

INSIGHTS AND IMPACT REPORT

EDITION 2 - 2021

*What young men
are telling us about
their friendships.*



**MAN
CAVE**



Acknowledgement of Country

The Man Cave acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which our offices are located, the Wurundjeri people, and we pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. We also acknowledge all Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander people who may read this report and acknowledge all First Nations people across the globe. Here in so called Australia, Sovereignty has never been ceded.

WHO WE ARE

We are an Australian-based preventative mental health and emotional intelligence charity that empowers communities to raise generations of healthy young men. We run transformational masculinities programs for hundreds of young men every week, and we see inside their unfiltered internal worlds in each and every program.

For the most part, young men (aged 12-16 years) feel misunderstood and confused about the world they've inherited and how to be a healthy man in the 21st century.

All around them they are witnessing discussions happen about them but they are rarely being invited into those conversations.

It's no wonder they can become disengaged, unmotivated and feel a lack of purpose.

But there is another way.

We know from working with nearly 21,000 young men, when they are given the language, permission, space, and role modelling to engage with each other in a safe environment, they open up and begin to express themselves and their authentic worldview.

The data shows that when they feel safe and aren't viewed as a 'problem to be solved' they actively engage with us and with each other in positive and transformative ways.

The following report shares stories and data from the boys, their teachers and our facilitators to paint a picture of what is really going on in the minds and lives of young men.

Our Vision

To create a world in which every man has healthy relationships, reaches his full potential and contributes to his community.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

STRONG BUT SHALLOW

In Edition 2 of our quarterly Insights and Impact report, we continue to amplify the voice of young men and bridge the disconnect between their experience and the world around them. Written in partnership with Dr Katie Wood (Associate Professor and Clinical Psychologist from Swinburne University), we explored the key topic of male friendships.

We surveyed both young men and teachers from a variety of Government, Private, Independent and Catholic schools in Victoria, Australia.

We also spoke with our own facilitators about what they have seen in our programs.

The results of the research paint a clear picture.

Young men feel their relationships are strong, but they remain shallow.

They genuinely want to support each other, but still feel a lack of permission between them to 'take off the mask' and talk about how they are really going.

While somewhat encouraging, it is apparent that young men are not building friendships that will be able to support them through challenging life events.

As a result, young men are staying quiet, not realising their friends can be one of the best places to get support.

Why is this happening?

One explanation is that our education system is still geared towards academia rather than emotional intelligence (EQ) and character development.

Our young men are still being educated as if there are clear occupations and careers paths that exist (FYA, The New Work Standard, 2020).

Additionally, our mental health systems and the people within them are already well beyond their capacity.

The lack of mental health reform is costing Australians \$600 million a day (or \$220 billion a year), according to the Productivity Commission report released by the Australian Government in 2020.

The reality is, our existing systems are not working and we are not setting our young men up for success as adults.

We need to prepare our young men with key emotional and social skills so they can become values-based leaders that contribute positively to the community.

Within all this, there is an opportunity.

There are preventative measures we can take to avoid these realities happening. If we empower boys to form healthy and deep relationships with each other, we can reduce the burden placed on our teachers, parents, and the mental health system and prepare our young men to become responsible, purposeful and loving adults.

We hope you enjoy this 2nd Edition.

The Man Cave
6 September · 🌐

HOW BOYS USE PHYSICALITY AS A WAY TO BOND 🗣️
You might have heard of the five love languages - quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service, giving/receiving gifts and physical touch. These languages are often spoken about by adults but boys also have their preferences.

And just because a group of boys may not feel safe or have the tools to have authentic conversations with one another, doesn't mean they aren't tightly bonded.

At one recent workshop we struggled to have authentic conversations with the boys early on, with so much social conditioning in the way.

But we noticed early on that these boys were PHYSICAL. All morning the boys were constantly play fighting, punching each other, slapping each other, wrestling, putting their arms round each other, even sitting on one another.

This was a group as tight knit as any we'd ever worked with - we just weren't speaking their language. These boys bonded through physicality, and this is something we see play out in hundreds of workshops.

As soon as we switched things up, got more active and playful, moved the energy of the room and started to tell impactful stories, the boys levelled up.

