

Assertiveness: HOW DO I FEEL WHEN ...

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Part 1: Practical Guidance and Didactical Approach

Background and keywords:

Assertiveness should not be confused with self-defence! The term self-defence is generally understood as referring to actions and reactions that clearly involve physical force. In contrast, assertiveness focuses on social and emotional awareness skills which empower a person to come up with personal "solutions" when faced with the escalation of a threatening situation. Moreover, assertiveness skills can be likened to mental action plans or strategies readily at one's disposal that can be applied in an appropriate manner to a given situation. The goal is for boys to acquire a broader range of behaviour alternatives and greater self-confidence to more effectively react to situations of threat. Furthermore, it should enable them to more clearly and openly define their limits and assert themselves.

In the framework of male-oriented measures, it would seem relevant and useful for boys, to experiment with alternative ways of behaving, in order to better cope and to be more empowered at finding solutions to such situations by drawing on a whole new range of violent-free (masculine) "strategies".

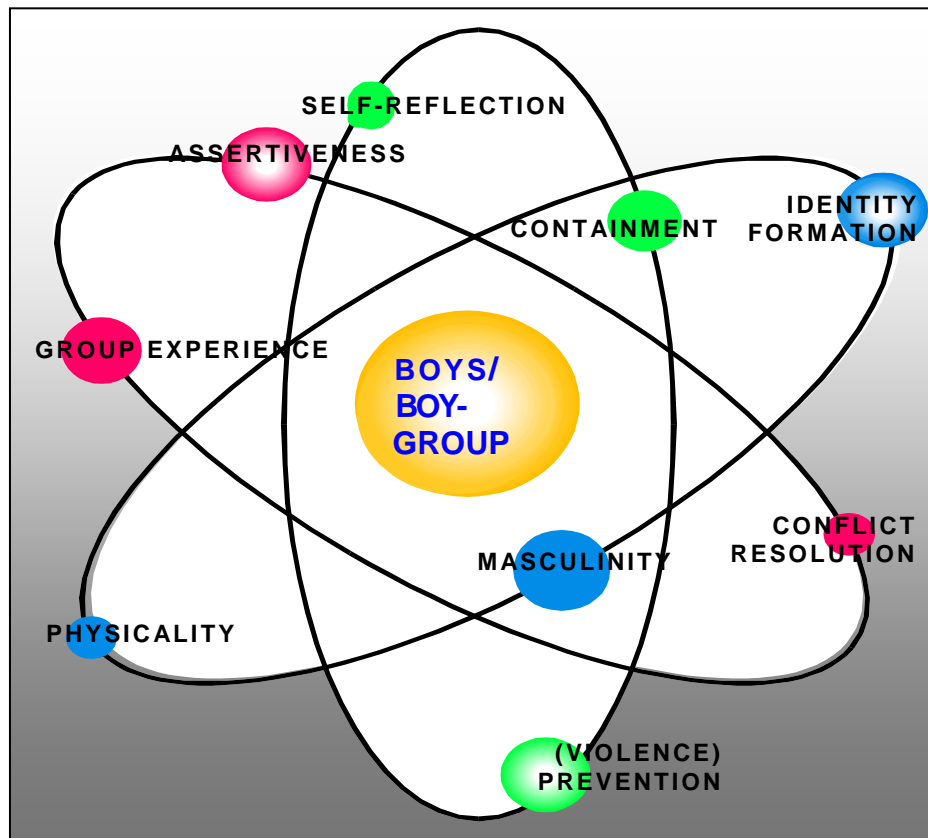
The role of males as offenders is often exclusively focused on, to the detriment of males in the victim role. Nevertheless, it is also important to let youth bring their experiences as victims out into the open and to get rid of taboos about such experiences. A victim experience is part of male socialization and reflecting about it often has the positive effect of empowering boys to work through this experience and to get it "off their chest."

Assertiveness training and other educational programs are also available. Above all, such initiatives serve to heighten an understanding of one's own perceptions as well as the state of others. With a combination of exercises, games and discussions in an atmosphere of trust, on the one hand, young people can experience solidarity and on the other hand, they can learn that they are not the only ones with emotional needs and difficulties. The topics of "Masculinity" or "Being a Boy" are integrated at all different levels in order to empower young boys to understand when and in what ways they are influenced by stereotypes of masculinity that do not reflect their own personal needs.

