

An Occasional Youth Work Practice Paper 1

Young Men & Education

Seminar 1

Healthy Relationships – A violence prevention curriculum was presented by Peter Davidson, Men for Change, Nova Scotia. This model of practice focuses on collaborative approaches between formal education and youthwork, in working with young men around aggression, media influences and developing healthy relationships.

This seminar provided an opportunity for a range of practitioners to explore issues affecting young men and their education, such as under achievement, essential life skills, how young men lead, gender expectations and preparing young men for employment.



Recommendation 1: Activities Must be Proactive

"We cannot solve the problems of today with the same level of thinking we were at when we created them."

– Albert Einstein

A proactive framework for violence prevention was introduced using the river of violence metaphor. Imagine a great river that runs through our society. It is a broad river about waist deep. In that river are the people involved with violence. It could be a child in a basket floating by or a teen holding tight to a log. It might be a woman who is being abused, struggling so hard to just keep standing against the constant current that she can't see the safety of the riverbank. There might be a girl who has been sexually assaulted or a young man who has had his first conflict with the law.

In this river are the people that most of us work with everyday. When you go to work whereabouts in the river are you helping the most? Someone has the job to wade out into the river and pull people to safety. Maybe you have a boat or raft or you link arms with other agencies reaching out into the river to reach those who are cold and lonely.

Those who give support on the river bank help to patch up wounds and help others to learn to make the best choices to not fall in again. There is also a role to reach the public already on the river bank but who are facing the other way. Someone needs to turn their heads and hearts to see the real issues so they can help with time, policy and money.

Finally there is upstream at the headwaters of this river of pain. What will we find upstream at the source of our problems with violence? Where in this scene do you see yourself serving on an average day? Where do agencies and governments spend the most money? Are our programmes reacting to the problem by offering charity and compassion down stream or are we proactive by working for social justice and long term change upstream. Both are important but only working upstream will dry up the river of violence.

For social change to be effective on the street we must continue to do the good work of healing and helping the pain but we must also move upstream to seek the source at the headwaters of the river of pain. There we will find the contributing factors for potential violence. In particular, the socially constructed values for men to be tough and in control.

Recommendation 2: Educating For Change Must be Holistic

"Violence is anything that denies dignity and leads to a sense of helplessness and hopelessness."

– Martin Luther King Jr.

There are many parts to the whole task of including young men. This includes "how" they learn, "what" they learn and "why" they are learning as part of a complete growing experience. The international success of *The Healthy Relationships Curriculum (HRC)*, is in part because of its user friendly and interactive learning model and in part because it addresses the whole person's needs and is not just an attempt to change the bad into the good.

HRC offers student-centered activities in the programme to assist young people in the development of:

- emotional intelligence,
- resiliency,
- problem solving,
- assertiveness,
- critical thinking,
- skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to form and maintain healthy relationships with themselves, others and the community.

"How" young men learn is by active participation. Traditional teaching is top down. It is an old model that goes, "I have something to tell to you. You memorize the facts and prove it on a written test and you have an education." The new learning practice means creating circles of inclusion with a facilitator who is trusted enough to host a learning space for students to learn not just what to think but how to think for themselves. The lessons are not taught "to" anyone. Rather the answers to problems are discovered as learner and teacher explore together.

Young people learn best when "what" they are learning includes all of who they are. Learning is successful and change is more certain when their head (knowing), their heart (valuing) and hands and feet (doing) are all engaged in a healthy purpose. Knowing is understanding that healthy choices build resiliency for life's challenges and that poor choices negatively impact yourself and others. Knowing also includes critical thinking and awareness about issues like stereotypes and the influence of media messages.

Learning to grow your heart by valuing yourself and others is important to build an attitude of self worth and a tolerance for differences. But a life with just knowledge and positive attitudes is like a well stocked boat on the sea of life without a paddle. Skills are needed to put it all into action or we risk wasting our talents and the imagination that calls us to the distant shore.

"Why" young people learn, on the deepest level, is to find greater meaning and purpose in life. Humans have been asking four great questions since the dawn of civilization. The most successful programmes or professional relationships are those that result in helping people discover:

- Where have I come from?
- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- Where am I going?

The bigger their answers to these questions, the bigger their life. If a programme doesn't help a young person find himself in these four ways the young person will tune out and seek satisfaction and connection elsewhere – often in situations that may be violent or unhealthy.



Recommendation 3:

Move Beyond the 'Tough Guise' Identity Racket

"Man's inherent nature is to be curious, gentle, intimate, responsible, enthusiastic, sensual, tolerant, courageous, honest, vulnerable, affectionate, proud, spiritual, committed, wild, nurturing, peaceful, helpful, intense, compassionate, happy, and to fully and safely express all emotions. When will we stop training him to be otherwise?"