For us it's important to be in tune with the way boys connect - and sometimes, it's not through words.

310 likes 112 comments 355 shares

Screenshot of social media post that was shared over 350 times online.



OUR REACH & IMPACT

Program Reach

Despite the lockdowns in Victoria, we were still able to work with over 700 boys in the last 3 months through our face-to-face and online programs. This increases our direct impact for the year to 3,700 boys across 50+ schools in Victoria.

Face-to-face programs

Our face-to-face programs are full-day experiences, designed to shift the attitudes and belief systems of young men and reduce the prevalence of anxiety, depression, suicide and gender-based violence.

Online programs

Our online programs, designed specifically to meet the needs of boys during lockdowns, provide boys with the space, permission, tools, and role models to connect with each other. These are 2 hour sessions held on Zoom and provide the boys a chance to 'check-in' on their wellbeing and learn to support each other better.

Program Impact

Across all our programs we have seen that when given the chance, young men do want to open up and move beyond the traditional, outdated masculine stereotype. This is what they had to say about our programs in Term 3:

100%

100% of boys we worked with thought more boys should have access to the program.

Here's why they think the program is important:

"Because it allows us to manage our mental health better"

"The discussions of mental health really positively impacted me."

"We (boys) like to bottle up and hide our issues and this helps up figure out our own issues and support others."

"Compared to other programs that do similar things, they are just the best at it."

"Because boys are stereotypically portrayed as tough, unfeeling and strong. But they don't have to be. I bet some are feeling alone, scared, but are acting like the above out of desperation and loneliness."

Man Cave TV & Twitch

We also used the recent lockdowns to focus even more on meeting boys where they're at - online. This meant continuing our MCTV channels on social media (TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube), recruiting a 'Board of Boys' in partnership with Movember and launching a Twitch channel.

Twitch is a streaming and gaming platform that has 140 million monthly users, 31 million of which are men aged 16-24 years old.

As part of this channel, our facilitators create space for 'check-ins' before gaming together at different times of the day. Additionally, we also launched 'Man Cave Mornings', a morning show for boys that connects them with our facilitators and other young men from our programs.

Through these platforms, we have continued to connect with new young men around the world and those we have worked with in programs.

22,500+
followers across all
social media platforms

350+
subscribers on Twitch
(majority are young men)

325,000+
accounts reached
across all platforms

CLICK
TO VIEW
HIGHLIGHTS



Man Cave Mornings Highlights



Twitch Gaming Highlights



OUR APPROACH

WHAT WE'RE SEEING

Through our programs and interactions with boys, teachers and parents, we have captured unique data and perspectives to inform our research findings. The predominant themes presented below draw on a broad range of internal sources:

- Evaluation data from the 700 boys we worked with in our face-to-face and online wellbeing workshops in the last 3 months.
- Check-in data submitted by the boys during programs using iYarn (more information below).
- Observations, insights and stories from our 20+ Facilitators who delivered the workshops.
- A questionnaire completed by teachers and wellbeing coordinators from a variety of the 50+ schools we have worked with this year.

The following section of the report is broken into 2 sections:

- 1 The current reality:** what we are seeing across all our schools and stakeholders, including the young men we work with.
- 2 Young men and their friendships:** what young men are telling us about their relationships with each other.

Here is what we are seeing.





SECTION 1

THE CURRENT REALITY

The last 3 months have been very challenging for all of us and particularly for teachers and boys who continued to learn online during Victoria's 6th lockdown. While schools returned for the first 3 weeks of the term along with our face-to-face programs, everyone in Victoria was quickly (and abruptly) thrust back home into lockdown with just 6 hours notice.

We were running workshops on the day the lockdown was announced, and witnessed firsthand how relieved the boys were to be back at school before seeing this switch to despair as their teacher updated them that we were going back in. It's been a battle for everyone involved, but the stories are not all negative.

THE BOYS

Checking-In

How young men are feeling about their lives right now

As part of our online programs, boys completed a 'check-in wheel' using the iYarn app. [iYarn](#) was built to enable groups to do simple and powerful check-ins together and this is what we found from their check-ins:

The Wins

- Enjoying their lives at home with their families, despite lockdowns
- Looking after themselves and forming healthy habits, especially around their diet, exercise and sleep.
- Feeling optimistic about their future

The Challenges

- Struggling with school and the long-hours of online learning
- Missing quality time with their friends
- Struggling with their self-esteem and confidence, mostly related to the monotony of lockdowns





THE BOYS CONT.

