the Agreements enter your and their lives outside and beyond the group.

Handling Authority

In various ways young men will see that these Agreements are just another set of adult rules. After all, the group is very likely to be seen as young men who act badly and need to be set right. Most young men have experienced authority as bad or abusive. And part of our culture’s manhood training requires them to challenge authority of any kind in order to prove their masculinity.

As an adult, you’ll find it easy to slip, unknowingly, into using the Agreements as rules—with penalties for breaking these rules ranging from reprimands to ignoring to shaming to expulsion. This is most likely to happen when things seem, to you at least, a little chaotic or out of control. But it is at just such moments that you will have to remind yourself—and possibly everyone else—that these are agreements and that everyone in the group has a stake in keeping them.

Young men will bring their experiences with authority to the group if you make it safe. To earn their trust in your authority, you can model fairness. Be open and clear about what is and is not okay in the group, and what will happen when someone does something that’s not okay. Make sure the Agreements and consequences for breaking them are clear to group members. What's not clear to them can be explained. What’s not acceptable to them can be negotiated. When you experience confrontation, manipulation, or threats you can always ask, “What’s up?”
Further, you can model consistency and firmness. Don't express your authority arbitrarily. Instead announce the group limits—your limits—and keep to them. Infraction of the limits does not mean retribution or punishment, but it can mean that you will have to have agreed-upon and understood sanctions.

Finally, it might be helpful to examine your own feelings about having authority, and about previous experiences of being manipulated by authority. Depending upon your experiences, you might find yourself wanting to pretend you don’t have it, or making a show of giving it away. You might use authority out of fear of the young men. Or you might use it unintentionally in ways that discriminate against young people. The best you can do is prepare, prepare, prepare by looking at your own experiences, and role-playing with other staff worst-case scenarios of confrontation, manipulation or threats. You can expect that when you are clear, consistent, and fair, young men will usually honor your authority. They are hungry for fairness and consistency.

In case you haven’t figured this out by now, handling authority is one of the most difficult parts of running the group. You will need to spend a lot of time considering and practicing how to bring young men to make the Agreements. You’ll also need to assist the group in keeping them.

**Seeing Them Through**

Making a commitment to the group, especially when the group is meeting about problems or anything that might involve emotional vulnerability, is hard work. Some young men will resist the commitment by joking, criticizing you or the Agreements, or by undermining your efforts. The ultimate resistance is when young men withdraw emotionally from the group or by silence or inaction, or physically coming in late, leaving early, or dropping out. You can assume that some young men in your group will demonstrate these kinds of resistance.

The best thing you can do is to understand these actions for what they are. Keep yourself from blaming the young men, but be clear about holding them to the agreements. It’s always appropriate to ask a young man doing any of these things “what’s up?” Then take his replies seriously. A group stands or falls based on how well young men are able to bring up how they’re feeling about the process. And you might hear reflections about what you’re doing, even if they are critical, that will help you and them go forward.
Feelings

As normal human beings, young men have full, deep, rich, and complex emotional lives. In a group setting, feelings will spill over in one way or another all the time—in laughter, affection, nervousness, embarrassment, shifting around, general discomfort, resentment, anger, or boredom.

At the same time, as long as the pressure to “act like a man” is at work, young men will try to maintain the appearance of control or competence and shelter any “bad” feelings—in fact any feelings at all—from you and from each other. Young men see other young men being admonished or penalized for crying, often from older men or peers. Expressing almost any feelings can get you labeled anything from a whiner to a sissy. Consequently young men pick up the deeper “male” training to not express any feeling except anger.

Make room for feelings other than anger. Use the Agreements and the group exercises to encourage young men to notice how they feel. Help them create a relationship with each other in which feelings can be expressed safely. This is a crucial skill in stopping violence.

At the onset of the group there will be some shyness and some testing of the waters by group members. Talking about personal experiences and looking at personal involvement in violence will feel unnatural to them. Expect attempts to ease this discomfort by jokes, putdowns, teasing. To complicate matters, group members will have lots of feelings about having feelings! Under these conditions directly asking a young man how he feels may feel invasive and manipulative to him. After all, his experience may be that when he talks about how he feels, someone puts him down for it.