Appropriate assertiveness:

An appropriate dose of assertiveness is based on a constructive and a positive view of aggression. It is a key element in the formation of our interpersonal identity as well as for our communication skills and conflict resolution capacity. It involves a direct and personal expression of our feelings, our limits, an outburst of anger, the assertion of our will, open confrontation with others, but it can also involve actively seeking a compromise regarding a situation or in dealings with others. It can best be expressed as a self-declaration or other affirmations. Assertiveness is a way to change situations, to protect oneself and/or to make contact. It is based on a social context and an individual's learning background. It can "take the heat off" from (a male) pressure to hide "stressful" feelings and for the requirement to keep *cool* enough. The commonly accepted notion that destructive aggression is reduced through sports or other activities is only partially correct. (i.e. the "pressure cooker" principle: rather than taking the lid off abruptly, slowly releasing the steam). In fact, new strategies for the appropriate expression of

anger can be learnt, but only through well-focused, conscious work on feelings (anxiety, anger, powerlessness, shame, etc.). Coping with aggression is, in fact, a lifelong task and through new experiences and experimenting, new behavioural models are continuously being constructed by individuals.



For effective learning, it is important to praise and reinforce positive behaviour of individuals as well as to encourage and stimulate the development of their social skills and areas they are naturally good at. This is the beginning of developing healthy self-confidence that is of course, not developed at the expense of others. These experiences help to enhance the development of self-esteem and therefore, personality. For this reason, youth work plays an essential role in helping boys to fine-tune their own individuality and to pave their own path through this world. In sum, this is a boy-centred learning process. The entire learning process is accumulated in a kind of individual experience memory bank containing knowledge about actions undertaken and their consequences, which continuously leads to a new range of behaviour.

Similar topics:

Culture and society, self-identity, body and health

Materials:

- Sufficiently long rope or wide adhesive strips
- Situation-related decision-making tasks (List)

Duration:

About 30 minutes (depending on group size and communication needs)

Number of participants:

12 boys (as much as possible, of the same age)

Age:

6 - 11 year old boys

Aims:

- To reflect on and develop an awareness of alternative behaviour and solutions for times when a person feels threatened;
- To discover that a feeling of nervousness can be constructive and have a positive impact on performance;
- To increase one's self-esteem;
- To promote self-awareness and a greater awareness of body language;
- To consolidate the development of assertiveness strategies and to test them out;
- To learn techniques so that one's own limits are much clearer and justifiable;
- To consider your body as an invaluable capital that should be maintained;
- To experiment with alternative forms of contact between boys to appropriately meet the need for physical contact.

(Short) explanation:

In an individual setting or in a group setting, the boys should announce their individual decisions concerning conflict situations. The boys will then present them in turns. They will be asked to express them/to decide according to specific, pre-prepared formats. Lastly, the documented findings will be discussed together.

Guidance for the game or exercise:

The boys are asked to line up one after the other on a line laid out on the floor (i.e. a rope or adhesive tape) that is long enough for the entire group. The trainer stands in front of the group and to the left of the line he places a piece of paper on the floor stating: "This is a conflict for me!", and to the right of the line, the teacher places a paper with the sentence: "This is okay for me!". The boys participating should then keep their eyes closed and not have any contact with the person in front of them or behind them. The trainer reads the first (prepared) question: "How do I feel, when...?" and asks the boys to go to the pre-defined area (to the left or to the right of the rope/or marked line), that represents for each one his answer or his feeling. The paper with the question is then placed down to the left or to the right of the line depending on how the majority of the boys answered. Or in the case of a tie, the paper with the question on it should be placed directly on the line. Then little by little, the boys should have been asked all of the prepared questions and have answered all of them non-verbally so that in the end the answers can be sorted by the group of boys.

THIS IS A CONFLICT FOR ME!



THIS IS OKAY FOR ME!

How do I feel WHEN

- ... someone takes something away from me?
- ... I'm laughed at because I did something wrong?
- ... someone calls me names like: idiot, you-hog!, you-kiss-ass or nerd?
- ... someone says to me, "you can't do that or can you!"?
- ... I go passed a group of boys that yell mean things out to me behind my back?
- ... the others won't let me play with them during school recess?
- ... I am pushed and shoved around "just for the fun of it"?
- ... someone hurts me?
- ... someone makes fun of me?
- ... you are just horsing around or fighting for the fun of it, someone wants to pick a real fight?
- ... my best friend lied to me?