Optimism *How young men are feeling about the future*

When asked, 'how optimistic are you feeling about the future', 59% of boys reported feeling optimistic. Despite the challenges they've faced, they think things can only get better from where we are and they have used the lockdowns to develop positive life habits.

"Academically, socially, and fitness-wise, I have found a balance and everything is coming together."

"I have hope for a better brighter future because I was taught that everything always comes to the light."

"Because I am going to do my best, and if things go wrong with the world, it isn't my fault."

30% of young men reported feeling neutral about the future and 11% reported feeling negative about the future. When asked why they felt this way, they told us how much they were struggling with the uncertainty and that they've given up or just become ambivalent and lazy.

"The world's gone to shit and all of my potential careers have pretty big downsides."

"I'm scared for what's going to happen."

"I feel like the future is pretty unpredictable because of the lockdown."



● 59% of young men felt optimistic about the future
● 30% of young men were neutral ● 11% of young men were negative

It appears that (understandably) the boys had some trepidation about having to endure longer bouts of isolation and separation from school, sport, play and community. Some of these young men clearly worry about their futures but interestingly if you look at the contrast between the way adults seemed to have responded to lockdown, the boys show remarkable resilience on the whole.

The vast majority of the boys in the data felt they had a lot of hope and prospects for the future. We know that when boys feel confident and connected to purpose and future outcomes, this creates a stable foundation for thriving in other areas within their lives.

This spread of optimism from the boys speaks to their deep-seated capacity of young men to survive, adapt, do what is necessary and move forward to a brighter future. To see them connecting to musical expression, artistic passion and academic goals are all bright beacons of positivity despite all the chaos caused in a post-COVID-19 landscape.

THE TEACHERS

We also surveyed teachers, wellbeing coordinators and school leaders (all referred to below as teachers) in the Man Cave Community about what they're seeing in their male students. Across 18 different schools in Victoria, ranging from Catholic, Government, Independent and Private, here's what they said.

Student Wellbeing

Not surprisingly, teachers are really concerned about their young men's wellbeing. When asked to rate the overall emotional wellbeing of the young men they teach, teachers perspectives were clear:



● 82% poor/very poor
● 18% okay ● 0% good/very good

Teacher Wellbeing

When asked to rate their personal emotional wellbeing, teachers are also struggling:



● 48% poor/very poor
● 39% okay ● 13% good/very good

Their Observations: As a result of Victoria's extended lockdown, teachers are telling us their young men are demotivated, distracted (especially by technology), withdrawn, tired, anxious and have forgotten how to communicate effectively.

Teachers are struggling to 'get' to students and to fully understand how they're going (most students have their cameras turned off). Some of them have become socially isolated from their friends simply because they don't live close to each other.

When they have returned to school they have struggled with social anxiety and making sense of their varied experiences of lockdowns. On a positive note, the boys have noticed just how much they missed each other's physical presence.

Their concerns: Teachers are most concerned about their young men's lack of emotional and social growth as a result of being in social isolation for so long. They're worried that their boys aren't developing basic tools for expressing themselves, they have a lack of positive role models in their lives and their resilience has been eroded.

The surprises: It isn't all bad news! Teachers have been pleasantly surprised by how their young men have adapted, taken responsibility for their learning and shown empathy towards their teachers during remote learning. A number of teachers reported that their students have shown immense positivity and capacity to keep going and 'get the job done.'



FACILITATORS

Our facilitators brought a slightly different perspective to how they boys have been going. Here are a few stories from our Squad delivering programs:



Josh *Senior Facilitator, Creator of Context for Man Cave TV & Board of Boys*

The Internet has been a haven to the boys while lockdown's been in place. Yes, there have been obvious negative aspects to having so much screen time, but it's kept the boys connected. This generation's been interacting with social media almost their whole social life, so being locked up at home with good wifi has distracted them enough to still believe that they are living a life that's "not that bad."