What is helpful is to be light. Take time with the process and make room for each person to go at his own speed in involving himself with the others. Honor any parts of (non-put-down, non-sexist) male bonding in the group that allow participants, now and again, to take a break from the “seriousness” or heavy weight that these subjects bring up; and then bring the group back to the process. Let the feelings come, through exercises and discussion, without necessarily calling attention to them. Notice and acknowledge the more subtle forms of emotions at play in the group. Be careful not to put anyone down for not knowing how he feels. The twin agreements of the “right to pass” and “trying on the process” can be used to encourage young men to take a chance, but also take
care of themselves. You can also balance emotional intensity by working in lots of non-competitive games, sports, exercises, humor, and group discussion. Tell about your own experiences. Using yourself as an example and talking about how you feel can help.

In general, women and men are taught to express emotions differently and also to value different emotions. It is also true that people from different ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups learn different ways of dealing with feelings. One group may value talking a lot, while another may value silence; one may value anger; another stoicism; some may engage by looking each other in the eyes; others by looking down or away. All cultures vary in what it is appropriate for one person to disclose to another. Group norms in a therapeutic society often unconsciously enforce the values of the mainstream: eye to eye contact, talking about feelings, and the like. You will have to practice making room for cultural differences.

Remember, the purpose of this group is not to have feelings. The purpose is to notice feelings, to notice how they affect actions, and to take responsibility for actions in order to stop violence.

Encouraging Closeness

This group is also about closeness. From teams to clubs to gangs, young men seek closeness with one another. Some traditional bonding involves talking about sports or making jokes about girls or each other. Your group is about helping young men get closer to each other in non-abusive ways. Obviously much bonding is healthy. Young men make long-term commitments to support each other. Calling on and reinforcing their ability to make commitments to each other, confront and support each other while resisting the putdowns, will be a chief task of this group process and another crucial skill in stopping violence.

For reasons already mentioned, young men are taught to fear closeness. This fear is often represented in homophobic and sexist jokes. Build in time, especially toward the close of the group, for young men to talk about positive relationships they have with any older men or men their age. Gently steer this toward acknowledging connections among the young men within the group. It is always appropriate to enable young men to appreciate each other in any way they can. Lack of information, misinformation, and confusion about sexuality reinforce the fears that boys have been taught about homosexuality, sexual orientation, and AIDS. Providing information about these topics
and room for young men to bring up questions and concerns helps create safety and closeness.

**Ending**

Finally, goodbyes. As the end of your group approaches, you will notice group members reacting in various ways. Especially when a group has reached significant emotional depth, young men may find it difficult to acknowledge its finish. Sabotage and disappearing acts frequently happen at this time.

Spend some time thinking about your closing. If possible, begin acknowledging the closing several sessions ahead of time. Make space for young men to talk about their next steps, what it might be like for them without the group, and what commitments they would like to make with other people and with each other for the near future. Above all, make sure each group member is acknowledged by everyone for whatever way he has chosen to participate in the group. A strong, clear ending underlines the group members’ power to act positively outside of the group.

**What-ifs**

Now that you have looked at some of the issues common to work with all young men, let’s look at the differences. There are special issues to watch out for, based on who your young men are, why they’re here, and who you are.

**AGE**

These materials are specifically designed for young men between the ages of 14 and 19. We have found them useful for younger boys and older youth with some modifications. The age of the youth you work with will determine some of the mechanics of the group, such as how long the sessions can be (shorter for younger men), how many physical activities and breaks you might need to build into the group process, and how long you can spend on any one topic.

Some exercises will have to be modified for younger boys because they have less experience to draw on. The “Costs of Male Training” exercise, the sections on male/female relationships, and the vocabulary in different sessions can be simplified without diluting the content. Specific suggestions can be found in the facilitator’s notes for the sessions.
RACE

Because this issue is so deeply woven into U.S. culture, your own understanding of it will be profoundly shaped by your ethnic identity. A first step for each of us as facilitators is to examine our own experiences and think about where, in the hot, lively process of a group discussion of racism, our own feelings or experiences may trip us up.

Look at who is in your group.

If Your Group Is ...

Predominantly or exclusively white young men

In our culture most white students are in institutions without people of color. Most young white men and women learn about other ethnic groups primarily through textbooks, TV or movies, or music. Additional information comes from family and friends who themselves have little contact with people of color.

Part of understanding male training for white young men invariably means coming to grips with their training as white young men. The history of “proving you’re a man” for white men in the United States has been inextricably involved with establishing dominance over men of color. If your group is all white, race may not even be mentioned, except in the occasional, uncomfortable joke. Nonetheless you can assume the issue is there.

