

Practice perspectives ...

BIG RIG

(Boys in Gippsland Reference and Information Group)

Telling it like it is

Jenny O'Neill

In partial response to two fatal utility truck accidents involving local school students, the School Focused Youth Service Coordinator and the Student Welfare Coordinator decided to form a boys' reference group to find out if the school was meeting the boys' health and well-being information needs. This resulted in 20 young men discussing and deciding on how they would find out the information, then developing a survey and distributing it to 113 boys. A wealth of information was gained from the completed surveys from young men in Years 8, 9 and 10 on what their information priorities were and how they would like the information delivered.

In mid 2005, two boys from the same secondary college were killed in separate utility truck incidents just five weeks apart. Were they just tragic accidents, or was something else going on?

People had varying views but the question remained – could the boys have better looked after each other before or after? The school's Student Welfare Coordinator (SWC) and I, the School Focused Youth Service Co-ordinator (SFYSC), agreed to explore whether the health and well-being information boys were receiving at school was helpful to them.

THE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR HOME AREA

Perusing the document, *Communities that care* (Cahir et al. 2003), it is obvious that the town of Maffra in Victoria, with a population of 4,000, displays all the hallmarks of a healthy community, with few risk factors and many protective ones.

Maffra is the service town for the Macalister Irrigation District and features sound farming and service industry communities with strong neighbourhood and personal attachments. The town has extensive public facilities and many people move to Maffra because of its strong neighbourhood appeal. There are many opportunities in the town, especially in sporting activities, although this could be limiting for some. There is a local paper and local organisations which give recognition to local achievements.

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THE PLAN AND THE PROCESS

It was agreed to develop a reference group consisting of a cross-section of 20 selected students from Years 9 and 10, as well as male teachers and a local business owner (whom the boys generally respected). The female SWC and I acted as coordinators and scribes, with the School Focused Youth Service providing the agenda and funding for lunches and afternoon teas, which were held at a local café run by the George Grey Centre – a well-established local venue (a commercial disability support service) where the boys felt comfortable.

When the process began in mid-Term 1, it was planned to have the project finalised by early in Term 4, but due to multiple changes in staff, the survey was not finalised until nearing the end of Term 4, 2006.

We were clear with the students from the outset that this was not a short-term project and it would probably take up most of the year. We stated that although this process had arisen because of the 'ute' accidents, we weren't intending to discuss them, and the students expressed relief that this was the case. We also emphasised that we needed the students to be honest with us.

Most of the boys managed to attend the six sessions, where issues relating to becoming a 'healthy man' were discussed. At each meeting we would review the notes from the previous session to ensure that we had accurately heard and noted what they had said, and to make any corrections. We would then divide into two groups (or later in the process, as the group became smaller, remain as one) and discuss the topic for the session.

We deliberately spaced the sessions to give the boys time to think through what they had discussed, and to give them the

opportunity to seek information and input from their peers outside of the group.

The boys stated that they enjoyed the process – whilst not completely understanding it – and grew from it.

THE MEETING CONTENT

To get the boys thinking about health in relation to being a man, the first meeting involved discussion on what makes up a 'healthy man', and the following ideas were presented by the young men:

- Experiences were cited as important, as well as making and learning from mistakes (the only mention of the ute accidents);
- Hobbies, helping others, role models and success 'not necessarily in jobs but who people become' were important, as was a healthy attitude;
- The boys referred at length to girls and their bad habit of smoking, as well as their annoyance at girls crying at parties and boys having to comfort them, but not understanding how to, nor wanting to:

Boys fight and get over it, girls bitch and it can last longer

[The] difference between male and female friends. Generally, but not always, talk to girls about more serious stuff and boys for fun and laughter.
- Independence, growing older and being able to juggle lots of things. Some wanted more help around time management;
- They said alcohol is a big part of life and just because it's not allowed doesn't mean it's not used;
- Knowledge is important but how to put it into practice was the hard bit, e.g. drinking too much at parties;
- Living in the country means there's a lack of opportunity to meet a variety of people, yet more opportunity to learn practical stuff, e.g. camping;
- Work and sport don't mix:

Sometimes sport takes up a lot of time with training. But I do it because love it.