I think the boys are doing what they are great at - surviving/coping. And as always, it will take a matter of trust and respect given to them before they will really let you in on what is going on for them.



Ben *Senior Facilitator, Coordinator of Movember Speakeasy workshops*

One thing that really stood out for me was how much they're still connecting. It's as if the way they reach out or communicate with each other hasn't changed a lot, they're just not seeing each other face to face. They're still talking all the time. Even within our workshop they were chatting to each other on an external source, but still sharing and contributing. They're isolated physically, but the safety of using the phone and social media and texting is big at the moment (due to lockdown) because it's their only avenue.



Narada *Senior Facilitator, Host of Man Cave Mornings on Twitch*

They're really just missing their mates and I think that's contributing to the disengagement from school. The best part of school for me was going and hanging out with my mates all day, not going there to learning and study, that was just a byproduct of being at school for me.



Himal *Facilitator, Content Creator for Man Cave TV*

Of the 3 online workshops we ran, approximately 80% of boys were gaming at the same time. They were holding a gaming remote to the side and still engaging with us in the workshop, and most of them asked to come back for rounds 2 and 3. The most rewarding feedback was that the boys told us, "we've never had conversations like this, we'd maybe talked about our emotions once a year, now we got to do it once a week (for 3 weeks) with you guys, in a space like this and we'd not done it before. We were really happy that we did get to kind of see where we were at and where the rest of our boys were.

GIFTS FOR THE ADULTS

Finally, we asked young men, 'what do you want adults to know about your experience right now?' The consistent theme across all responses was this sense of feeling misunderstood or misaligned with the adults in their lives about their priorities and goals.

"Grades aren't everything."

"Teens don't always want to hear about coronavirus but want adults to recognise that their mental health is declining."

"That I'm doing well but I still need support from them."

"Just to understand."

"Us kids have it easy most of the time but we're under just as much stress as you right now."

"It's different for us than what they are seeing."

**SECTION 2**

THE RESEARCH ON YOUNG MEN & THEIR FRIENDSHIPS

OUR RESEARCH FOCUS: FRIENDSHIPS

Given the current reality, we set out to better understand how young men felt about their relationships with each other.

We know that peer to peer relationships are critical to the mental health and positive growth of young men as they navigate adolescents. While the mental health and support seeking is becoming increasingly normalised, we wanted to understand how boys and young men relate to each other.

Do they have each other's backs? Do they feel comfortable asking for help? What do they really want to ask each other? The results were enlightening and honest - we still have work to do.

Before we present their responses, we invite Dr Katie Wood, Associate Professor and Clinical Psychologist from Swinburne University), to set the context for why and how peer-to-peer friendships for boys are so important in their development and wellbeing.

**Dr Katie Wood**

Associate Professor and Clinical Psychologist from Swinburne University

Dr Wood specialises in child and adolescent mental health, and has spent many years working clinically with young men individually and in groups.

Historically, the societal norms and expectations for boys would have it that they don't express emotions or show their vulnerable side. They are meant to portray strength and toughness; an image of masculinity that many males learn to project from childhood (Chu & Gilligan, 2014). However, this gender stereotype has most definitely served as a distraction from showing what many young men really need and desire, and that is meaningful connections with others.

Humans need connection, and young males are no exception (Siegel, 2014). Being connected lays the foundation for self-disclosure, intimacy, and ultimately self-acceptance (Chu & Gilligan, 2014; Way, 2011; Rowsell, Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Frank, 2014). A key developmental task during adolescence is to find an accepting peer group, which helps to answer the important questions: who am I?; and where do I belong? (Erikson, 1968; Ragelienė, 2016; Siegel, 2014).

It is not that parents/carers become insignificant during adolescence but more that peers take centre stage (Siegel, 2014). Belonging to a peer group, and feeling accepted can translate to healthy self-esteem (Daniels & Leaper, 2006). It can also buffer against loneliness, disconnection, and poor mental health (Ragelienė, 2016; Rowsell et al., 2014; Siegel, 2014).

Research also tells us that young males typically engage in more active or rule-governed activities (e.g., sport) with their male peers (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Drummond, 2020; Rowsell et al., 2014). While participation in such activities can reduce the need for feeling talk, they can also facilitate peer acceptance and feeling good about yourself (Daniels & Leaper, 2006). Starting from a place where males feel comfortable is also likely to increase their confidence to open up, as has been found in The Man Cave groups.



