

This message guide contains recommendations that will help you have more productive conversations about masculine stereotypes in Australia. It is based on extensive research undertaken by Common Cause Australia on behalf of VicHealth in 2019 and early 2020.

The primary users of this guide will be people working to challenge unhealthy attitudes and patterns of behaviour that stem from adherence to traditional forms of masculinity, and who aim to shape healthier norms and behaviours for Australian men and boys. Whether you are engaging with men and boys directly or with the broader community, the recommendations in this guide should be useful to you.

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Introduction

Approach

The research and recommendations outlined in this guide are based on the [Common Cause approach](#) to community engagement. This approach is based on decades of research from the fields of social psychology, cognitive linguistics and behavioural economics.

A key finding of this research is that most people are able to think about any issue from multiple and often conflicting perspectives. Importantly, these different perspectives operate mostly at a subconscious and emotive level, which means people's attitudes and behaviours are often driven by factors beyond their conscious awareness.

In our research on masculinities, we focused on identifying perspectives (also known as *frames*) which make people feel at a gut level that what we are saying is true. We also sought to understand which frames moved people into an oppositional mindset – a mindset where our calls for healthier forms of masculinity felt wrong to them. Identifying these oppositional frames is just as important as supportive frames, because it tells us which frames we should avoid using.

Methodology

In order to identify the dominant frames that people in Australia use to reason about masculinity, we conducted a nation-wide frames analysis. This involved collecting and coding over 20,000 words of language data from dozens of publicly available sources of discourse on the topic of masculinities – including media articles, political debate, social media discussions and popular culture.

In addition, we conducted 17 one-on-one interviews with key advocates addressing gender and masculinity in Australia. This language data was then coded and analysed based on key metaphors, values and story logic in order to identify the dominant supportive and oppositional frames used by Australians to think and talk about the topic.

“Messages that appealed strongly to supporters and also shifted persuadables were identified as most useful for future messaging.”

These findings were then tested using an online survey of more than 1,600 Australians¹. The 20-minute survey included a range of question formats – including forced choice² and split sample³ questions. We also tested five 30-second audio-recorded messages in which participants moved a dial up and down on their screens as they listened to the messages to indicate their level of agreement with what they were hearing in that moment. This provided us with a moment-by-moment view of the persuasive effect of the messages we tested and allowed us to isolate specific words and phrases that most resonated with audiences.

To ensure our research was grounded in the growing body of existing research on gender and masculinity, we consulted with masculinities expert Dr Michael Flood (Queensland University of Technology) throughout the project and sought feedback from a range of people working in the field both on our initial message testing results and early version of this guide. VicHealth would like to thank Dr Flood and the many other people who helped shape this guide into what it is today.

Our research identified three key attitudinal groups on the topic of masculinities



Supporters



Persuadables



Opponents

¹ The sample of 1619 respondents was drawn from a panel and weighted to be representative of the Australian population by age, state and gender.

² Forced choice questions force respondents to choose between one of two statements with no option to skip or opt out of the question. This allows us to assess the strength of opposing frames relative to each other – for example, to assess whether a promising advocate message is more or less powerful than a common opposition message.

³ Split sample questions split the entire sample into two random groups and present each with different versions of the question. These questions are used to assess the impact of using different words or frames on people's responses.

Segmentation

Our research identified three key attitudinal groups on the topic of masculinities:

- **Supporters:** people who strongly agree with messages suggesting *traditional masculinity is problematic*
- **Persuadables:** people who hold more ambivalent attitudes overall and tend to *move between oppositional and supporter perspectives*.
- **Opponents:** people who strongly agree with messages suggesting *concerns about traditional masculinity are exaggerated*.

We analysed the results of our survey based on the responses of these three groups to each of the questions and messages.

Messages that appealed strongly to supporters and also shifted persuadables were identified as most useful for future messaging. These are messages that move persuadables into a supporter mindset. On the flip side, messages that appealed strongly to both opponents and persuadables were identified as harmful messages because they move the latter into an oppositional frame of mind.

Our survey found that supporters and opponents each represent roughly a quarter of the population, while just under half of Australians do not hold strong views on the topic either way and are persuadable. For many of these persuadable audiences, gender and masculinity are not topics they have ever thought much about and, as such, they are relatively easy to influence through persuasive messaging.