Would like to see some other sports like blokes' netball, softball, lacrosse, junior lawn bowls.
- And with work:

Don't feel at all confident about embracing the world when leave school.

Don't like aspects of school but don't want to go out into the world.
- With regard to relationships, they said they miss siblings when they leave home, and teachers who 'are themselves'

are the most approachable, although sometimes age has something to do with it;

- The subject of bullying was raised, and different opinions were expressed:

Other people say it was only mucking around.

Another participant pointed out:

If it had continued I would have gone crazy.

At the next meeting we discussed how information about what young men (the term chosen by the participants to describe themselves and their peers) needed to know could be gathered from others, e.g. from a sample or everyone, individually or in groups, face-to-face or survey/questionnaire. The initial response from the students was:

Surveys are crap. People take them as a joke.

There was a lot of discussion around previous questionnaires and their worth (or lack of) and what might be possible with other questionnaires.

If created by us [the survey] – people might be willing to do it.

My level wouldn't.

And finally these points were agreed upon:

- it needs to be quick, easy, simple;
- something free to be given with it;
- make it anonymous;
- make it professional, well-done;
- serious – whole class;
- don't have a light question in it [as school surveys have] – it wouldn't be taken seriously;
- [have it] the way tests are formatted;
- 'strongly agree' and 'disagree' doesn't work.

At the third meeting, the conversation turned to discussion on actual classes:

Sometimes feel better if not all girls/boys.

Why don't we have Girls Talk like a double period in Year 10? [because not much health done since Year 9]

Information from this discussion was also incorporated into the surveys.

Possible survey content was raised with the young men and discussed, with issues being raised such as:

When PE classes were two [separated] sexes worked best;

What to do when bullied or hit;

Alcohol and fighting – strategies to avoid;

Learning about sex, when more likely to do it, e.g Year 10, not 8; and

Not a whole semester of alcohol.

At the fourth meeting more discussion occurred around the above issues and, at the fifth meeting, agreement was reached to develop a survey which incorporated what had been discussed. The survey content was reviewed twice. The boys discussed the meaning of some questions and revised the wording on some of them. The young men stated that the greatest need was for students in Years 9 and 10, and the survey was probably most relevant to them. However, at the request of school staff, they agreed that the survey could be conducted with a sample of boys in the other years.

The young men determined the survey style:

- look professional (it was printed in colour)
- the term ‘boys’ changed to ‘young men’
- short and simple
- tick boxes not to be down one side to stop patterns being made of them
- strong-looking font
- *All surveys will be shredded after they have been completed* was deleted as the young men decided this statement suggested that the survey wasn’t important
- use of positive sentences, e.g. *how to eat healthily*.

The only point that the adults insisted upon was to include *person* in the statement *how to act in front of a girl/person you feel attracted to*.

The questionnaire set out twenty-five topics and asked respondents to number from 1 to 10 the topics about which they would like more discussion or information, with 1 being the most important item. The results were compiled using frequency of selection for inclusion in the top ten and the average rating for each item in terms of its position on that list.

Members of BIG RIG (Boys in Gippsland Reference Information Group – the name suggested by a teacher and adopted by the boys) and a male teacher organised the distribution and supervision of the surveys which occurred in the Year 12 VCE examination hall. There were 113 completed: 3 from Year 11, 39 from Year 10, 31 from Year 9, 20 from Year 8, 10 from Year 7, and 10 unknowns.

In collating the results, the top ten by frequency of selection were identified and listed with their mean ranking in brackets. The aim was to keep it to a ‘top 10’ results, but where there were tied scores, at times it extended to a ‘top 11’ or ‘top 12’.

Once the report was written up, feedback on the findings was to be given to the boys’ reference group, and a copy of

the report presented to them to go into the school library as a resource.

FINDINGS

Year 8 – 20 respondents (see Table 1)

‘How to gain muscle’ and ‘resisting peer pressure’ were the two items most frequently included in respondents’ top ten, but the mean ranking for ‘how to gain muscle’ indicates that overall it was of greater interest to the group. The mean ranking for ‘illegal drug effects’, which was selected by 60% of respondents, reflects the importance of this topic for respondents, with 7 young men ranking it as number one on their list.