In Session 6, “Who I Am,” you can help white young men look at their European-American family backgrounds, enabling them to break down the misconception that they have no ethnic identity—that they are simply “American” (and, incidentally, that people with more “visible” ethnic heritages are therefore less American). White people often devalue their own cultural heritage in order to call themselves American.

In many regions of the United States people of color within a community are largely invisible to the white people in the same community. A city may have long-standing stable communities of Arab Americans, Asian Americans, African Americans, or Latino/as, or Native Americans. There may be migrant workers, new immigrants or refugees in a community, but because people tend to socialize and do business with other people who are like themselves, this diversity is unnoticed. Youth violence issues in any given community are often blamed on “gangs,” a not-so-subtle coding for youth of color. In this way white young men may not
recognize their own responsibility for stopping violence. Although the main violence in an all-white community will be white on white, don’t gloss over the “Who I Am” session because of a lack of men of color in your group. Understanding and building diversity is a crucial skill in stopping violence.

**Predominantly or exclusively young men of color**

Many institutions serve almost exclusively African American, Latino/a or Asian American or Native American people, including multi-racial people, those whose parents are of different races or ethnicities. If your institution is predominantly run or staffed by white people, and your group is convened for young men with “problems,” and young men in the group are mostly youth of color, you can be sure that discrimination is happening somewhere in your institution. You will have to deal with its effects in your group.

Any adult of any ethnicity might be reluctant to venture into a discussion of racism with a group that is predominantly youth of color. Some of this may be the result of subtle racism pure and simple—the implicit belief that this group is more “dangerous” than others. Well-meaning adults may also fear youth of color will use acknowledgment of racism as an excuse for rage, apathy, or hopelessness, or as a reason to strike out. Just the reverse is usually true. It is a relief to young people of color to have racism acknowledged. They are unlikely to take full responsibility for making better choices unless they can discuss and analyze the constraints on their lives and community.

In these groups, set aside time for young men of color to voice their concerns, anger, fears, and hopes. Invite the white men (if there are any) to listen carefully. Ask them to notice when they get scared, angry, or want to deny what the young men of color are saying. Remind them that they are not responsible for what has happened to youth of color in the past. This is an opportunity to examine racism and its different effects on the lives of group members. Further, each group member of color will need to hear the experiences of members of other ethnicities as well as those of biracial members. One way that racism works is by pitting one group against another. These exchanges are not an occasion to figure out who has it the worst but rather an opportunity to discover how each individual and group can be the best possible ally for each other.

Finally, without a good understanding of racism, young men of color are kept from understanding the dynamic in which the
powerlessness, fear, and anger of racism is turned into violence against their peers and themselves. They have learned the same stereotypes about themselves that white youth have learned about them. You may be surprised to hear how deeply these messages of hopelessness and distrust of others have been set in.

Racism is extraordinarily difficult to talk through in any group, especially when the talk involves personal experience and the subject is the racially charged issue of violence. But in every case the rewards are profound. Our experience has been that it often feels as if a great secret had finally been disclosed, as if fresh air and reality have swept into the room.

ECONOMIC CLASS

Economic issues are rarely talked about in relation to violence, but they are clearly at the core of young men’s and everyone else’s lives. Making it economically and providing for others is a bottom-line expectation of how men are supposed to act. Men are taught that they should never be satisfied with existing economic achievements, and should always strive to make more money. The reality is, however, that most men, like most women, will not succeed economically in any way close to the expectations laid upon them.

Although most young people live in neighborhoods and go to schools that are segregated by socioeconomic class, even small differences in economic resources and opportunity produce anger, frustration, despair, resentment, and violence among young people. Much male/male competition and fighting is related to real and perceived differences in money, jobs, and overall status—or to future possibilities for education, jobs, and status. Obviously, drug dealing and fights over athletic shoes and jackets are related to money and status. When a man’s primary way of earning respect is to have money to front the right clothes and the right ride, and to have the power to handle other people, including girlfriends, perceptions of class difference and hierarchy lead to violence.

You know the economic circumstances of the community of youth you work with. What effect do unemployment rates, the kind of jobs available, the standards of living have on the way that violence is acted out among young men and women?

Members of wealthier communities tend to have the resources to keep violence within the home and off the streets. “Hidden” violence such as drug use, battering of partners and children, child sexual abuse and suicide, is no less damaging than the more visible
forms of violence that occur on the street. Young men who are white and from wealthier families are often let off, excused or bought out of the criminal justice system, and their acts of violence are not taken seriously. Be as serious with them about the consequences of their actions and the necessity for them to make different choices as you would with other young men.