The way in which people who identified as women and men split out into attitudinal segments is stark⁴. As the table below shows, women are twice as likely as men to be supporters of the need for healthier masculinities, while men are twice as likely to be opponents. It is important to highlight, however, that roughly half of all men and women are persuadable. Indeed, it is this persuadable group of people that the recommendations in this guide are primarily aimed at influencing.

	Opponent	Persuadable	Supporter
Women	16.0%	51.3%	32.7%
Women < 18	16.9%	42.5%	40.6%
Men	35.6%	46.8%	17.6%
Men < 18	36.8%	43.2%	20.0%
Total survey	25.9%	48.9%	25.1%

In the area of supporting or opposing masculine stereotypes, our survey showed the following:



SUPPORTERS

25%

of the population believe there is a need to free men from masculine stereotypes



PERSUADABLES

49%

of the population hold weak or conflicting attitudes to the need to free men from masculine stereotypes



OPPONENTS

26%

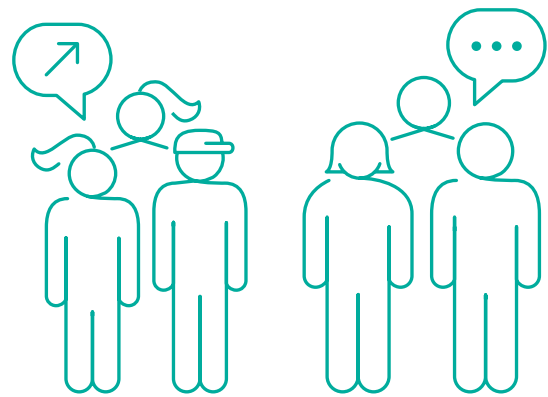
of the population do not believe there is a need to free men from masculine stereotypes

⁴ As people who identified as gender diverse represented only 0.2% of the overall sample, we were unable to derive any statistically significant results for this group.

Young men and women

Given that a number of advocates engage with young men and women in school settings, we also included an additional sample of 16 and 17 year-olds to explore how their responses to messaging might differ from the adult population. For simplicity, we'll refer to these 16 and 17 year-olds as young people throughout this guide.

In general, we found young people held more progressive attitudes towards gender and masculinity than the adult population. Young men held more progressive attitudes than adult men and young women were more progressive than adult women. That said, the gender people identified with was a more important differentiator of attitudes than age. Young women were significantly more progressive than young men and even adult women were slightly more progressive, on average, than young men. Despite these differences, our recommendations in this guide are the same for both men and women of any age group. This is because, with only a few minor exceptions⁵, attitudinal segments were a much more powerful determinant of people's responses to messaging than age or gender.



Young people held more progressive attitudes towards gender and masculinity than the adult population

How to use this guide

While this guide provides evidence-based insights into more effective ways of engaging Australians in the topic of masculinities, there is no silver bullet when it comes to messaging. Even our most successful messages, ones that tested well with the vast majority of persuadables, did not appeal to a small minority of people. Using the recommendations in this guide will, therefore, not guarantee you success in every conversation in every context, but it will improve your persuasiveness overall.

To that end, based on our research findings, this guide provides four top tips for persuasive public messaging on the topic of masculinities. This is followed by a suggested message structure that will help you tell a convincing story about the harms of traditional masculinity and the benefits of freeing men from restrictive gender stereotypes.

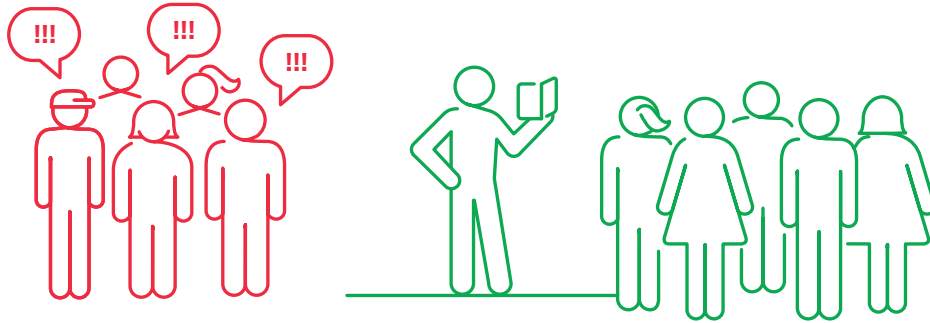
The guide concludes with some guidance on which common words and phrases we should avoid, because they fail to communicate our meaning effectively, and some alternatives our research showed will serve us better.