FINDINGS

Do young men have each other's backs?

To answer this question, we explored 3 key topics with the boys:

1. How comfortable they are supporting each other
2. What they want to ask each other
3. How comfortable they feel seeking support

Overall, we found that boys would do anything for each other in support. They have a sense of altruism and care that really warms the heart, and shows the deep well of love and support that sits in them.

Despite this potent sense of duty, young men are still unsure and afraid of judgement if they open up to their friends. This is not a surprising finding, but their reasons for why start to shed light on the barriers in the way of them opening up to each other.

Below we explore why they felt this way.

THEME 1 MATESHIP IS STRONGER THAN EVER

How comfortable do you feel supporting your mate when he is struggling?



● 86% Very comfortable ● 9% Neutral ● 5% Not at all comfortable

Without a doubt, young men told us they want to support their mates when they are struggling.

86% of young men surveyed told us they are comfortable or very comfortable supporting their mate when he is struggling.

For those that responded positively, there were 3 clear reasons why they were so willing:

1. Because it's what friends do for each other

For most of the young men, supporting their mates was simply part of friendship. Their responses included, 'because friends help each other', 'I'm always there for my mates' and 'I want my friends to feel comfortable and not struggle.'

2. Because I'm good at caring for others and they would do the same for me

Secondly, young men want to support their mates because they feel they are good at it or have a duty of care for others. Their responses included, 'I enjoy helping people', 'because I should care for people, it's a human quality' and 'because I know how important it is to give help if someone needs it.'

3. Because they would do the same for me

Finally, young men want to support their mates because they trust it will be reciprocated. They told us, 'they would do the same for me' and that 'it's good to help friends out because they help you.'

THEME 2 YOUNG MEN WANT TO CHECK-IN ON EACH OTHER

Young men want to go deeper and talk to each other about their thoughts, feelings and emotions. We asked young men:

What do you want to ask your mates right now?

They responded with the following:



● 95% how are you? ● 9% want to hang / game / play sport?

95% of young men wanted to ask their mates, 'honestly, how are you?', 'are you actually good?' and 'are you doing okay?'

First and foremost, their responses show genuine care for the wellbeing of their mates, along with a desire to have deeper conversations about how they are going.

Secondly, their responses also show how perceptive they are about their friends. Phrases such as 'honestly' and 'actually' indicate that boys are noticing a mismatch between what their friends are saying compared to what they feel (eg. he might actually be struggling, he just isn't willing to admit it).

The other 5% of questions ranged from inviting each other to game together, to play sport together or to catch up in general.

Overall, their responses show how deep their friendships run, even during lockdowns. Our facilitators also reflected that even though the boys were unable to connect at sport, school, parties, hobby and social events, they still stayed connected through online portals and gaming, clocking in large amounts of time together.

This hints at the positive impacts of connecting through online platforms and gaming, which may be getting missed as a result of parents and adults being overly conscious of 'screen-time'.

This generation of young men is wedded to and embedded in technology in ways we are only beginning to comprehend. Leveraging this, rather than rejecting it, opens up avenues for meeting boys where they're at, and introducing positive role models and connections in ways we have not seen before.



THEME 3

YOUNG MEN STILL FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE TALKING OPENLY

Despite their willingness to support each other and be a good friend, most boys are still uncomfortable regularly taking off their mask and asking for support.

What do we mean by taking off ‘the mask’?

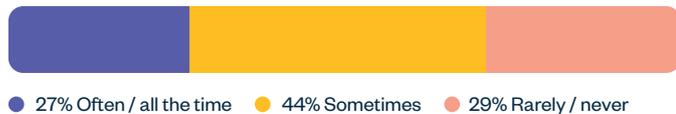
‘The mask’ is the version of ourselves that we show the world in order to protect the parts of us that are scared of being judged, shamed or rejected. This concept of ‘the mask’ is particularly relevant in how it explains the connection between masculinity and mental health (watch this documentary to gain a better understanding ‘[The Mask You Live In](#)’).