- Gordon Clay

Our work at the roots of violence or "upstream" must get to the very heart of the issue of how we construct masculine identity. Participants in the workshop answered the question, "What does it mean today to 'Act Like a Man'?" The extensive list generated included a range of expectations to live up to physical ideals (strong, muscles, tall) and behavioural expectations (fight, sports, be in control, hide emotions, punch out anger.)

The "Act like a Man" (and Be Ladylike to expose stereotypes of girls) activity is from Healthy Relationships Curriculum, Volume 2: Gender Stereotypes and Media Awareness and opens up permission to explore a subject very close to everyone, our sense of self identity. Ask young men what its like to be who they are and you begin to end the taboo on sharing about the things that are important to them. Ask questions like, "How are you fitting in?" "What's it like to be a guy?" "What are your hopes and dreams for the future?" These are simple questions that open huge possibilities for honest relationships to form.

It is crucial for educators and youth workers to reach into the conversation and peel back the layers of behind the mask so as to open up the honest exploration of the issues. This is no easy task to get behind the mask of protection.

Tim Chapman, a training consultant and researcher into young people based in Belfast, explains how violent acts are often a predictable defense. The young man's violent "protection racket" creates a sense of safety,

esteem and control over their lives, These rackets help young men cope with fears, low self esteem, or the belief that people look down on them. A protection racket, like a stereotype, is a way of thinking and acting. Young people develop these behaviours for good reasons in order to deal with their environment. Chapman's research concludes that rackets do not actually protect but rather draw more trouble to them.

By the time young men work with us they may have built up a very tough racket, a tight combination of internalized stereotypes requiring them to be tough, in control and aggressive towards perceived external threats to their security. When we judge the racket negatively, the young men get a shaming message that they themselves are bad. If we say to them, "You shouldn't be violent." Then they have every right to respond, "You don't live in my street." The question should be "How is what you are doing now working for you?" If they say "not well" then you will have a better chance of success than forcing them to change. Your job then becomes offering them a better alternative than the racket they are running.

Reinforcing stereotypes to be tough and manly is an all too common experience in daily living. The day before this presentation on gender roles and violence I was enjoying a stroll through Lisburn and I dropped into a shop to get a snack. As I scanned the chocolate bar rack looking to try something new, my eyes fell on the blue and yellow wrapper of a Yorkie bar. I was perplexed by the outline of a woman carrying a handbag and crossed out like a 'do not enter' street sign. I picked it up and read on the side, "It's Not for Girls!" and the bottom "Not for Handbags." I bought 20 to hand out as perfect examples of how we socialize gender differences and reinforce the qualities of the male racket.

On my way back to the church hall where the training was taking place, two young lads about four years old were in the door way. I could see their mothers in the next room watching their sisters take dancing lessons. When I asked the youngest boy if he was taking dance lessons, he replied with certainty, "We don't dance, we fight!" and lunged at his friend. I wondered how many Yorkie bars someone would have to eat to arrive at that conclusion. Sexism in the media is so subtle we often miss the deeper messages. What if someone made a chocolate bar called Norkie and printed, "Not for Blacks" or "Not for Muslims" on the wrapper instead? That would be repulsive but what is the difference? Could it be our tolerance level? Like fish in water, we are swimming in a sexist culture and don't notice it.

Recommendation 4:

Celebrate the Positive Potential in Everyone

"Be the change you wish to see in the world."

– MK Gandhi

For the closing activity of our session on issues with young men I invited participants to write down three things that would radically alter society, also known as the three things they value in relationships. Next they came up to the front of the room and covered up any stereotypes on our list that they considered to be harmful to forming a healthy relationship. The display that resulted was a beautiful collage of authentic heart centered values, a true celebration of the ideal ways all humans can connect honestly if given the chance.

Common values found on all of the lists include: Trust, Honesty, Respect, Humour, Acceptance, Love, Security, Support, Communication and Loyalty. We made several observations:

1. That when this activity was done with youth or adults across Canada, with street gang members in Los Angeles and at international conferences in Israel and Trinidad, the same values were celebrated.
2. How different would the values of youth be?
3. In a world that separates us in so many ways, it was impossible to tell the age, gender, religious background or what neighbourhood we grew up in because, when it comes down to it, the differences that divide us are not as deep as the power of the human heart to love and be loved.