As you go about implementing this guide in practice, we encourage you to look out for differences in the way your audiences are responding to the messages. We also encourage you to share with us any new insights you gain in the process. While we see this guide as a useful step in the right direction, it will not be the final word on messaging for this rapidly evolving and important field of work.

⁵ Young men, for example, responded better when masculinity was referred to as 'outdated', whereas this shift in language had no significant impact on any other demographic group.

Tip #1

Don't pander to the vocal minority



While our research found around a quarter of the population was consistently attracted to regressive messages around masculinity, most of these people were also persuaded by the majority of our progressive messages on the same topic. In other words, *most of our opposition are actually persuadable* to some degree and, therefore, represent a soft opposition.

Digging deeper into the makeup of the opposition, we found among them a group representing just over 8% of the population (5% of women and 12% of men) that comprise a *hard opposition*. These are the people who often dominate in online discussions around masculinity and feminism. They reject the idea that traditional masculinity harms both men and women, and instead believe the focus these days on harmful masculinity is part of the 'feminist war on men'. They believe gender inequality is a myth and that efforts to improve women's rights will unfairly disadvantage men.

When confronted by these viewpoints, it can be tempting to wade into a debate and point to the evidence that shows these attitudes are not only wrong, but dangerous. In fact, in our public discourse analysis, we found many examples of advocates engaging in various forms of myth-busting along these lines. However, giving further airtime to these regressive

views, even to disprove them, only strengthens these frames in people's minds – weakening support from persuadable audiences and activating resistance from members of the weak opposition.

Similarly, many advocates attempt to co-opt the opposition's language in an effort to reframe their meaning. This includes using well-worn opposition terms such as 'real men' or pandering to traditionally masculine qualities such as 'strength' and 'stoicism' in an effort to reframe their meaning. In our discourse analysis, for example, we found advocates using statements such as 'real men don't hit women' and 'it takes strength to cry'. As with myth-busting, however, research shows using opposition language and concepts in an effort to reframe them, simply activates and strengthens the regressive narratives we are hoping to challenge.

Instead of pandering to the vocal minority it is better to use your airtime to tell *your story of masculinity*. In our research, when we put forward our progressive case for freeing men from unhealthy masculine stereotypes and expectations, not only did we win support from the majority of persuadable audiences, but we also swayed large sections of the weak opposition.

IN PRACTICE:

Resist the temptation to pander to traditionally masculine language or engage in myth-busting. Instead focus on telling your progressive story to the vast majority of people who are persuadable on the issue.

FROM

Men are not naturally violent. They have been taught to use violence.



TO

Men have been taught to use violence.

FROM

Real men show their emotions.

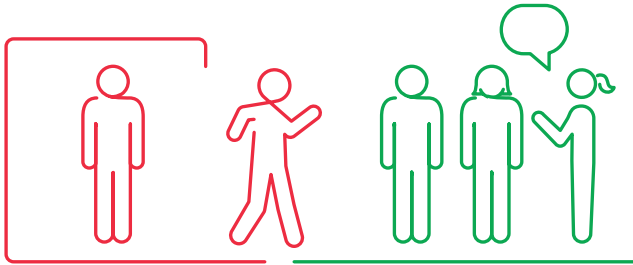


TO

It's healthy to show your emotions.

Tip #2

Don't box men in



When we interviewed advocates, most expressed the view that masculinity and femininity were limiting concepts that we should ideally move beyond, but also felt that most Australians were not ready for a conversation of that nature. As such, people working to challenge dominant forms of masculinity in Australia tend to talk about creating *healthier and more diverse forms* of masculinity – as opposed to abandoning masculinity altogether.

Our message testing, however, found high levels of support from persuadable audiences for the idea that traditional masculinity is problematic and that men should be supported to break free from it. We also found surprising levels of acceptance for messages explicitly referencing the need for men to move beyond gendered norms and expectations entirely. Not only did our existing supporters respond encouragingly to most of the positive messaging, but so did persuadable audiences and even some elements of the softer opposition.

Overall, a strong majority of Australians (78%) agree or strongly agree that being a good man is really just about being a good person, while 75% think what we value in a man is what we should value in all people – men and women alike. Most people (72%) also think people should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes.

In fact, opposition to these concepts is very small, with between 5% and 7% of Australians disagreeing with these statements to any degree – most of whom are members of our unpersuadable hard opposition segment.