If boys and men internalise the belief that being a man involves being tough and showing no emotion, there is a risk they will never take off the ‘the mask’ and show their whole selves. For men, this can spiral into a feeling of

isolation loneliness, resentment and even anger, which can become the driving force behind depression, suicide and gender-based violence (The Men’s Project & Flood, M. 2020).

Taking off the mask means diving headfirst into the pool of vulnerability and admitting we don’t have to be strong all the time. That we can cry and feel everything that is present for us. In doing so, we give other men the permission to do the same, but someone has to go first. Be a man? Take off the mask and tell me how you really feel.

We asked boys, ‘how often do you ‘take off the mask’ and talk openly with your mates?’



44% of young men reported they ‘sometimes’ take off the mask, while 29% reported they rarely or never take off their mask.

Alternatively, just over a quarter (27%) of the boys reported feeling accustomed and comfortable taking off their mask;

“I am always the one who asks my friends how they are going and more personal questions.”

“Because me and my friends care for each other.”

“Because me and my mates are pretty open with each other.”

“My friends and I have had lots of chats recently about all this stuff because of the toll lockdown has had on our mental health.”





Why are young men not taking off ‘the mask’?

We analysed their explanations to understand why this was the case and found the following 3 key themes.

1. Ambivalence / Not the done thing

Ambivalence towards the idea and it not being something they do as part of their friendships is the key reason boys aren't taking off the mask.

Some feel they can do it sometimes, but this might only be with the right people and not with others.

For some it is very much not the done thing in a space where banter and surface talk dominate the nature of their interactions. Delving into feelings and honesty can feel awkward, difficult or entirely new and out of alignment with how they usually engage with each other.

“Because I try not to worry them too much.”

“Because when I talk with my friends it is never serious.”

“Because I’m someone that only really opens up when I’m asked.”

“Not sure, never tried to initiate that type of conversation.”

“Because I feel like as a man I don’t have to, it will just get better over time.”

“Because normally we wouldn’t talk and see how everyone is going like this.”

“There are times where I will talk to my mates about how I feel but also sometimes I like to keep things to myself because I work best alone and can get through it alone if needed because there is only a number of people I can be open with.”

We know that an amount of psychological safety and trust is required for boys to drop the mask. Despite how deeply they are connecting with each other online and how much they would do for each other, they are still not fully comfortable opening up and engaging in the level of vulnerability that is necessary for them to feel connected to and safe with each other.

In his book [Lost Connections \(2019\)](#), Johann Hari captured this paradox very effectively in saying, ‘the opposite of depression is connection.’ When young men feel isolated and disconnected, they are unfortunately laying the groundwork for symptoms of depression and anxiety. There is an illusion of isolation that can be broken when they experience a space where they can be themselves and connect with others who are experiencing the same challenges (eg. their peers).

2. Being socially isolated and in lockdowns

The next most dominant theme was that boys would usually open up to their friends face-to-face, and they simply haven't been able to because of lockdowns.

“It’s hard over the internet, it’s not as genuine.”

“I think it’s because we’re in the middle of lockdown.”

While this might only seem relevant now, it is an important piece of the puzzle.

It is likely in regular life that the more isolated a young man, the less likely he is to see or have friends to catch up with in person. This in turn, can lead to him experiencing less connection and also having less opportunities to talk openly about how he is going. This example re-emphasises the importance of peer-to-peer relationships that are experienced face-to-face. Without this, boys risk falling into a sense of isolation and pessimism.

3. Fear of judgement or lack of awareness

For a small number of boys, they were honest that they are uncomfortable taking off the mask for fear of being judged or not realising it was something they could do with their friends.

“I don’t feel they (my friends) care or don’t feel comfortable talking to me.”

“I didn’t know I could really talk to my friends about this.”

While this perspective was only a small part of the data, it's another important piece in understanding the barriers preventing young men from speaking openly. Showing young men what is possible in their relationships with each other, is critical in setting them up to build friendships of strength and depth.

Without a role model or example, the invisible barriers between young men will continue to prevent them from connecting more authentically. They need the space, permission, tools and role models to show them another way of mateship and support.

“In our culture we associate vulnerability with emotions we want to avoid such as fear, shame and uncertainty. Yet we too often lose sight of the fact that vulnerability is the birthplace of joy, belonging, authenticity, creativity and loving.”

