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Good Weekend

'What's bubbling underneath': Showing teen boys how to master emotion and empathy

Armed with A-grade BS detectors, adolescent boys are quick to judge and faster to shut down. Hunter Johnson's quest: to help them channel all those tricky feelings and become good men.

By Melissa Fyfe

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Hunter Johnson regretted his behaviour at school so much that he contacted teachers and students in his 20s to apologise. "I was really just a dick," he says. JOSH ROBENSTONE

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Hunter Johnson is nervous. This is unusual. The entrepreneur normally wears a cloak of Zen-like calm. But today, at a Catholic high school in Melbourne, he's on edge. Dozens of year 9 boys, all fledgling moustaches and restless energy, will soon file into this classroom for a day-long workshop of The Man Cave, which Johnson, 32, co-founded. The healthy masculinity and emotional intelligence program has big ambitions: to create a generation of men who can remove the masks hiding their true selves and deal constructively with their feelings – for their own sake, as suicide prevention and for future partners, as an antidote to family violence. Yet it also has the toughest of audiences. "Teenage boys are notoriously one of the hardest groups to work with," Johnson says. "They have amazing bullshit detectors, they sniff you out a mile away."

But Johnson, who received a young leader's award from Queen Elizabeth II in 2018, isn't nervous about being sniffed out. He's an old hand at this. If there's a magic code to the black box of teenage boys, a puzzle pondered by parents across the ages, Johnson has it. (Actually, he's relatable in front of any audience: "I have never seen someone be so effective in front of a boardroom and also a bunch of 14-year-old boys," says his mentor and Man Cave chairman Ian Ward-Ambler, a former Goldman Sachs executive.) Johnson's been honing his teen-speak since 2014, when he and mate Jamin Heppell began visiting schools in Melbourne, often in their spare time. Now The Man Cave employs 28 facilitators and last year touched the lives of 20,605 boys across 163 schools in Victoria and 34 in NSW.

Not only that: three years ago, knowing absolutely nothing about fast-moving consumer goods, Johnson took on global giants like Unilever and L'Oreal in the aisles of Woolworths and Sephora when he launched Stuff, a "social impact" men's personal care brand. It donates five per cent of sales to The Man Cave, its part owner (Johnson specifically wants to knock off the popular Lynx Africa deodorant, after its years of marketing campaigns that objectified women). Until recently he's been the CEO of The Man Cave and Stuff – he's now the brand's chief impact officer – so there's been no time to return to the classroom coalface and check how his "baby" is going. So this makes him nervous. Plus, a journalist is watching the possible emotional unravelling of 45 teenagers. What could possibly go wrong?

Johnson received a young leader's award from Queen Elizabeth II in 2018. COURTESY OF HUNTER JOHNSON

The Man Cave headquarters in Brunswick, in Melbourne's inner north, is a drab, two-storey, brown warehouse with a small concrete car park out front. This is where Johnson parks his bulky Toyota FJ Cruiser. With few other assets to his name – he rents nearby with partner Laura Peasley, a yoga instructor – the car is his one concession to materialism as a charity CEO. In the downstairs studio, the team is busy making a panel show for Twitch, the gaming platform popular with teenage boys. Part-funded by the Victorian government, the program traverses issues of mental health, sex, body image and consent.

I sit down with Johnson at a cafe next door. He wears a black T-shirt, white linen pants and Birkenstocks. He's got the strong neck and shoulders of the rugby player he once was and is classically good-looking (his mate Zac Seidler, a fellow men's health campaigner, says he calls him Hottie Hunter, but not to his face).

Johnson grew up on Sydney's north shore. His mother Catriona Wallace – a former police officer turned entrepreneur and AI expert who appeared last year as one of the "sharks" on Channel Ten's reality show *Shark Tank* – had Johnson at 26, which she describes as a "great but unplanned surprise".

Johnson was 18 months old when Wallace went through a fraught separation with his father Steve Johnson, a now London-based psychologist who works with professional athletes. "Hunter was well-loved by family and friends, but it wasn't an easy childhood," says Wallace. "He had to navigate quite a lot from a very early age around relationships."