Contrary to the assumptions made by many advocates, most Australians are ready for a conversation about masculinity, the harms it causes and the need to move beyond gender stereotypes.

One advocate frame that *did* resonate with the hard opposition was 'many ways to be a man'. Their support for this framing is a red flag in that it may mean different things to different people. For example, this frame may not be activating progressive ways of thinking about gender and gender equality in persuadable audiences in the same way that framing the solution as freedom from gender stereotypes does.

What's more, having well-framed conversations along these lines is highly persuasive. After hearing four progressive audio messages about masculinity and the need for change, followed by one oppositional message, the proportions of people agreeing that 'what we value in a man is what we should value in all people' and 'people should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes' both rose by over 10%. And, those agreeing that 'men will be better off if they break free from narrow gender stereotypes' rose by an impressive 24%. These are sizeable shifts in attitudes in the course of a short online survey and are promising signs for those who use these messages as part of deeper and ongoing engagement via programs and other initiatives.

IN PRACTICE:

When explaining why masculinity is a problem, frame it as gender stereotypes that constrain men. When talking about the solution, instead of framing this as seeking new or better forms of masculinity, frame it as freedom from gender stereotypes altogether.

FROM

It's time we redesigned masculinity for the 21st century.



TO

It's time we freed men from outdated masculine stereotypes.

FROM

There is more than one way to be a man.

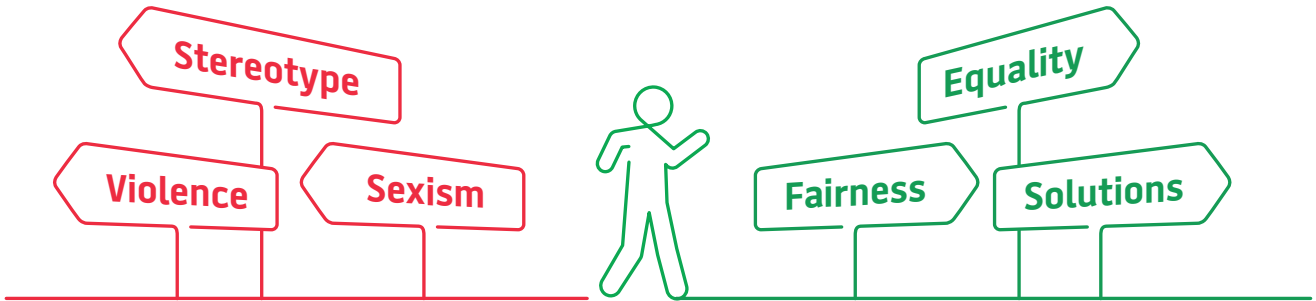


TO

Men shouldn't be shackled to any gender stereotype.

Tip #3

Be solutions focused



As a rule, people respond better to solution-focused framing than to problem-focused framing. This is particularly the case with persuadable audiences who, by definition, are not deeply engaged in the issue and have little interest in adding yet another problem to their daily list of concerns.

Our research confirmed that this rule also applies to engaging people in the topic of masculinities and is even more important in the context of engaging with men. Across our survey, we found men responded better to messages that focused on solutions and what they could do to help, rather than messages that highlighted the problems of traditional masculinity and the way in which men’s attitudes or behaviours contributed to these.

For example, while 54% of men agreed that traditional ideas about masculinity contributed to men’s high rates of suicide and depression (problem focus), 74% of men agreed it was important to teach our boys it is okay to cry (solution focus).

“It means framing those conversations in terms of the behaviours we want to see more of.”

Similarly, when asked whether ‘good men sometimes do or say things that make other men think sexist behaviour is acceptable’, 51% of men agreed. In contrast, when men were asked whether there were things ‘all men can do to help prevent violence against women’ the agreement rate among men rose to 76%. This pattern was consistent across our survey.

Importantly, this does not mean avoiding conversations with men about behaviour change. Instead, it means framing those conversations in terms of the behaviours we want to see more of, rather than focusing on the behaviours we want to see less of.

