Towards an effective approach for designing and implementing programs and interventions aimed at fostering freedom from unhealthy masculine stereotypes among men and boys

Hints, Tips and Promising Principles of Practice for Program Facilitators

Research by Monash University for the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth)

The purpose of this tool

In efforts aimed at greater gender equality, there is a growing emphasis on promoting positive or healthier masculinities. Aiming for healthier masculinities that embrace equality, respect, non-violence and care means encouraging boys and men to be more conscious of how enactments of masculinity and traditional norms of masculinity can be harmful to women and girls, to gender diverse people, and to boys and men themselves. It is clear that conforming to traditional masculine norms is associated with poorer mental health outcomes and lower help-seeking behaviours among men, as well as a higher likelihood of violence perpetration.

A variety of organisations, communities, local councils and other bodies are putting increasing amounts of time and energy towards promoting freedom from unhealthy masculine stereotypes. While this often involves engaging an existing provider to run a healthy masculinities program, some stakeholders want to set out to design and implement their own programs. Both existing program providers and newer stakeholders are the intended audience of this tool. Drawing on recent evidence from two qualitative research project focusing on facilitators of healthier masculinities programs in Australia[1], the tool lays out some promising principles of good facilitation practice. Paying attention to the suggestions in this tool can help guide the effective design and implementation of healthier masculinities programs.

1 Funded by VicHealth and conducted by Monash University, these include 'Masculinities and Health Scoping review', by Ralph et al 2020; 'Gendered stereotypes and norms: A systematic review of interventions designed to shift attitudes and behaviour' by Stewart et al. (2021); and 'Evaluating programs aimed at gender transformative work with men and boys: a multi-cohort, cross-sector investigation' by Elliott et al (2022). The detail in these documents can support stakeholders who want further detail alongside the present tool.

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Good facilitation is tricky and important!

Being a facilitator of a primary prevention program, is a dynamic, complex role involving the management of many moving parts. Facilitators are often responsible for the implementation of the key objectives of a program, whilst also responsible for the management of those participating in the program. Thinking about promising practice for facilitators of healthier masculinities programs, specifically, we summarise research findings from interviews with 44 facilitators from 15 programs that work with men and boys.

While some program facilitators feel they are the "right kind of person' for the job, the practices we describe below also need to feature as core components of program facilitation training. Such training should be undertaken prior to starting the role of facilitator, but also consolidated through regular refresher training. This will support the core practice and keep the key principles at the front of facilitator practice.

Six core practices for effective facilitation of healthier masculinities programs

1. Create a sense of safety

Safety within the space that the program takes place is integral for the participants to be able to share and voice their opinions and experiences. Making it feel safe for the participants to share allows the facilitator to gauge the level of understanding and acceptance of topics being discussed, what the group dynamics are, and use this to help determine the best pace and approach to delivering the program based on the group's ability and motivation to participate. This helps to avoid imposing or discussing irrelevant topics or issues that will alienate the participants. A useful way to create a sense of safety, is to co-create the rules of engagement, meaning the facilitator and the participants work together to design the guidelines needed for safety in the space.

Another important part of creating a sense of safety is the need to set boundaries. Just as openness and honesty should be encouraged and vulnerability recognised and affirmed, counterintuitive and harmful attitudes and behaviours also need to be recognised and addressed. These should be treated as learning opportunities, supporting reflection and discussion amongst the group, and not as a means of shaming or embarrassing anyone.

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2. Build rapport

Building rapport is essential for effective facilitation. Having rapport with the participants moves the facilitator from a stranger in the room, to someone they know and can take advice from. Finding common ground with the participants can also make discussing more personal or serious topics, such as mental health, easier as they have a stronger level of connection to the facilitator.

Establishing rapport also allows facilitators to challenge participants to go deeper when it comes to some of the more sensitive or heavier topics, such as exploring and acknowledging the inherent gender privileges afforded to males. Caution must be taken however to ensure that in the process of building rapport, rigid stereotypes are not reinforced – casual 'banter' can for example be helpful in engaging boys and young men, but can also easily become sexist or homophobic without careful consideration. One way to do this is by focusing on the diversity of men and masculinities, including characteristics, interests and talents that have traditionally been seen as feminine.

3. Model vulnerability

These programs provide an opportunity for the participants to share aspects of themselves publicly, many for the first time. This can be quite daunting for the participants so a way to remedy this is for the facilitators themselves to also model vulnerability. The facilitators sharing in this way, not only allows the participants to feel comfortable but it also helps to level the facilitators to be seen as more relatable. The facilitators and participants being in an open dialogue with each other helps to promote how men and boys can share with each other outside of the programs. Our research largely suggests that the facilitators act as role models for the participants. By role modelling vulnerability or authenticity to the participants, the facilitators are thus primed to challenge harmful masculine norms which may prevent the participants from sharing openly.

4. Encourage growth

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5. Teamwork makes the dream work

We suggest the need for at least two facilitators working in the program space at any one time. Having multiple facilitators working in the space alleviates some of the mental labour that the facilitators undertake. Multiple facilitators also help to promote more diversity in how one can express masculinity, by having the participants see how different people express themselves. On this note, in particular, avoid any temptation to have only teams of (or individual) men as facilitators of programs aimed at boys and men – this might feel intuitive but the evidence on facilitation does not support this assumption. The facilitators are likely to be interacting with, and presenting to, a variety of young people, and thus the facilitation team should reflect that diversity. Moreover, the notion these spaces should be 'men only' is not supported by the research on facilitation, or in the programs more generally. Indeed, the social science literature has several compelling critiques of the value of male role models (see e.g. Tarrant et al 2015).

6. Practice self-care

Whilst modelling vulnerability is of great benefit to the program's aims and the participants, it is not without its struggles. Our data shows that facilitators could be sharing the same story multiple times a week, or even within the same day. Thus it is important for the facilitators to recognise this strain, and to ensure they take the chance to debrief and to process each day. Employers and program leaders also need to recognise this labour and ensure this is taken into account when considering hours worked and commuting to and from various workshops, as well as through the provision of debriefing opportunities. It is also recommended that the programs themselves have this need for self-care built into their sessions.

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Works used in preparation of this tool:

This tool is based on a synthesis of research conducted by Rebecca Stewart and Jayden Walker in their respective PhD studies at Monash University. The research for Jayden's thesis, entitled 'A post structural analysis of masculinity among facilitators of healthy masculinity programs in Australia' is ongoing through to mid 2023. Rebecca's thesis, entitled 'Men, Masculinities and Gender Equality: How Australian primary prevention programs are supporting attitude and behaviour change in boys and men' was conferred in March 2022. The following are published works that draw from Rebecca's doctoral work, and which should be of further interest for readers of the present tool:

Stewart, R, Wright, B, Smith, L, Roberts, S, & Russell, N 2021, Gendered stereotypes and norms: A systematic review of interventions designed to shift attitudes and behaviour. Heliyon, vol. 7, no. 4 e06660.

Stewart, R, Roberts, S, Wright B, Smith, L 2022, "Men actually need to practice the conversation: Collective learnings from Australian programs seeking tom challenge outdated masculine stereotypes and norms, Journal of Men's Studies, online ahead of print.

Work cited

Tarrant, A, Terry, G, Ward, M, Ruxton S, Robb, M, & Featherstone B 2015, Are male role models really the answer? Interrogating the 'War on Boys' through the male role model discourse. Boyhood Studies vol. 8, no. 1. Pp. 60-83.

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