Study finds key factors that support male youth

Successful facilitators connect with boys through own experiences

By Georgia Hall and Linda Charmaraman

Authors’ note: This article is a follow-up to the article, “Boys, teens can benefit from inclusion in common-interest groups,” which appeared in the November issue of School-Age NOTES. That article made the case for creating and fostering boys’ empowerment or common-interest groups in after-school programs.

William Pollack, author of Real Boys, believes many of our nation’s schools are failing to meet the needs of male students by not giving enough attention to boys’ issues and challenges that surface in the school setting (Pollack, 1998).

Boys’ empowerment groups can offer opportunities for positive relationship building, group identity formation and for building healthy behaviors, particularly in an urban climate of single-parent households missing a father figure and interpersonal violence in the schools.

Child psychologists Kindlon and Thompson (2000) suggest that “boys [who are] cut off from meaningful relationships miss critical opportunities for emotional growth” that are essential for a healthy life trajectory and navigating the world despite many obstacles in the way.

Selecting the right leaders for a boys’ empowerment group is critical. National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) research on this topic grew out of our study of a middle-school boys’ after-school empowerment group during the 2009-2010 school year. The participants were between the ages of 12 and 15 from primarily African-American backgrounds (reflecting the school’s predominant racial-ethnic composition). Facilitators describe the group as a “boys’ support group” that provided a forum for friendship building, conflict resolution and mutual goal setting. Periodic after-school meetings were organized along with special outings and team-building activities.

In NIOST’s focus group, interviews and casual conversations with the boys, we asked them to describe the positive qualities they saw in their program leaders. Their responses were frequently embedded in stories about a) what it was like to be invited into and involved in the program and b) how the facilitators helped them during a time of need. According to those stories, 10 qualities were shared among the facilitators:

- Showed us his own vulnerability (e.g., showing honest emotions that are important for boys to witness)
- Displayed devotion to us (e.g., acted like a father to us)
- Accommodated our different interests, abilities and personalities (e.g., understood our temperaments)
- Was patient seeing ourselves emerge (e.g., did not lose hope in us)
- Open to learning from us (e.g., valued our perspectives)
- Familiar with our struggles (e.g., in school and outside of school)
- Gave us one-on-one time (e.g., pep talks)
- Showed gentleness and also tough love (e.g., showed empathy yet reminded us of their high expectations)
- Made us feel we belonged (e.g., we were not alone)
- Made us feel like the group was a privilege (e.g., “we were the chosen ones”)

Finding the right staff members to effectively and meaningfully lead an empowerment group and contribute to the regular programming side of the after-school program is challenging. During the hiring process, there are several key personal and professional credentials a program director may look for in addition to general employment qualifications when selecting staff members:

- Previous experience creating an informal learning curriculum
  - The boys’ empowerment group we observed engaged in a loosely formed curriculum of workshops, guest presentations, outings and team-building exercises that were well coordinated yet somewhat spontaneous to remain attuned to the group’s particular progress and development. It is helpful to have facilitators experienced in putting together an engaging and informative set of activities.

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Experiment with more-elaborate themes during December break

By Brian Newman

December break is an exciting and nervous time for school-age children. The excitement of being out of school, attending end-of-year parties, not seeing close friends for a while and the question of what they are going to do during break can cause a disruption in a school-age child’s routine.

This is a great time for after-school programs to reintroduce themselves to parents and children. These days can be used to showcase your summer camp program or and give staff members a chance to do more elaborate activities.

**Movie week** — Bring the movies to your site.
- Decorate with posters and then have children create their own movie posters. Let children make their movie snacks, turn off the lights and let the movie begin.
- Create a movie. Whom do they want to star in their movie? Where does their movie take place? What is their movie about? Use a video camera and film a short movie made up by the children.
- Have a big “red carpet” party on Friday and invite parents to the “premier.” The process of creating a movie also lends itself to a great journal activity and other writing projects.

**Snow week** — If you’re in a part of the country that gets snow in the winter, go play outside. Build snow people and snow forts. Go sledding. Have hot chocolate. No snow? Create snow people using dough for snow. Make snowy pictures with salt and powdered sugar. Have the children design snow forts on paper.