IN PRACTICE:

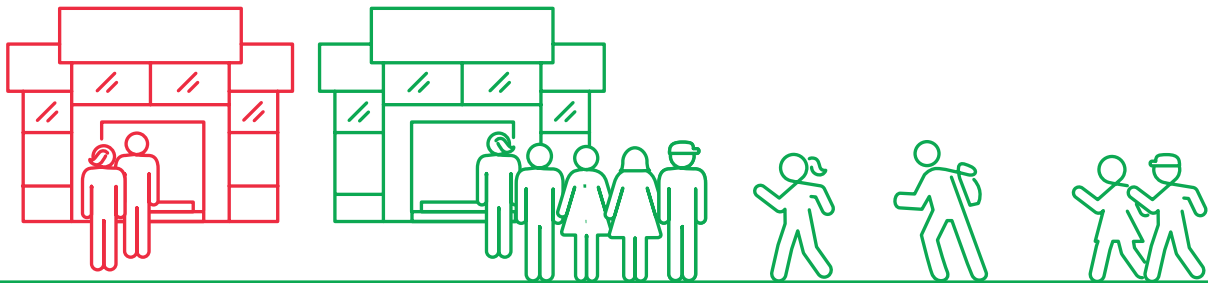
Spend more time talking about men’s role in the solution and less time talking about their role in the problem, in order to avoid activating shame and defensiveness.

FROM All men do things that contribute to a culture of violence against women. **→** **TO** There are things all men can do to end the culture of violence against women.

FROM Men trapped by traditional masculine stereotypes suffer worse physical and mental wellbeing. **→** **TO** Men freed from traditional masculine stereotypes enjoy better physical and mental wellbeing.

Tip #4

Use the power of social norming



People are more likely to accept an idea if they believe most other people accept it too. This tendency to follow the herd is particularly true among persuadable audiences who do not already hold strong opinions one way or another on an issue. One way to increase support for an idea, therefore, is to point out that other people already support it. This is often referred to as social norming.

When it comes to building support for men to break free from traditional masculinity, social norming is a powerful tool for change. In essence, this involves pointing out that most people already believe masculine stereotypes are problematic and would like men to be freed from them. Highlighting this reality will not only motivate existing supporters to speak more openly and honestly about their discomfort with traditional masculinity, but will also give persuadable audiences a nudge in the right direction.

Indeed, our research revealed strong levels of existing support for core statements in our progressive narrative. For example, close to three quarters of Australians believe people should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes. A similar portion think what we value in a man should be what we value in all people – men and women alike.

Meanwhile, when asked what were ‘the most important qualities in men’, the top three chosen by Australians were ‘respectful’, ‘caring’ and ‘loving’. In contrast, stereotypically masculine qualities such as ‘risk-taking’, ‘tough’ and ‘self-sufficient’ were among the least likely to be nominated. In other words, most Australians do not support the traditional masculine stereotype. Using social norming to our advantage simply means pointing this out.

“Most people already believe masculine stereotypes are problematic and would like men to be freed from them.”

IN PRACTICE:

Don’t imply traditional masculine norms are ‘dominant’ or widely accepted. Instead, point out that most people think traditional masculine stereotypes are harmful and believe men should be freed from them.

FROM

Challenging these outdated ideas of what it means to be a man is difficult because they are so deeply embedded in our culture.



TO

The vast majority of Australians do not agree with these outdated attitudes and are ready for change.

FROM

Most people expect men to be strong, independent and in control.

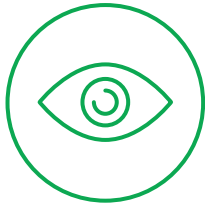


TO

Most people want men to be respectful, caring and loving above all else.

Suggested message structure

Our testing found the following narrative structure to be an effective way to engage with both men and women on the topic of masculinity.



1. Vision



2. Barrier



3. Action

1. Vision

To set a positive tone for our communications, it is helpful to start by articulating a values-based vision. It is important that the vision resonates with our audience and is a mixture of aspiration and common sense. The thinking we want to evoke in our audience is, “Well that’s obvious – why can’t we have that?”.

Examples of persuasive visions

- Being a good man is really just about being a good person.
- Everyone should be free to explore and develop who they are without the pressure of gender stereotypes.
- What we value in people should be the same whether they’re a man or a woman.
- Overwhelmingly, people want the men in our lives to be respectful, caring and loving.

2. Barrier

The barrier part of our narrative tells our audience what stands between us and the vision we seek. To avoid tapping into blame and defensiveness, particularly in men and boys, it is important to frame this barrier as external to men.