Johnson with grandfather Harry Wallace, whose philanthropy influenced him. COURTESY OF HUNTER JOHNSON

While Johnson picked up psychology and entrepreneurship from his parents – both handy in creating The Man Cave – he was also influenced by the philanthropy of his grandfather, Harry Wallace, whom Johnson describes as an "old-school man of the church". Wallace, who owned trading companies in the South Pacific, paid for Johnson's fees at Knox Grammar School, one of Sydney's most elite private schools for boys.

And yes, I know what you may be thinking: here's a white, good-looking guy, gifted at sport, rich grandfather, exclusive private school. This guy is up to his eyeballs in privilege! What does he know about being a man outside the north shore bubble? I wondered this, too. But I've never met someone so self-flagellating about the person they were in high school.

His mother recalls that, in year 9, Johnson got an extra detention while on his 26th detention because he and a friend filled a hallway with fire extinguisher foam and slid down it. Johnson admits that, in this dominate-or-be- dominated environment, he bullied some people by putting them down with banter. In his 20s, he set about "cleaning that up", emailing teachers to apologise, reaching out to kids he'd picked on. But after our first interview, he tells me, he went home and cried with Peasley about his behaviour at school. He's so tortured that I start to wonder if he's carrying some darker secret.

Eventually, after I ask several times, he says: "I was really just a dick. I thought I was better than other people, and I was wrong." He felt trapped as a teenager, wanting not to be this person. Then, in year 10, life-threatening complications from a severe broken leg on the rugby field destroyed his dreams of playing the sport for Australia. His grandfather advised putting his energy into something "more meaningful". It was the nudge he needed.

Johnson's mum Catriona Wallace helped steer Johnson into a life of service to others. EDWINA PICKLES

After high school, Johnson started a business and psychology degree at Macquarie University, but he found it so uninspiring he never finished it. Detecting his ennui, Wallace sent him to Melbourne in 2013 for an internship with her friend, social entrepreneur Jan Owen at the Foundation for Young Australians. He was a lonely, rugby-playing fish out of water, but his first trip with the foundation, to help run a leadership program for Indigenous youth in the Northern Territory, inspired him to devote himself to young people.

"He understood his privileged background and that he had an obligation to be of service," remembers Wallace. "That was my 'Thank goodness' moment. 'Here's this kid I always knew was in there.' He'd found himself."

In the same year, Johnson met former GP Arne Rubinstein, author of *The Making of Men*, who was running Rites of Passage camps for boys in the Byron Bay hinterland. In these gatherings, boys listen to older men tell life stories about intimacy, heartbreak and death. Rubinstein, whose ideas underpin The Man Cave's work, believes men are acting like boys because they lack good mentors and little in our culture honours the shift from teenager to man; instead, there are only risk-filled episodes such as Schoolies. Rubinstein became a key mentor to Johnson. (And, in an extra twist, Rubinstein's been in a relationship with Johnson's mother for about eight years. "That's been quite an adjustment," Johnson admits.)

"I was really just a dick. I thought I was better than other people, and I was wrong."

Hunter Johnson on his behaviour at school

When Johnson went through the Rites of Passage leadership training in 2014, the experience cracked him open. "At the end of it, I was like, 'What the f--- was that?' It was unbelievable. I hit an edge of my own being that I didn't know existed." Afterwards, he concluded he was emotionally stunted and lacking the literacy to communicate his inner world. "That awoke something in me, and The Man Cave journey kicked off through that."

Meanwhile, Johnson knew male friends and family members who were struggling with their mental health. He knew women who'd suffered at the hands of men: Wallace had openly talked about her teenage sexual assault. It dawned on him that family violence was only being addressed after the fact – few were looking at preventing the violence. "I realised we couldn't keep preaching [gender equality] to the converted, we needed to go to those who weren't listening."

Johnson landed a full-time job at the foundation, where one of his roles was matching young philanthropists – the children of the extremely wealthy – with young social entrepreneurs (a gifted networker, Johnson would later call on these people to support The Man Cave and invest in Stuff). He also came across Jamin Heppell, who was interested in youth leadership programs. Some young women they knew asked the pair to give a leadership talk to boys at Frankston High School on the Mornington Peninsula.

At the end of a two-day workshop, they read a Post-it note left by one boy: "Thanks for the lesson, man, it really shows me what it looks like to be a good man." The teachers were astonished: this boy had just been voted the biggest school bully in an anonymous survey. Heppell and Johnson – both 23 – got in a car with a jammed stereo that only played Bon Jovi's *Livin' on a Prayer* and banged it out, windows down, all the way back to Melbourne. They were onto something.