In poorer communities, on the other hand, economic pressures may make young men more desperate, less self-assured, and more cynical about stopping violence. Available economic opportunities may include military enlistment, job training in security or law enforcement, or extralegal or illegal activities, all of which can in fact, intentionally or not, promote violence. For both communities, “upper” and “lower,” economic differences can be the cause or the justification for various kinds of violence.

In any community, whether wealthy, middle-class, or poor, the tendency is to perceive violence as a problem of “those people”—anyone other than themselves. This stereotyping is a form of violence itself, dividing people from each other, silencing victims of violence, and giving license to the forms of violence common in the community. One effect of this tendency may be the socioeconomic background of your group itself. You may, for example, have been sent the poor or working-class youth who have been set up to be the “problem”. Here again, your work is to bring out the issues that fit and help young people address them with one another.

**Tailoring Your Group to the Community You’re In**

**RURAL/URBAN/SUBURBAN**

Some truths about violence and its roots cross all gender, race, and class lines, but there are often helpful distinctions to be made based on the community you’re in. For example, young people in rural areas often have few age-appropriate community services to turn to. Limited work opportunities, isolation, and poverty may trap many young women into early childbearing and domestic abuse. These hardships may make moving to a city seem attractive and may prevent youth from attempting to build community where they are. This is unfortunate in many ways because the pride in the land and history attached to the area can be assets in helping young people develop a strong sense of community. Cultivating responsibility to a community is a crucial skill in stopping violence.
Urban environments generally offer more services for youth, but there is also more vulnerability to street and neighborhood violence. The larger school systems tend to provide students with a greater variety of teaching materials and subjects, better access to information, and more diversity among peers and teachers. But more students also get lost in the larger school systems and they are more likely to confront danger from drug dealing, gangs, and weapons violence than students from a rural area.

In the suburbs young men face yet another set of problems: few places for young people to gather with each other, economic segregation and isolation, high rates of invisible family violence, and the displacements suffered by mobile and “developed” communities. They may have learned to deny or gloss over the real problems they face to keep up appearances. If so, one of your tasks will be to help them break through this denial.

Violence crosses all boundaries, and all young people need to discuss this, but the context for this discussion is always the community you’re in—how it fits, how it’s different, and what must be done here.

**IMMIGRANTS**

If you are working with young men who have recently immigrated to your community from another country, you will need to understand some of the violence they face from the stereotypes and prejudices of more established community groups. Community services are not often set up to aid immigrant victims of violence. Also, many recent immigrants are refugees who have come from countries where there was extreme violence—war, rape, torture, forced relocation, assassination, and extortion. Their first needs may be to deal with these previous experiences of violence, although few resources may be available.

Finally, this is an era in which anti-immigrant sentiments and legal restrictions alike affect both documented and “illegal”—undocumented—immigrants in nations throughout the global North. This further reduces available resources to immigrants, while encouraging them where possible to “blend in” or conceal their identities.

You will also have to help non-native speakers of English understand the materials and participate fully in the discussions. Young men born in the U.S. may have to be challenged on their misconceptions of the cultures of immigrant young men. Immigrant young men may need help finding their voice within the
group. They may also have different cultural styles, different levels of comfort with public discussion of personal issues, and different fears about public participation than non-immigrant youth. It may help to talk with adults from their culture to open doors to this curriculum with them. Co-facilitate with people from the cultures represented in the group where possible. And always make room and time for all kinds of young men to speak up for themselves within the larger group discussion—the earlier in the curriculum, the better. It makes it easier as you proceed.

**YOUNG FATHERS**

If you are working with a group of youth fathers, you will need to focus much more intently on discussion of gender issues and offer additional sections on parenting. The sessions in this curriculum provide a solid foundation for going deeper into those issues but you may need to expand these discussions further. You can use the common situation these men share to build group support and trust. Have them share pictures of their partners and children, stories, frustrations, fears and hopes to create the bonds for exploring the harder issues.

**DRUGS**

It’s likely that many young men in your group have some involvement with drugs (including alcohol). Drugs are part of the fabric of life in the United States, and drug abuse is often among the self-destructive practices involved in “acting like a man.” At the same time, recent “crackdowns on drugs” have touched the lives of many young men, especially youth of color, in punitive ways. For both the above reasons, discussion of drug use in the group can be very difficult.

