

20/7/2000

Submission

I am writing this submission as the coordinator of the SHED (Self-Help Ending Domestic) Project, a men's behaviour change program, in Gippsland. The SHED Project received an Australian Violence Prevention Award in 1995.

In 1995 some of the men participants in a SHED group asked whether there was anything in the local schools to help their own children not end up in a similar program for abuse and violence when they were older. Out of that question came a collaborative effort between the local community health service, the alcohol and drug service, and the education dept. in which I co-designed and helped pilot a 10 week program for secondary students, both girls and boys, called the COOL (Control of One's Life) Project. At one stage COOL was running as part of the curriculum in about twenty-five secondary colleges in Gippsland.

Components of the COOL program were, communication, self-esteem, aggression and violence, racism and sexism, sexual harassment, alcohol and drugs, family back-ground, emotions, male socialisation and relationships. The project no longer has dedicated funding from the education dept and is now languishing.

From our work in the SHED Project there is a clear correlation both between men's violence in the home and their own experience of past abuse and also the impact of the men's violence on their own children. In the past six years over five hundred men have come to the SHED Project and been assessed for their abusive and violent behaviour. Of those men, over 70% state that they were victims of some form of abuse in their childhood. In addition, 77% of those same men identified that they had children who were affected by their violence and abuse.

Ours is only a small rural project but the statistics do seem to point to a correlation between men's violence and abuse and its effects on their children, particularly on the boys.

Often the men when growing up lacked of role models for how to have respectful relationships, and how to have a disagreement without it becoming abusive and violent. The unreal expectations put on boys growing up, regarding being a 'real man', often set the child up for failure, leading to low self-esteem, insecurity, a need to prove themselves, and yet never quite being good enough, and so on.

There is a clear sense of hopelessness for many young people growing up in this rural area, the perceived duplicity and falsehood of many things around them in the adult world fills them with despair and apathy. Alcohol and other drugs are but often merely a way to cope with the pain, frustration and sense of helplessness which leads in its extreme to a very high rate of youth suicide. The negative effects of economic rationalism on the social fabric are also evident in the streets and arcades of empty shops, the number of

properties lying vacant for months, family dysfunction, and many other destructive symptoms in the area. (Laming, 2000a:308)

It seems to me that what makes most sense for young people, is to have an opportunity in their early to middle high school years to be part of an experiential group learning process in which both boys and girls are given an opportunity to look at, discuss, reflect on, do exercises about a whole range of things like their own self-esteem, communication, emotions etc, in a non-threatening and fun context. That an environment is created where they can learn about themselves and others, to get past the fear and trust.

In such an environment, 'response-ability' is learnt and choices are recognised. Basically respectful ways of relating (to oneself and to others), becomes possible in such an environment. Constructive alternatives are possible for young people to learn in such a process. Hope instead of despair, honesty in place of deception, communication rather than sullen silence, options rather than feeling cornered, feeling at home instead of alienated, and feeling healthy not 'dis-eased'. The COOL Project produced such an opportunity for some young people, because it was part of the curriculum, not just for 'problem students', it involved teaches co-facilitating groups with counsellors, and ideally it also provided for parent education nights that looked at similar issues.

It is crucial that we do something more for the boys in our schools, something like the COOL Project, which is seen as a normal valued part of a child's education, not just for 'difficult' or 'problem' students, usually boys, but for all students, girls as well as boys, and which is part of the curriculum, not an optional extra.

The basis for my remarks above lies in a strong belief that boys as well as girls can learn to make much more constructive choices if they are able to undertake a group process which gives them an experience of alternative behaviours and attitudes.(Laming, 2000b:257) In addition, my experience over the past seven years as a social worker with families, men, women and children in this region fills me with trepidation at the plight of many boys and where they are heading. I believe as a community we can do much better for our future generations.

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References

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