From left, The Man Cave's Al Green and Johnson with co-founder Jamin Heppell and Johnson's mentor Arne Rubinstein. COURTESY OF HUNTER JOHNSON

Before the boys come in, Johnson and the three facilitators sit in a small circle for a "check-in", a grounding mental health tool they will teach the boys. Each person provides a snapshot of their emotional state, flags anything they wish the others to know and any specific needs. The make-up of a facilitation team is designed to cover a cross-section of personality archetypes and backgrounds. Lead facilitator Tal Kedar, 28, a counsellor, has alpha energy, a backwards baseball cap and the bulked torso of a gym-honed guy. Ziah Cooper, 26, who has just finished his teaching degree, has a magnetic but gentle presence and earrings in both ears, and loves bushwalking. The youngest is Leeson Timms, 20, a basketball coach. "If they feel connected to us," says Timms in his check-in, "that's our biggest goal."

Afterwards, Johnson takes a teacher aside. He wants her to identify the alphas because there's a strategy for them (and for the introverts). The teacher names a boy called Lucas*, who will make his presence felt almost immediately.

Johnson and I then watch Kedar, Cooper and Timms approach the boys mingling under a nearby basketball ring. A high-energy pop song booms from a speaker that Kedar has placed on the court. Curious, the boys gather around. They're organised into pairs for a knee-tapping competition where they face each other off and try to tap the other's knee while avoiding being tapped. Lucas, the alpha, is good at this and makes it to the final. Kedar plays Survivor's *Eye of the Tiger* and Lucas triumphs. A mate mounts his back and ruffles his hair. As they lumber into the classroom, it becomes apparent that Lucas doesn't walk anywhere: he bounces. His vibe is court jester, always hunting a laugh, but capable of both love and cruelty. Some kids he's likely bullied will come into the Cave with him. And there will be a reckoning.

It's an odd time to be a teenage boy. Masculinity is being redefined. Toxic masculinity is in the headlines. Take a wrong step when talking about gender and you risk a social media pile-on. And just a click away, lurking on sites like Reddit, 4Chan and TikTok, is the "manosphere", an endless source of misogynistic content, with one of its most popular figures, the self-styled male self-help guru Andrew Tate, hugely popular among teenage boys. (Tate faces human trafficking and rape charges in Romania. He denies the charges.)

Tal Kedar, a lead facilitator for The Man Cave. "Men don't know how to show each other love," he says. COURTESY OF HUNTER JOHNSON

In 2022, after noticing Tate's growing influence in their workshops, The Man Cave surveyed 1300 teenage boys and found nine out of 10 knew of him, and a quarter considered him a role model. Meanwhile a Monash University report, based on interviews with 30 Australian female teachers and released in late 2023, suggested Tate's influence had led to an increase of sexual harassment and misogyny.

The Man Cave's approach in this environment is to ride in on what Johnson describes as the "conscious Trojan horse". Johnson's skill is to distil the complexity of the gender landscape into a non-jargony, teenage-boy-friendly message delivered by relatable facilitators in a space where there's no shame or cancelling. But it's not easy. "How do you educate a generation that they're part of a system called the patriarchy that they didn't choose?" asks Johnson. "They didn't create it and it's not their fault. But it is their responsibility."

Johnson doesn't often talk about toxic masculinity, instead he says boys are products of intergenerational trauma passed on from the generations of stoic, emotionally stunted, patriarchal fathers affected by world wars. Healthy masculinity, he says, is about helping boys access "a range in their identity", to express traditionally feminine traits – such as empathy and vulnerability – as well as traditionally male ones like strength. And it's about helping them see they're not the centre of the universe. "We often see male leaders who are stuck in a conquest mindset, opposed to a custodianship mindset," he says.

> ***"How do you educate a generation that they're part of a system called the patriarchy that they didn't choose?"***
>
> Hunter Johnson

It's now mid-morning and Kedar, Cooper and Timms are weaving their magic. They've each shared a personal story. Kedar had anxiety and panic attacks in school. Cooper felt like an outsider. Timms had a mate who took his own life. The energy in the room shifts. A boy with curly brown hair called Cam* says he's going through stuff at home. He starts crying and

the energy shifts again. Lucas, the alpha jester, puts an arm around Cam. "It's OK for there to be emotion in the room," says Kedar. "Who has more respect for Cam?" All hands shoot up. Lucas offers that a mate was shot and killed in a gang incident recently. Johnson turns to me and whispers: "This shows you what is bubbling underneath, all the time." Later, employing the strategy for alphas, he takes Lucas aside and invites him to harness his energy for leadership. "It's your superpower, man. Use it today."