- Brene Brown



SOLUTIONS

WHAT NEXT?

Given the findings, below are 5 key areas for action that can improve the state of play for young men and their relationships at an individual, group and systemic level.

1. Start with yourself

This work as adults always starts with understanding our own life experiences and how they have influenced our personal beliefs and attitudes.

Start by examining your personal values about masculinity and think about how these might be projected, consciously or subconsciously, onto the young males in your life. Reflect on what your life was like as a teenager and consider how certain experiences have impacted your own perceptions of how friendships and relationships should work.

2. Be a role model

If you don't feel like you can 'take off the mask' in your friendships or relationships, then start to open conversations with these people about wanting to be more authentic. There is nothing more frustrating for a young man than an adult whose words and actions don't align. Do the work yourself and be a role model for them. You can also connect them to mentors or friends of yours that are values-aligned.

3. Get curious about their experience

Young men don't care what you know, until they know that you care. Reserve any judgement or discomfort of your own and get curious about what it's like to be a young man right now. Be willing to ask them questions and explore ideas with them. Think about the function of their behaviour. Resistance is a need not being met, so consider what needs of theirs aren't being met and discuss this with them.

4. Get involved in their worlds

It's critical to meet young men in their world and give them experiences that matter to them. Young men typically respond well to 'doing' something together. If they have an interest in fishing then go fishing or start the conversation about that topic and build from there. If they love TikTok or gaming, ask them to show you their favourite creators or games and let them educate you. Reserve any judgement, and seek to understand.

5. Create opportunities for them to deepen their friendships

As boys turn to young men, their focus turns from their family to their peers. Provide a psychologically safe space wherever you interact with them. From there, you can help them broaden their understanding of friendship. Many young men did not trust they could share their internal thoughts with their mates. Give them permission to know that it's okay to do this and provide them with meaningful ways to connect with each other. This could be as simple as having a sitdown meal without phones (adults included).

Systemic Change

It's time to shift the education curriculum toward character development

For us to create real, sustained attitude and behaviour in young men, our education system needs to change.

We need to move away from a curriculum focused purely on academic achievement and integrate emotional intelligence, relationship skills and values-based decision making into everyday schooling.

Programs like The Man Cave and emerging programs like [Teach Us Consent](#) by Chanel Contos, need to be

integrated into school curriculums. Not as add-ons, but as core pieces of education. This will lay the foundations for our young men to become kind, purposeful and values-driven leaders and benefit the whole community around them, especially women.

These changes need to be backed by Government funding, and result in real changes in how schools deliver their education curriculum to students and professional development to their staff.

Without these changes, we will continue trying to raise young men in a mental health system that is geared toward crisis management and an education system that is geared toward academia.



CONCLUSION

Overall, we found that young men deeply care for their mates and have each other's backs. However, there are still social norms preventing them from feeling comfortable opening up and talking honestly.

The key explanations for them not taking off their mask regularly, included:

- Ambivalence / not the done thing
- Lockdowns and social isolation
- Fear of judgement or lack of awareness

We know from the research and our observations, that feeling safe to 'take off the mask' is critical to the health and wellbeing of young men during their adolescence, and for the rest of their lives.

The nature of their friendships and what they learn about how to gain respect, attention and love from their peers during high school also has long-lasting impacts on how these boys form friendships and relationships for the rest of their adult lives.

This initial research by The Man Cave will be continued in partnership with academic professionals as we seek to prevent the harmful impacts of unhealthy masculinity, on young men and those around them.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the next insights and impact report, we'll be exploring what young men have learned about themselves from the lockdowns. We'll be asking them how they used the lockdowns as an opportunity for growth and how they want to emerge from the Rite of Passage they have been through over the past 2 years.



Resources

Want to educate yourself more? Here are a few resources we'd recommend:

- Listen to:
[Outside the Cave - Harry Garside](#)
- Listen to:
[Dyl & Friends - Hunter Johnson \(Man Cave\) & Zac Seidler \(Movember\)](#)
- Watch:
[The Wisdom of Trauma \(Movie\)](#)
- Read:
[Brands can play a role in changing hispanic males' self-expectations](#)





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