

## **A New Experience for Boys: Walking the Talk in BAM! Groups**

According to the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health, a survey of 12,000 young people across the country (Resnick 1997), a child's connection to a caring adult and that child's perception of his or her school as a caring environment are the strongest protection against high-risk behavior. BAM! groups represent our method of creating a caring school environment where connections with supportive adults and other boys are key.

BAM! groups are about both prevention and intervention. Contrary to the typical approach to boys, however, these groups are not focused on reducing a particular behavior. Instead, the goal of BAM! groups is to help boys become more emotionally literate and relationally competent while working with boys in ways that work for them. Too often boys in our society learn to interact with each other in ways that are hurtful, involve put-downs, and generally do not foster safe and supportive friendships. In contrast, BAM! groups create an environment where boys can feel safer with and more supported by one another, with less of a need to act aggressively or defensively. We want boys in these groups to use their naturally buoyant and expressive energies in mutually supportive ways in order to experience a positive sense of belonging, safety, and involvement on their playgrounds, in their classrooms, and in their communities.

In BAM! groups, we intentionally orchestrate a social environment wherein boys are encouraged to be honest with themselves, express a broad range of emotions, and relate more directly with their peers. If the typical school hallways socialize boys to be on guard, BAM! groups provide boys a social experience in which they can remove their armor.

We believe in the ability of boys to be healthy and happy individuals as well as positive contributors to community and family life. To achieve this, we must recognize and support what is natural about boys' behavior while helping them to be more relationally skilled and emotionally intelligent. This is not about making boys into girls. Whether boys are from urban, rural, or suburban settings, what is important is that they are emotionally healthy. Whether they play football or dance ballet, whether they hunt or knit, what matters is that boys are relationally competent.

As we have been describing, in order for us to help boys make better contact with themselves and others, we must first be able to connect with boys ourselves. Knowing about boys' preferences for communication and contact help us to make better connections with them. Because by nature and nurture boys may not approach emotional content as directly as girls, for example, we tend to work with them indirectly. We tell them our own stories before asking them to tell us theirs. We also work side by side with them in activities as much as we ask them to work with us or each other in a face-to-face manner. In general, we keep our communications with them playful, subtle, and casual.

By working with them in these indirect ways, we have often been surprised by the powerfully direct ways that boys will respond in the group. We ask them to physically support one another over an imaginary "electric fence"

and they tell us afterward how they have learned to feel trust in one another. We tell them a story about losing one of our fathers, and one of the boys tells us how painful it has been to have not seen his mom since he was 3 years old.

Because we know that boys are concerned about being seen as vulnerable, we allow them outlets to dissipate the anxiety of being authentic in our groups. We have learned, for example, that allowing them to fidget with something in their hands and even gaze at the object while they are talking or listening paradoxically enhances their ability to make contact with us and each other.

We have discovered two major types of activities in our boys group that have been especially helpful in connecting with boys and in helping them connect with themselves and others: strategic storytelling and physical challenges. In the next sections, we describe our approach to using these two types of activities.