# Positive Masculinity
## *in boys and young men*

BRIGHTON GRAMMAR | Crowther Centre

# What makes a good man these days?

*We live in a world where the idea of how we see ourselves as people can have an impact on our health. Our mental health impacts our lives significantly: from day to day interactions with others, to setting meaningful goals that help us to have a sense of purpose in life, to dealing with the stresses of the modern world.*

*It is vital that we help our boys to learn skills, attitudes and behaviours to be life-ready. Parenting expert Steve Biddulph believes 'backbone and heart' is the answer to the question 'What makes a good man these days?' – but is there more?*

# About boys and young men: masculinity

Much has been written and said about masculinity: is it toxic, does it lead to ill-health for boys and young men, is it linked to violence? We know that things need to change: amongst boys and men there are higher rates of aggression, violence and suicide and poorer school engagement. What society has been doing isn't working.

*There is a gap. Something is missing and new approaches are needed.*

Recent research has shown that programs tailored for young men play a role in helping to shape perceptions of manhood. Schools are places for learning: they create the necessary emotional and social conditions to explore and ultimately make developmental choices about identity and values. We believe this is an ideal environment to encourage the development of *POSITIVE MASCULINITY*.

# Positive masculinity (+M) defined

*Put simply, positive masculinity is the expression of attitudes and behaviours (character strengths and virtues which any gender might have) that have been embodied and enacted by males for the common good, both individually and for the community.*

+M is a perspective that accentuates the strengths and beneficial aspects of a masculine identity (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010).

The pressure to achieve, prove and maintain one's masculinity remains largely constant for boys and young men (Kimmel, 2006; Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Vandello, Bosson et al., 2008). Intervention and positive guidance are necessary to offset the current social depiction of masculinity (Kupers, 2005), where men are commonly depicted as aggressive or violent, unemotional and non-nurturing (Collier, 1998; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Positive masculinity is a way to change the conversation.

# What we are doing: +M Framework

Brighton Grammar and *Orygen* (Australia's peak adolescent mental health organisation authority) have teamed up to create a framework of best practice for boys and young men. Called Positive Masculinity (+M), it will be a set of practices, curriculum and evidence-based advice for boys, their parents, guardians and

teachers. This framework will be developed and tested at Brighton Grammar, a school with its own centre for research, and then shared both nationally and internationally for the benefit of all.

# Factors of Positive Masculinity and the +M Framework

In developing a framework, our belief is that there are two major factors to be considered when it comes to positive masculinity – 'knowing' and 'being'.

**Knowing:** is about providing boys and young men, as well as their parents and teachers with content knowledge about positive masculinity.  It includes character strengths and virtues (for instance non-violence), tools for self-reflection, links to curriculum, positive masculinity heroes (in life and fiction) and understanding the role of various services (including mentoring). The 'knowing' factor also emphasises the importance of engagement.

**Being:** is an understanding that there isn't one 'perfect version' of a man. It's a choice — moment by moment, day by day.

The positive masculinity framework therefore proposes there are three elements for young men and boys to develop positive masculinity in their lives.  Namely, that they are authentic, connected and motivated.

| **Authentic** *(that boys and young men are confident and content, kind and compassionate, in their sense of self)* | • To be authentic is to know and be comfortable in one's own (masculine) identity. An authentic young man has a willingness and comfort to be inclusive and openly express their identity, attitudes, and emotions. To be authentic may promote openness, honesty, integrity and humility. <br>• This concept responds to the notion that young men are often facing confusion and confliction regarding what is expected from them, resulting in a compelling need to 'mask' this confusion by appearing increasingly more 'manly' (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Pollack, 2006). |

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| | • It may promote health behaviours, such as help-seeking or providing support to others (Lynch, Long, & Moorhead, 2018). Similarly, it is aligned with the notion of student voice, where students have space for personal agency and an active ability to meaningfully contribute to their school environment (Quaglia & Fox, 2018). |
| **Connected** *(that they have relationships formed on respect and trust)* | • This concept is related to building social relationships and engagement with an array of individuals.<br><br>• To be 'connected' is to have respectful, tolerant, empathetic, and kind relationships with a variety of people, systems, groups and self. It should not promote disconnection, isolation or intolerance of other groups (Wade, 1998).<br><br>• It is proposed as a key strength as boys and young men have reported difficulties forming close and trusting relationships, and often experience feelings of alienation, isolation and loneliness (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pollack, 2006). |
| **Motivated** *(to do and be a good person)* | • This represents the drive to continually grow as a person, to contribute to society and feel a sense of purpose.<br><br>• It is concerned with recognising and modifying the underlying causes of our boy's motivation to think and behave in certain ways.<br><br>• The framework will aim to reduce over-reliance on external motivators of behaviour, namely, acting on the basis of how our boys believe their peers want them to act. For example, men's aggression is often driven by false expectations about what their peers prefer, or expect from a 'man' (Vandello, Cohen, & Ransom, 2008). |

The overall goal is that we want our boys and young men to base their decisions on the collective wisdom and practice of what it is to be a good person — as Plato once posited: the true, the beautiful and the good. Applying this framework to guide intervention in positive masculinity development in adolescence will help to establish a positive developmental pathway for our boys and young men.

## How you can help

**To encourage positive masculinity, you can:**

- Foster open and honest communication with your son.

- Help your son feel supported and create an environment where he feels free from judgement for sharing his concerns and fears and feels comfortable to share, empathise and connect.

- Encourage personal expression and support your son in being his true and authentic self.

- Challenge harmful stereotypes, define positive values and model the type of behaviours and attitudes you want to encourage.

- Assist your son in finding positive role models – perhaps in your family, community or even in the media who demonstrate healthy and respective ways to be a healthy young man

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