Topics which had the least overall interest for boys in Grade 8 were ‘how to get help if someone needs it’ (6), ‘different forms of contraception’ (6), ‘common sexually transmitted diseases’ (7) and ‘getting over grief’ (7).

Half of the respondents (10) wanted information via a discussion group and almost a third (6) wanted more information via websites. Overwhelmingly (17) the respondents did not want single gender classes. And although they didn’t want time with a teacher to discuss issues about being a boy and growing up to be a man (14), over half (11) would prefer time with an expert to discuss the same issue. However it’s unclear whether they would prefer a male or female expert.

Year 9 – 31 respondents (see Table 2)

Year 9 responses reflect a broadening of interest and/or varying developmental stages and social and educational levels. Topics related to sexual development, for example, make their first appearance in the Year 9 top ten.

Once again, ‘how to gain muscle’ was the topic most likely

Table 1: Year 8 responses

Year 8	Top 11 areas by frequency of response Number followed by mean ranking (N=20)
1	How to gain muscle 15 (3.0)
2	Resisting peer pressure 15 (5.1)
3	How to act in front of a girl/person you feel attracted to 14 (3.9)
4	Physical stuff – skin, eyesight, genital cleaning 14 (5.4)
5	Developing strength of character 13 (3.9)
6	What’s a practical diet 13 (5.3)
7	How to eat healthily 13 (3.3)
8	Dealing with girls 13 (4.2)
9	Illegal drug effects 12 (2.4)
10	Becoming independent 12 (4.5)
11	Self confidence 12 (4.9)

Table 2: Year 9 responses

Year 9	Top 11 areas by frequency of response Number followed by mean ranking (N=31)
1	How to gain muscle 23 (4.8)
2	Illegal drug effects 22 (4.4)
3	How to eat healthily 21 (5.9)
4	How to use a condom 19 (5.1)
5	How to act in front of a girl/person you feel attracted to 17 (5.7)
6	Self confidence 13 (7.3)
7	Common sexually transmitted diseases 13 (5.2)
8	Bullying 13 (5.7)
9	How to lose fat 13 (5.7)
10	What's a standard drink? 12 (4.7)
11	Developing strength of character 12 (5.6)

to be selected for inclusion in the top ten, closely followed by 'illegal drugs effects', with the latter being most likely to be ranked number one. Topics of least interest were 'isolation' (1), 'getting over grief' (4), 'different forms of contraception' (6) and 'legal drugs' (6). It is strongly recommended that all the topic areas listed in the table are included in personal development programs to ensure they cater for the variety of interest whilst not 'boring' some of the boys.

Similar numbers of Year 9 respondents said they would like to receive more information by discussion (13) and websites (11). Thirty-six per cent (11) of the respondents said they would like classes/groups with just boys in them. Some single gender classes preferred were health, physical education, maths and English.

Of the 27 who answered whether they would like time with a teacher or expert about growing up to be a man, about 40% said they would. The answers as to preference for male or female were inconclusive.

Year 10 – 39 respondents (see Table 3)

Whilst 'how to gain muscle' continues to be the most frequently selected item for inclusion in respondents' top ten list, the remaining items reflect a growing interest in aspects of personal development and relationships. The spread of interest in the topics was wide with only one topic, 'how to kick bad eating habits', being included by less than a third of the respondents (13).

Twenty-two students out of 38 (58%) said they would like a discussion group, with the next highest being 7 for websites.

Thirty-seven per cent (14) said they would like classes with just boys in them, e.g. PE, any, groups, blokes chat.

Table 3: Year 10 responses

Year 10	Top 12 areas by frequency of response Number followed by mean ranking (N=31)
1	How to gain muscle 29 (3.3)
2	Developing strength of character 29 (4.7)
3	Becoming independent 26 (4.7)
4	Self confidence 26 (5.4)
5	Depression 25 (3.6)
6	How to act in front of girl/person you feel attracted to 25 (5.1)
7	Illegal drug effects 23 (3.7)
8	Resisting peer pressure 23 (4.2)
9	How to find help if someone needs it 23 (4.7)
10	Common sexually transmitted diseases 22 (4.8)
11	Dealing with girls 22 (5.1)
12	Dealing with authority 22 (5.4)

Thirty-one per cent (12) said they would like time to discuss with a teacher about being a boy and growing up to be a man, and slightly more (37%) said they would like to discuss it with an expert.