Youth workers and other front line professionals have a particularly important responsibility to witness their values in every eye contact, hand shake and promise kept. Young people know when someone doesn't walk their talk. They are not asking us to be perfect, they just want to trust us that we will do our best to lead the way with integrity as we all learn to participate in the growing movement across the earth to turn our organizations, communities and families and personal lives into more balanced, respectful and non-violent environments.

"We are constantly being astonished these days at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamt of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of non-violence."

– Mahatma Gandhi

Model of Practice

Programme Title: Healthy Relationships Curriculum (HRC)

Publisher/Developers: Men For Change, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Contact: Peter Davison 011-902-492-4104 Website www.m4c.ns.ca

Primary Audience: Young people aged 12 to 24

Format: 253 page spiral bound soft cover teachers guide (*also available as PDF file*)

Overview: The Healthy Relationships Curriculum is a critically acclaimed and research backed violence prevention programme developed by Peter Davison and other members of Men For Change in Canada. It is a comprehensive facilitator's guide for educators and others who work with youth aged 12 to 24. The three part programme was designed as a user friendly guide to take students to a deeper level using social analysis and critical thinking as a powerful tool for exposing the roots of violent and aggressive behavior.

Over 53 student centered activities in the programme assist young people in the development of emotional intelligence, resiliency, problem solving, assertiveness, critical thinking, and other skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to form and maintain healthy relationships with themselves, others and the community.

Section 1: Dealing with Aggression

Subject: Self Awareness and Communication

Themes: Exploring Emotions, Facing Anger, The Nuts and Bolts of Aggression, Being Responsible and Conflict Resolution

Section 2: Gender Equality and Media Awareness

Subject: Societal Impact on the Individual

Themes: Exposing Gender Stereotypes, Learning Gender Stereotypes, Impact of Gender Role Stereotypes and Options and Choices

Section 3: Forming Healthy Relationships

Subject: Interpersonal Relationships

Themes: When Relationships Go Wrong, How Sexism Leads to Violence, Understanding Anger, Communication Skills, Gender Justice in the School and Celebrate Healthy Lifestyle Values

Methodology: The focus of the programme is to empower young people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to become emotionally literate, value self esteem and tolerant self identity, and create attitudes that seek and maintain respect in relationships.

The widest application of Healthy Relationships is in primary/proactive prevention. The objective is for young people to build the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes that will enable them to live healthy and productive lives free from violence. The programme also provides an effective tool for secondary prevention because it alerts young people who are currently in an abusive situation as to both the dangers and the routes through which they can leave. HRC can also be used in the context of providing support counselling and treatment for both victims and perpetrators of violence, in order to help them learn pro-social skills and gain positive attitudes that are needed to foster healthy relationships.

The curriculum content follows a natural progression and activities are presented in such a way as to engage the youth in the process of self-discovery. A command-and-control teaching style is not recommended. The preferred method is facilitation style that involves the students by encouraging their participation, giving them responsibilities, and recognizing their contributions. The facilitator introduces the activity, students engage in it, they share their observations and insights, they learn from one another, and then the facilitator reinforces the key messages on conclusion. Through role plays, small-group discussion, and flipchart-assisted brainstorming, students make the activities their own, practice constructive communication techniques, and learn that they can begin to apply these skills in their own lives. At the heart of the student-centered approach is honouring the student's experience. There is a degree of unpredictability because the students are given more leeway to express themselves.

Research Proven: A three-year longitudinal study sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in Canada and conducted by the University of Manitoba has documented the success and effectiveness of Healthy Relationships Curriculum. Please contact the publishers for a complete report.



YouthAction Northern Ireland, the University of Ulster, Community Youth Work Department and The Curriculum Development Unit have hosted a series of thematic seminars.

The purpose of these seminars is to contribute to the understanding of Youth Work, develop training and enhance methodologies. An action learning approach, provided opportunities for youth and community workers and teachers to share ideas and methods of practice.

A discussion paper has been produced on each theme as a result of the seminar.

Work with Young Men

Traditionally, work with young men in Northern Ireland has been about keeping young men out of trouble, distractions and deflections from the streets. Increasing evidence that this type of provision was not meeting the developmental needs of young men led to YouthAction Northern Ireland in the 1990's exploring new and more imaginative approaches to working with young men.

YouthAction works strategically to encourage youth work approaches that provide young men with opportunities to talk, discuss and reflect upon issues that are important to them. We offer support, training and resources to local workers and community groups engaging young men.

Publications include: Young Men's Health – A Youth Work Concern; Young Men Talking – Voices from Belfast; Everyday Life – Young Men, Violence and Developing Practice in Northern Ireland; Young Men & Violence Board Game; Some Men Do, Some Men Don't - Young Men's Health Report.

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