... ..?

Next, the group participants and the trainer sit down on chairs and the trainer presents the results of their decisions, with the help of the different answers collected. Then the boys participating should comment on the results presented, the trainer directs the answers with questions like (i.e. "Is that always the case?", "I wouldn't have looked at it that way!", "I don't understand!"), in order to stimulate discussion between the boys about their experiences. Above all, this is a conscious reflection on experiences with conflicts and the (various) problem-solving skills.

Reflection:

This exercise is aimed at helping boys determine their room for manoeuvre when making a decision as well as different views on what represents a threatening situation. Different social conduct and problem-solving skills can also be presented and negotiated in the context of the evaluation phase. In addition, the boys should be made aware of the fact that there are different individual limits as well as many different male strategies to assess and to react effectively to threats and conflicts. A change in perspective involving individual reflection (working alone) and shared reflection (small group work) is good preparation for the broader discussion and exchange of ideas about conflict issues and relationship queries within the boy-group.

Variations (continuation):

Trainers who have known the youth group for a long enough time and have observed group dynamic conflict structures (i.e. outsider system), can use this information in formulating and planning questions in such a way that ultimately the relations between the boys can be focused on in feedback sessions.

Moreover, the evaluation/decision-making processes could be reconstructed and acted out in short role play sequences.

Part 2: Theoretical Background and Further Information

Social parameters

For an understanding of violence and aggressiveness, prevention and social skills, it is important to bring to mind the current cultural-based image of masculinity from a gender-related point of view. For this reason, this section outlines the essential traits, characteristics and judgments, attributed by society, which are directly correlated and in that way justify the generally accepted understanding of "masculinity –and its relation to violence."

Boys and men acquire masculinity mainly by taking on qualities and behaviours which are regarded as masculine according to the prevailing value system in society. Adolescent boys are shaped by an interaction between their cultural environment and their biological and genetic dispositions. Innate basic characteristics are for example the capacity to learn and to develop instinct mechanisms and grow physically. The acquisition and internalization of masculine features is a long-term social learning process. In interaction with biological dispositions (i.e. puberty phase), the learning process for adolescent boys takes place in active and passive phases. In our European cultural area, a young boy acquires masculinity through differentiation (especially from females), role models, projection, testing limits, confrontations, identification as well as media image of masculinity. This is how a social model of what it means to be a man or a boy is developed.

'Being a boy': in the delicate balance of masculinity and "being a man".

Prevention-oriented youth work is mainly focused on what it means to be a boy. Being a boy is understood as an early stage of manhood. Manhood as well encompasses all of the different and diverse alternative lifestyles available to men.

However, a series of stereotypes are running awry such as about how maleness should be expressed, what behaviours are appropriate and how a man has to behave, which are obvious in expressions such as: "I can do it on my own, I don't need any help, "Hey, don't be such a softy!", "What a real scaredy-cat?". These sentences reveal values regarded as essential for males like being independent, strong, assertive, fearless, etc. and as a rule they must be individually coped with by boys at one stage or another of their lives.. Masculinity is therefore understood as a culturally shaped distorted image. Nevertheless, men and even boys orientate themselves on the basis of this image. This is because on the one hand, they do not have any tangible "alternate models" of men as fathers, male teachers in kindergartens, etc. and on the other hand, because they are forced to come to grips with this image. In other words, every boy must compare society's image of masculinity with his own image. Masculinity is the sum of the prevailing ideas and images about being a man and therefore these expectations are carried over to boys as future men. As a result, a lot of boys have to face this task and to take a stand while trying to find their male identity.

Therefore, masculinity is a construct and the outcome of the social confrontation between prevailing ideals or ideologies (i.e. cultural norm and attributions, traditional influences) and the boy's individually developed conception (self-socialization). To be more precise, there is not one form of "masculinity", but many different kinds of masculinity which are attached to each other, subordinated or in competition with each other. (cf. the term of "hegemonial masculinity" by Connell, *Der gemachte Mann (The Made Man: Construction and Crisis of Maleness)*)

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