Table 4 identifies preferred methods for receiving information about growing up to be a healthy man. Boys in Year 8 are more likely to prefer discussion time with an expert. Boys in Year 9 are more receptive to the idea of information via a website, while young men in Year 10 favour participation in a discussion group.

When asked whether they would prefer a male or female expert, the majority in each year level indicated that either gender would be acceptable.

A FINAL COMPARISON AND SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Table 5 shows the comparison of differences between the year levels. It is clear that gaining muscle is an important topic in all years, but the topics differ significantly after that.

The results from this survey provide information that can be

Table 4: Preferred methods for receiving information

	Year 8 N=20	Year 9 N=31	Year 10 N=39
Wanted discussion group	50%	42%	58%
Wanted website information	30%	35%	18%
Discussion time with teacher	30%		31%
Classes with one gender		36%	37%
Discussion time with expert	55%	40%	37%

Table 5: Top health and well being topics by year level

Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
How to gain muscle	How to gain muscle	How to gain muscle
Resisting peer pressure	Illegal drug effects	Developing strength of character
How to act in front of a girl/person you feel attracted to	How to eat healthily	Becoming independent
Physical stuff – skin, eyesight, genital cleaning	How to use a condom	Self confidence
Developing strength of character	How to act in front of a girl/person you feel attracted to)	Depression
What's a practical diet	Self confidence	How to act in front of girl/person you feel attracted to
How to eat healthily	Common sexually transmitted diseases	Illegal drug effects
Dealing with girls	Bullying	Resisting peer pressure
Illegal drug effects	How to lose fat	How to find help if someone needs it
Becoming independent	What's a standard drink?	Common STDs
Self confidence	Developing strength of character	Dealing with girls
		Dealing with authority

used by the school for comparison with its current practices.

Young men want information on a variety of topics at different times in their lives. The information required on any given topic may vary according to year level. For example, the topic *Resisting peer pressure* may focus on 'who you are' and 'what you do' in Year 8, using examples from outside the school such as the annual Australia Bravery Awards which can then be linked to Values Education and discussion on identifying people's internal characteristics. The same topic in Year 9 may focus on types of bullying both within and outside school, and might involve discussion and analysis of allegations and court cases around harassment and assault, and the identification of the character/value traits which appear to be missing in the perpetrators.

The topic *How to gain muscle*, which is highly rated across year levels 8, 9 and 10, can also be presented with different emphasis depending on year level. For example, in Year 8, the topic could be tied in with *How to find help if you need it*, using the internet and resource guides to find recipes and good health links, and inviting local speakers. The topic could be developed further by linking the topics of *How to find help if you need it* and *Bullying*.

In Year 9, the *How to gain muscle* and *How to eat healthily* theme could be developed with links to *Legal drugs* and *Illegal drug effects*, with discussion on the content and effects of alcohol on body fat and metabolism.

In Year 10, *How to gain muscle* could be linked with *Becoming independent*, and *How to eat healthily* and *How to lose fat* with identifying and *Kicking bad eating habits*.

Participation in discussion groups was a popular choice across the three year levels but they may vary in structure and level of information exchange. For example, discussion groups might be introduced late in the school year for Year 8 around a few chosen, non-threatening topics. In Year 9, it could take the form of member-rotating, small group projects rather than discussion (because character strengthening and bullying are still significant topic areas).

Some young men want single gender groups, especially in sport, and that possibility could be investigated further by the school. The school, in conjunction with the Department of Human Services which employs school nurses, could also investigate the possibility of involving a male nurse in visiting occasionally. However, as the gender of the 'expert' is not an issue for the majority of young men, this should not prevent the use of female school nurses. A service such as the Central Gippsland Health Service could be another resource.

It is hoped that the description of the process undertaken to empower the young men to develop the BIG RIG questionnaire, along with the findings of this report, will provide a useful starting point for other schools to compare with what they are currently delivering in their curriculum.



REFERENCE

Cahir, S., Davies, L., Deany, P., Tange, C., Toumbourou, J., Williams, J. & Rosicka, R. (2003) *Communities that care*. Centre for Adolescent Health, Parkville, Victoria.

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