Examples of persuasive barriers:

- There's still a lot of pressure on men to live up to traditional masculine stereotypes.
- Expectations about masculinity force some people to suppress parts of themselves.
- It's unhealthy for anyone to live a lesser life because they have to hide their true selves.
- Masculine stereotypes trap men in boxes and stop them from living full and happy lives.
- Men worry about being judged for talking about their emotions, so they bottle them up.
- Traditional ideas about masculinity have contributed to men's high rates of suicide, depression and anxiety as well as violence against women.

3. Action

This explains what must be done to remove the barrier that stands in our way. This solution will vary depending on the situation but should always provide a clear role for your audience. Metaphors of 'breaking free' or 'letting go' of gender stereotypes work particularly well. In addition, when describing the outcome of the action, it is useful to describe the benefits to both men and women.

Examples of persuasive action statements:

- It's time for men to escape narrow gendered stereotypes the same way women have started to.
- It's time we allowed men to move on from gender clichés.
- If we want boys and young men to live happy and fulfilled lives and be caring and respectful in relationships with women, they need role models who show them that being a good man is really just about being a good person.
- Boys and men need healthier role models to break free from harmful masculine stereotypes.
- We'll all be better off if we let go of narrow gender stereotypes and let people be themselves.
- Breaking free of traditional masculine stereotypes will improve the health and wellbeing of both men and women.
- Everyone should feel comfortable being themselves and carve out their own unique path in life.
- Let's teach our boys to be good human beings, not just good men.

The following is an example of what a persuasive Vision-Barrier-Action message around masculinity might look like in practice:

What we value in people should be the same whether you're a man or a woman. Because, after all, being a 'good man' or a 'good woman' is really just about being a good person.

Unfortunately, there's still a lot of pressure on men to live up to traditional masculine stereotypes and to suppress parts of themselves that don't fit the cliché. It's unhealthy for anyone to live a lesser life because they have to hide their true selves. Not only do these outdated ideas of manhood lead to high rates of depression and suicide in men, they also contribute to violence against women.

If we want boys and young men to live happy and fulfilled lives, they need role models who show them that being a good man is really just about being a good person. It's time we freed everyone from the shackles of narrow stereotypes and allowed people to just be themselves.

Words to use and lose in public

When engaging with the public on a topic like masculinity, it is important to remember that the words we use as professionals on a daily basis may not mean the same thing to our audience as they do to us as subject matter experts. Thinking carefully about the language we use in public is therefore an important step to communicating clearly and persuasively.

Based on our testing, the following are suggestions for words and phrases that we should either use or lose when engaging with the public on the topic of masculinity.

LOSE	USE	WHY
Masculinity, Masculinities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masculine stereotypes • Gender stereotypes • Old ideas about masculinity 	Many people don't know what masculinity is and conflate it with men. Referring to masculinity instead as a stereotype or an outdated set of ideas implies that it is both something <i>undesirable</i> and <i>external</i> to men. Both versions tested well in our research.
Toxic / unhealthy masculinities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unhealthy/harmful masculine stereotypes 	As above.
Healthier masculinities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom from unhealthy masculine stereotypes 	As above.
Dominant masculinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional masculine stereotypes (or 'outdated' when engaging with young men) 	Referring to unhealthy masculinity as dominant implies it is accepted by the majority of people. We want to show that the opposite is true.
There are many ways to be a man	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Men should be free to be themselves, and not be judged by outdated ideas of masculinity 	Our testing suggests messaging that reaffirms the importance of being a man (of one kind or another) does not activate progressive attitudes.
Men and women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone • People 	Avoid unnecessarily reinforcing gender binaries when talking about things that apply equally to all genders. Exceptions to this would include situations in which it is important not to ignore the reality of inequalities between genders.
Manhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adulthood 	'Manhood' panders to the notion of gender binaries and implies the characteristics of men are naturally different to those of women.
Real men	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decent men • Good human beings 	'Real men' panders to oppositional frames that suggest there is one ultimate way of being for men – typically associated with traditional masculine stereotypes.



Victorian Health Promotion Foundation
PO Box 154 Carlton South
Victoria 3053 Australia
T +61 3 9667 1333 F +61 3 9667 1375

vichealth@vichealth.vic.gov.au
vichealth.vic.gov.au
twitter.com/vichealth
facebook.com/vichealth

VicHealth is committed to health equity, which means levelling the playing field between people who can easily access good health and people who face barriers, to achieve the highest level of health for *everyone*.



VicHealth acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.

© VicHealth
June 2020
<https://doi.org/10.37309/2020.MW895>



VicHealth acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land. We pay our respects to all Elders past, present and future.