

# Work with boys and young men - why we should bother

*Ymlaen looks at a rationale for working with boys and young men, and describes two examples of boyswork in action*

## 'A Full-on Mission': ✓ Working with young men in Wales

**M**any youth workers in Wales will understand what the term 'a full-on mission' means to young

men. It means going out in a group to get drunk and drugged over many hours, often culminating in a spectacle such as a car theft or a fight with the police, always involving bad behaviour in public. For all too many young men such a mission is necessary to prove themselves men to their peers. An essential part of youth workers' mission should be making boys and young men aware of their masculinities, helping them to think critically about what is expected of them because they are male.

As academics have pointed out in recent years, there is not one type of masculinity, but many different masculinities. The attitudes and behaviour of a white gay 18 year old from Pwllheli will be very different from a heterosexual black 14 year old from a stigmatised council estate in Newport. In Wales, however, as elsewhere, the models of manhood that are readily available to young men are limited. Heterosexuality is compulsory. Physical and sporting prowess, competitiveness and risk-taking are expected while caring, emotional articulacy and genuine respect for women or not. There are particular Welsh masculinities with particular effects on men and women. An obvious example is rugby culture, which encourages physical aggression, discourages tenderness, insists on hard-drinking and the exclusion of women.

There is a strong argument that youth work needs to question and challenge assumptions about masculinity. I shall give two examples of problems Where youth workers can help: the abuse of women and suicide. -' As a probation officer I came across many examples of young men, sometimes as young as mid-teens, who were regularly physically abusing their girlfriends. This abuse had often been overlooked, either because it was not expected from such young men or because it was

assumed the problem was not serious in the long-term. Much of the research into domestic violence shows that men do not grow out of it, but in fact the abuse gets more severe over time. Youth Workers can intervene early by discussing with young men in groups and as individuals issues of power and control in relationships.

Other research tells us that young men are more at risk of killing themselves than are young women (although young women may be more at risk of other self-destructive behaviour such as self-harming and eating disorders). There are all sorts of connections between masculinity and suicide. It is the ultimate in risk-taking, seen as strangely glamorous in young men's culture, and men's inability to talk about problems, particularly socially unacceptable ones, can lead to extremes of suppressed emotion. Sensitive youth workers can give young men permission to talk through problems and are also perhaps uniquely placed to infiltrate their peer group culture and question some of its values.

Male youth workers' approach can be a macho one, communicating with young men only on the level of being 'one of the boys', and the only service offered is one that revolves around sport or other traditional macho leisure. For the sake of young men themselves, and for the wider community of men and women, there is a need for challenge and change.

### Further reading (they include examples of practical exercises):

- David Jackson and Jonathan Salisbury (1996) *Challenging Macho Values*. London, Palmer Press.
- Any resources from the organisation Working with Men (they publish a magazine) or the B-team ('boys-work'). Tel 0171 7329409. The Wales Youth Agency also has some of their resources.

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## Caerau Boys' Group

**W**orking with boys is messy, full of compromise; ambitions are continually beset by reality. So says Mark Drakeford, project leader of the Caerau Boys' Group.

Caerau Boys' group began in 1989 when Mark, then Community Leader at Barnardos, was offered funding to run an activity programme for boys during the summer holidays, a time when provision was concentrated on a number of holiday playschemes for younger children.

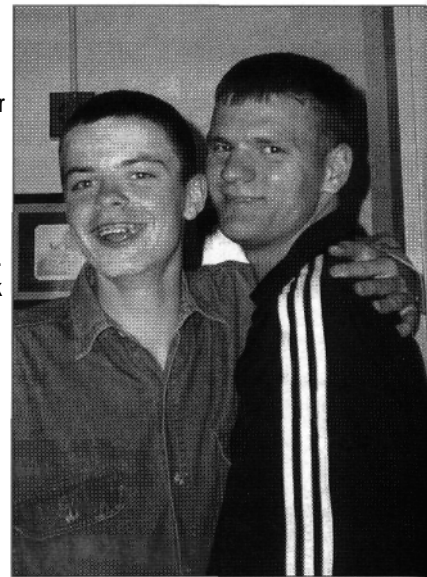
Funding for the project was limited to the six weeks of the holidays. Its main aim was, as Mark explained, "to offer compensatory experiences for boys in their mid teens and to provide them with a focal point to meet and take part in activities which they would otherwise be unable to do." It also provided an opportunity for the boys to be introduced into a more adult environment and to interact with adults, something very rare in their day-to-day activities.

The initial scheme highlighted the need for a longer term project, as Mark explained "I was surprised because the modest programme offered attracted so much interest, in a way that itself was cause for concern."

The group, which is run by two workers with assistance from a social work student on placement, meet one evening weekly and in the holidays for one full day's activities each week. Mark says, 'The activities we are talking about are the most basic - horse-riding, swimming, bowling, ski-ing - but they are activities that the boys cannot afford to do because of their economic circumstances. The project, because all activities are free, makes them realise that these things are not only for other people, they are for them also and this, in turn, builds confidence and leads to higher expectations.'

Attendance is voluntary, with the majority of members recruited through the local school who provide the names of boys who they think would benefit most. However, the school is reluctant to give the names of some boys because they don't want to be seen to be rewarding bad behaviour. This means that the project does not really know whether it is targeting those with the greatest need.

The project begins working with a cohort of boys when



they are aged 14-15 years and continues for two years until they are 16-17. Mark explained that, 'There have been difficulties in the past when the group has allowed younger boys to join and, although we're reluctant to say no to any boy, the tension between the age groups is destructive. Their interests, needs and ways of behaviour are so very different that it causes friction. In the past we have sometimes been forced to ask the younger boys to come back when they are older.

Ideally, the group aims to work with twelve boys, the number that can fit in the minibus loaned from Barnardos for trips. While the number of members can fluctuate, there are usually about fifteen.

Mark went on to explain that the boys "...suffer from a poverty of ambition. They only want small beer and yet lack a realistic prospect of attaining this. We are living at a time when the gap between what they are told they need to be a

valid member of society, a car, job, house etc., seems to be beyond them."

They aim to complete the two years work with a grand finale of a trip abroad - a big experience for many who have never even been outside the Cardiff area. However, at the end it is difficult to get the boys to break away from the group. Mark says, "It is important for them to make the break, but it is difficult when they still need help. The last group we worked with stayed for three years and so are 18-19 years. The project must be meeting a need because the boys turn up every week in large numbers." For some the project does act as a springboard to better things - such as becoming a junior leader in youth clubs. Some use it for references, even many years later while others use the project to broker discussions with other agencies such as the probation service. Some also come back to work with the group.

Mark explained that in taking on a long term

commitment to the boys, they also took on the constant struggle of fundraising. "The project exists hand to mouth; the workers who would like to spend more time with the young people have to spend their precious time and resources fundraising."

What advice does Mark have for those thinking of undertaking such work? "Boyswork is worth doing, but you need to be resilient and committed to it because you are meeting a long term need and you have to be there week after week. Often, bringing 15 young men together is not exactly a recipe for harmony. We need to make optimistic assumptions that the boys deserve a good deal. We need to act positively towards them, however you also need realistic outlook, the boys can be trouble, hard wearing, difficult, frustrating, but we try to create an environment and circumstances that they can flourish in and address their difficulties.