

Week 6: Making Lists

During these middle weeks of our group, our intention is to build on the supportive relationships that have formed in the group to tackle some difficult content. In this way, we are building on the basic ideas of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) in that we are providing the boys with a secure base from which they can take the risk of exploring new territory. Our intent has been to build a base of trust and safety in the group from which the boys can take the risk of discussing openly the challenges of growing up as a boy in our society.

Last week, we began this exploration by discussing what they get teased about as boys. This week we want to go deeper. We want to help them see that they get teased for acting in ways that are “outside the box” of social expectations for boys (e.g., for wearing pink, as in Stephen’s story). We want them to be able to identify how they feel and what they do when they are teased and pressured to get “back in the box.” We also want to begin to give them tools for fighting the pressures that exist for boys to conform to the limiting conventions of what it means to be a boy.

On this sixth meeting of our group, we begin with a story from Peter that is meant to describe a positive example of one of us acting “outside the box” in our own boyhood. We hope, in this way, to make it safe for the boys to begin to talk about and accept parts of themselves and their own experiences that do not easily conform to a standard definition of masculinity.

After the boys settle down, Peter says that he wants to tell a true story. He begins:

When I was about 15 years old I had a paper route. Every day I would fold my papers, stuff them in my shoulder bags, and then ride around my neighborhood delivering them to all the houses on my route. One Friday afternoon, I was delivering my papers and thinking about a party I was going to have on Saturday night at my house. I had invited some of my friends and we were going to play ping-pong, play music, and eat lots of food.

I was thinking about this party when I threw a paper into the driveway of Terry Walford’s house. Terry was a girl in my class who was different than the rest of us. She kind of looked and walked funny and she didn’t have any real friends at school at all. As I threw the paper, I saw her walking around the yard of her house by herself and I realized how lonely she must be. I decided that I would invite her to my party.

Terry was really happy to be invited to the party and she was the first one to arrive the next night at my house. When my other friends showed up, one of them, Wally Jeffries, gave me a weird look when he saw Terry. Then he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, “Sick! What’s *she* doing here?!” When I told him that I had invited her, I half expected him to leave the party. Maybe I just hoped that he would leave. But he ended up staying anyway and so did Terry. I remember feeling uncomfortable during the party about having invited Terry, but I also felt kind of proud, too.

After finishing his story, Peter gives this week's "talking pen" over to Howard who says:

Peter's story is about getting teased for something, but doing it anyway because it was the right thing to do. Last week we made a list of the things you get teased for. Basically, it was a list about the things that people say a boy is not supposed to be—like being slow or bad at sports—and about the things that a boy is not supposed to do—like playing with girls or showing you care about school. This week, in contrast, we want you to tell us about the things that people say a boy is *supposed* to be and the things that people say a boy is *supposed* to do. What are those things? I'll write them down here on this big piece of paper.

In the 7 years that we have done this exercise with boys, it has been remarkable to us how consistent the items on this list are across different groups. In fact, for 6 out of 7 years, the first words on the list have been "tough" and "strong." What follows is the list that this year's group of fifth-grade boys came up with in reply to our question: "What is a boy supposed to be?"

"Tough"
"Strong"
"Fast"
"Not do girly things"
"Don't do ballet"
"Hang out with boys, not girls"
"Do sports"
"Not be a sissy"
"Fearless"
"Be big and bulky, like the Incredible Hulk"
"Show no emotions"
"Don't show anything"
"Be happy or serious only"
"No crybabies"
"No tears"
"Grunt"
"Act cool"
"Don't wear girly stuff"
"Can't wear skirts or dresses"
"Play with action figures, but not dolls"

Toward the end of this activity, Keith, one of the quieter but more astute boys in the group, shares the following story:

If you're a boy, and somebody does something good for you, and you like it, you can't be all [he smiles brightly, with his eyes wide open]. You have to be more like [he narrows his eyes and tightens his mouth, nodding in a serious way]. You have to be cool.

Overall, the tone of the group while they are sharing these ideas and experiences is quiet and reflectively thoughtful. The boys seem to clearly understand the web of expectations and limitations that they are caught in. They also seem to be appreciative of the opportunity to put words to their experience, perhaps for the first time.

Still, we push on. Stephen next asks the boys to help make another list. He states: "If this list we just made is about what you are supposed to be, or not supposed to be as a boy, I want this next list to be about the names you get called when you do something different than these things. What are those names you get called?"

Not surprisingly, the following list of "names you get called" has also varied very little from year to year in our experience of running boys groups. Still, there is a certain impact when we capture the violence of these words as they are said and write them down in big letters on the butcher paper on the wall. The boys can hardly believe we are doing this exercise, from the look in their eyes. Our intention, of course, in acknowledging and writing these words down for all to see is not to further the power of these words, but to weaken the hold they have on boys. We mean this exercise to be a bit like pulling out splinters that have been lodged below the skin. The boys' list of names they get called includes:

"Gay"
"Fag"
"Midget"
"Dumb"
"Shorty"
"Girl"
"Bitch"
"Weakling"
"Short stuff"
"Retard"
"Stupid head"
"Sissy man"
"Girly men"

Astonishingly, the governor of California used that last phrase to publicly criticize his legislators during that particular week, and, obviously, the boys took note. They are excited at this point. They have nearly shouted out these epitaphs, slurs, and homophobic remarks, but not with anger and aggression. Instead, their words have been shouted with a sense of joyful release. In this conversation, the words themselves, not the boys, have finally become the target of critique.

Even though we are running short on time, we have one last question to ask the boys on this day. Howard says he would like their help making one final list. He is curious to know, he tells them, "what the effect is of being called these names. What happens to you when you get teased in this way, with these words?"

Once again, the boys are quick to respond. Their responses attest to both the violence that can happen internally as well as externally when boys are forced “into the box.” These are their responses to Howard’s questions:

“I want to close up and go away”
“I wanna quit”
“It’s like the words get installed inside my head”
“I wanna cry”
“I want to close up and die”
“I sometimes get into fights over words”
“I think that maybe what they are saying is true”
“I call them names back”
“I beat them up”

As a way to get some closure on the depth of work that the group has done on this day, Peter chimes in after this last list has been created. “This is what I think,” he says:

I think that this is what our group has been about. I think we have been creating a group, a place in this school, where you won’t get called these names. You can come here and talk about things that you probably can’t talk about in other places. We have made sure it has been a safe place. What we are going to try and figure out over the next few weeks is how you can be more of yourself both in this group and later when you are not in this group anymore. We don’t want you to put yourself in a box or let others put you into a box. Today as a group we haven’t been in the box. Today we have been breaking the box wide open.

At this point in the session, the boys are understandably growing somewhat antsy. We have covered a lot of ground and used a lot of words in the process. So we move to a physical activity. We end the group with three more boys, one at a time, standing in the middle of the circle of the rest of the boys and playing Willow in the Wind. The boys lean on one another, are caught, are lifted up over the group, and are brought safely down to the ground once again. They are learning to support one another.