The topic of drug use has an obvious place in group discussions about how men are socialized, how young men may use substances as a way of medicating themselves to cope with the pressures to act like a man, and how drugs may sometimes be involved in violence. It will also come up when you ask the group to make the agreement not to come to the group under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

This curriculum does not address the fundamental dynamics of substance abuse. It addresses violence, and we believe that alcohol and other drugs, even when they are involved in violence, are not usually the cause of violence. If you are running a recovery or rehabilitation program for young men, you will find that the
curriculum will support but not replace the recovery work. Even if your group is not explicitly addressing recovery issues, nonetheless you will need to weigh the impact of drug use upon your group and be prepared to discuss it knowledgeably.

**GANGS**

Gangs provide protection, safety, connection, recognition, community, and respect for their members. These are all things that young men need yet are often denied in our society. Many young men join gangs because they feel locked out of other places—families, schools and neighborhoods—that provide the support they need. Rather than condemning gangs, we must help young men see the costs as well as the benefits of gang participation. We also need to help them transfer the pride, power, and protection that gangs sometimes provide to safer activities. If young men see that your support programs and interventions are working, they will decide that gangs focused on violence or drugs are not useful for them.

This curriculum is not anti-gang. It is about helping young men find ways to be together based on pride, power, and protection without relying on fear, violence, constant competitiveness, illegal activities, or self-destructive behavior.

**RECENT VIOLENT INCIDENTS**

In many institutions, this curriculum will be introduced after an incident of violence. It may have been an event such as a drive-by shooting, interracial fight, a youth suicide, a boyfriend beating up his girlfriend, a student raped, students carrying guns, charges of sexual harassment or racism against a teacher, or police harassment of young people. Young men are always touched by these events, even when they don’t realize it. The curriculum offers times for group members to write about and discuss recent incidents of violence.

Certain events or discussions may trigger strong emotional responses such as despair, fear, confusion, or rage. Healing from the effects of violence is important for each individual, and can also be a catalyst for young men to join together to stop violence. If major trauma resulted from a recent incident or series of incidents of violence, you may need to rely on community counseling resources to help young men heal from the events. In any case, run the group in the context of what is currently happening. Give young men a chance to talk about what is going
on, how they feel about it, how they want to support each other, and how they can respond to the violence.

**FAMILY VIOLENCE, SEXUAL ASSAULT, CHILD SEXUAL ASSAULT: REPORTING**

Most attention to violence focuses on the most visible and dramatic instances. But the form of violence that the most young men have to deal with—in many cases on a regular, long-term basis—is physical and sexual abuse within their family or community. One in four girls and one in six boys is sexually assaulted before the age of 18. Physical and sexual abuse of young people is endemic in many of our communities.

Even if you are in a school and community where there is little overt or public violence, you can be sure that young men are experiencing this. And, while in any effort to stop violence it is crucial to identify and focus attention on this violence, you will find that young men cope with this “relationship” violence in many different ways.

Some will come forward with their own stories of abuse. While disclosing abuse is not the goal of your group, it may happen. If you make it safe enough, young men will tell you what’s happening to them. You should be prepared to respond, and to work out an intervention where it is required. Learn the reporting requirements and procedures in your state. Discuss with your supervisor and other staff how to respond to young men, or the women they may be involved with, who are in abusive and dangerous situations. Make sure you have planned adult back-up for this eventuality. Steer the young person to appropriate resources for support and intervention if necessary.

When someone tells his story publicly, the rest of the group is affected. It is difficult for anyone to expose being a victim of physical or sexual abuse. This is especially difficult for young men because of the pressure upon them never to be tagged as a victim. When witnessing this, other group members may need a chance to talk about how they can best offer support. This is not a time to talk about, gossip about, or blame the discloser; it is a time to remind everyone of the agreement of confidentiality.

Other young men may deny the possibility that they could ever be victims of abuse. They may say things like “I would never take it, I would fight back.” Vulnerability to violence can be terrifying; denial is one way of dealing with the fear. Denial of their own vulnerability can also make young men critical of other young men...
who have been victims of violence. They may even blame the victims. In reality, no one is immune from possible sexual assault, robbery, or physical attack. Precisely when we want to separate ourselves from the survivors of violence do we need to see our common vulnerability and work to make it safer for all of us. Understanding our common need for safety is an important component of violence prevention work.