**Music week** — Have a day for rock ‘n’ roll, hip-hop, country, jazz and classical music. Let children share some of their favorites (with adult approval).
- Rock ‘n’ roll should be played loud with lots of activity. Hold air-guitar and lip-sync contests.
- Hip-hop music is really poetry set to a beat. Have poetry books and nursery rhymes ready to be transformed into the next big hit or let children create their own raps. Get drums to set the beat.
- Country music gets everyone back to the farm. If children have them, let them bring or wear cowboy hats and boots that day. Learn to square dance or line dance.
- Jazz can be slow and smooth or loud and exciting. Do some swing dancing and have the children learn about Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie.
- Classical musical ranges from Sousa marches to Bach concertos. *Flight of the Bumblebee* is wonderfull for school-age children to try to guess what creature the music is about. Have the children draw while listening to music.

**Fads week** — Draw on fads for daily activities:
- Adopt a pet rock — Give it a name, write up adoption papers, create a home for it out of a shoebox and make it a member of the family.
- Hula-hoops are great for large motor exploration. See who can keep his or her hoop spinning the longest. Get hoops of different sizes and materials and have the children determine if that makes a difference when spinning.
- It walks down the stairs … it’s Slinky! Set up a course for the slinky to travel, take a slinky apart and try to discover why it makes that sound.
- Rubik’s Cube … Can you solve it? Have contests to see who can get the most sides finished. Can anyone solve it? Share some fun facts about the cube from www.rubiks.com/world/cube_facts.php.
- Have the children make their own set of trading cards, such as Pokemon. Have them create a game around the cards and develop rules.

Children will enjoy coming to a program that is planned and ready for them. The long break from school offer chances to build relationships with children and trust with parents by providing fun and educational opportunities.

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activities that will sustain the boys’ attention and increase retention, while simultaneously giving them opportunities to build confidence, interpersonal skills between youth and adults, real-world skills and resiliency to risky behaviors.

**Strong communication skills**

It would be great for facilitators to have experience with young people as a discussion group leader, counselor or coach. Facilitating a boys’ group will call upon a leader’s ability to communicate at a personal level in a genuine and authentic way that will appeal to boys’ emotional and cognitive needs.

At the same time, they need to effectively manage group-oriented exercises that often demand “teachable moments” in a safe space for boys to explore their feelings and experiences. Wide-ranging familiarity working with boys one-on-one combined with managing potential conflicts within a group process is necessary.

**Experience connecting outside resources**

Knowledge of and experience in the local community positions a group leader to bring additional resources to the youth. It would be a tremendous asset to have facilitators and group leaders who not only understand that it takes a village to prevent youth violence and risky behaviors, but will actively connect youth to mentors within their communities.

A facilitator’s personal connections at other youth and family-serving organizations can make the transition between the different supportive networks less intimidating and threatening for involved youth. For example, in the NIOST study the facilitators invited the boys to local faith-based services with the approval of the parents, which helped bring more mentoring adults who can look out for them within their neighborhoods. A facilitator’s experience and willingness to bridge the adult relationships between support or service organizations can make or break potential youth connections with their local communities.

**Meaningful personal involvement as a participant in a youth-development organization or other mentoring program**

Throughout NIOST’s study, it was clearly evident that “leading with the heart” played a role in effective group facilitation. Group leaders recalled stories about emerging through their own struggles growing up in similar environments with the help of caring organizations or devoted mentors.

These formative experiences helped facilitators remember how critical it was to join a supportive network of mentors and how those relationships were significant and memorable for them. For these group leaders, personal experiences, the boys and hope all were connected.

Establishing and supporting a boys’ empowerment group as part of an after-school program is a worthwhile charge. Selecting the right leader who can navigate the challenging dimensions and relationships of the group is key to making a powerful and lasting difference on the healthy development of adolescent boys.

**Footnote**

1. The after-school empowerment group met in the public school and was facilitated by a community-based youth worker and school staff member.

**References**


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