EXTREME VIOLENCE OFFENDERS/VICTIMS

If you are working with a group of young men who have experienced extreme violence—murder, rape, child sexual assault, abandonment, long term physical abuse, imprisonment, or war—you must expect serious resistance, denial, and layers of self-protection. You will not often be wrong in assuming that many juvenile offenders were seriously victimized at some time in their lives. In most cases long term individual therapy is called for to deal with the more serious symptoms consequences extreme violence—disassociation, personality splitting, hyper-arousal, and terror. The material in these sessions can supplement, but cannot replace, the slow, painful healing process from serious trauma.

ANGER IN THE GROUP

Anger in the group is scary. But you have a tremendous opportunity when someone in the group gets angry. Many young men have probably never seen a man get angry without hurting someone. If someone is angry, start talking with them. Have him describe what he is feeling and why. If he seems as if he is going to lose control, remind him of the agreement that there will be no violence in the group. Have him take some deep breaths or a brief time-out. Use a calm voice to ground him and to ensure the safety of the whole group. This can become an opportunity to practice the basic but important anger-management skills the group members have learned.

If two young men in the group are angry at each other have them sit apart, facing away from each other. Have each say in turn what he is feeling and why, and what he needs from the other person. Help the two negotiate what they need. Afterwards, help the other members of the group talk about how they perceived the conflict and whether or not they felt it was handled well.
A Final Note

You have to understand and plan for the possibility that the conditions under which young men come to your group may prohibit the group from working. It’s important to expect as much as you can—young men are capable of coming through in surprising ways. But it is always appropriate to scale your goals to what is possible. When you work with young men in dealing with violence, you are confronting a deep and normal way of life for many young men in America—more normal than aberrant. The institutional setting in which you meet these young men may make it too hard for your intervention to work well. Many schools, drug programs, juvenile detention halls and other institutions where young men are congregated are more interested in criminalizing and punishing them than in helping them learn alternatives to violence. At the same time, some of the young men in your group may be so damaged by the violence they have experienced and the training they have received that they need longer term, more individualized help than this group can provide. So what will finally be important, and will count as a success even if your group doesn’t “go,” is that neither you nor the young men be blamed for its not working. You and they will have done what you could.

A group has a life of its own. No matter what the curriculum says or what your mandate is from others or what your personal goals are, these particular young men in this group, at this time, in this place are unique, valuable and dynamic. Gradually allowing the young men to take leadership in deciding what to focus on, what concerns and situations to bring up from their lives, what issues to spend time on is the most important kind of support you can provide. Their being able to claim this time and space as theirs, in the midst of all the places and times in their daily lives which are controlled by others, helps them develop and value their own leadership, take responsibility for themselves and each other, and gives them an opportunity to deal with what is real and immediate for them.

Long-term Work for You as an Adult Ally

It is certainly crucial that we provide services for young men, including groups like the one you are/will be leading. But to build a community in which young men are full and active participants we will need to be strong advocates for them. Many of us work in institutions and organizations in which young men, particularly poor and working class young men, young men of color, and young men who are acting up or acting out, are seen as the problem. Even running these groups may put you in conflict with
prevailing attitudes in your organization because you are providing prevention rather than punishment, and because this curriculum deals with difficult social and personal issues.

We need to be strong advocates for young men within our organizations by encouraging their leadership, and by challenging the organization to provide the resources, support, information, and skills that young men need to be able to take their place in our community. You may encounter resistance from people who hold stereotypes about young men and who have conservative attitudes that promote locking them up and throwing away the key. You may have to contend with racism, class prejudice, homophobia and other institutional practices which further stigmatize and separate some young men from the rest of us. To be advocates for young men you will need to develop your own support network, allies, and institutional support. And finally, you will have to hold the line with young men themselves, requiring them to be accountable for NOT passing on the violence. Expecting this from them may be the most important act of alliance you can perform.

**Taking Care of Yourself**

Taking care of yourself is essential for any work you do with young men. This might be harder than it sounds. Taking care of yourself contradicts ingrained beliefs that you should go it alone, never make mistakes, and never ask for help. Part of taking care of yourself includes making decisions for your own safety ahead of time by working with co-facilitators, devising appropriate ground rules, and developing realistic ways to enforce them. Be clear about what you want from the young men. This helps them feel safe. Also, taking care of yourself challenges the covert ways that some adults use to make young people care for them. Young people will notice your actions and begin to see what they need to take care of themselves.

Does it look overwhelming? It’s not! Remember our assumption. Young men are good! They did not ask to be trained to be violent. They may have also been exposed to training in being brave, in taking risks, in taking charge when they have to, in being loyal, and in being irreverent to abusive authority. All of them have learned that pride and respect are important tools for survival. You can call on all of these in your work with them.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.