Sweat drips onto my notepad as I try to scribble down what Johnson is saying. We are in a sauna at Inner Studio, a breathwork and hot-plunge/cold-plunge facility in Melbourne. This is one of the many things Johnson does for his mental health. After the sauna we'll take a cold plunge, which I've never done before.

Johnson is a deeply spiritual person, at home in an ashram as well as a boardroom. He's a big journaller. He uses a "hedonic calendar" to schedule time for healing, peak experiences and community. He's been on a 10-year extreme self-improvement kick, trying to achieve "total human optimisation". At 22, he watched a different TED Talk daily for three months. Then he realised the high-performance gurus he followed studied the same texts: the *I Ching*, *Tao Te Ching*, *The Kybalion*. So he read those. (He sounds like a self-development bore here, but he's actually not: he's funny and still loves blokey things. "I still drink beer, eat steak and love all sport, especially football and mixed martial arts.")

In the sauna, I notice a dragonfly tattoo spanning Johnson's chest. I'm slightly loath to ask about it, as I sense the answer will be long and my ability to withstand the heat short. I ask anyway and sure enough, it's quite a story. Last February, Johnson says, he was "moving through" a lot of sadness from exhaustion and stress. "It felt like I was at rock bottom." This coincided with cash-flow problems at his men's personal care brand Stuff, when production increased but the "pockets of investors got deeper and their arms shorter". He was swimming in a river in northern NSW when a dragonfly landed on his arm and instantly died. "It was, like, super crisp," he says as sweat rivulets run down his calves.

In that moment – "a place of synchronicity with the dragonfly" – he knew everything was going to be OK. To mark this, he decided to get a tattoo. He went full nerd on dragonflies: did you know they're a symbol of transformation and one of the planet's most successful predators? He starts telling me a lot more about dragonfly nymphs but my brain is starting to melt.

Even the story of his relationship with Peasley is marinated in meaning. They met when they were 18 and dated for several years before amicably splitting up. But Johnson says he always had a "knowing" they would reunite and, for years, intermittently tried to woo her back. Peasley, meanwhile, was having none of this. Eventually, she said: "You deserve someone who is choosing you. It's not me. I am not choosing you." Johnson, gutted, let go: "Ultimately I realised that I was seeking some love from her that I wasn't giving myself." But as soon as he did, Peasley had what she describes as "an unlocking". Now it's Johnson and Peasley 2.0. "I'm just mesmerised by her and I feel like I've known her for a lifetime."

Johnson with partner Laura Peasley – their relationship clicked when he "let go" of expectations. COURTESY OF HUNTER JOHNSON

After about 25 minutes, we exit the sauna for the cold plunge. We stand up to our necks in water so cold it stings. He pushes me to stay extra time. I watch the excruciating seconds tick by on the digital clock.

Over lunch afterwards, I ask Johnson about his future. "I've been lucky to be in rooms with billionaires, prime ministers and presidents and I'm literate in [that scene]. But just because I can do it, do I want to?" He's more interested in making Stuff a global brand and using his business skills to solve social problems. When he and Peasley have children, he wants a stint as a stay-at-home dad. "I think that would be amazing," he says, tearing up.

After recess, the facilitators talk about dealing with life's worries and stresses. They ask nine boys to stand. That's how many people kill themselves daily in Australia, they say. They ask two to sit down. The ones still standing represent how many men kill themselves. Why do they think male suicide is high? "Because of the social norms," one boy volunteers. "They don't want to talk about pressure, because they feel weak." Then Lucas opens up a bit more. He's had family issues, made an attempt on his life. He's three months drug-free. "I want to be more than a gang [member] and drug addict. I'm trying to turn my life around."

A teacher watching on looks stricken (the facilitators, who are specially trained for disclosures of suicidal attempts or ideation, will spend one-on-one time during lunch with the boy and document and report these matters to the school for follow-up. Today, sadly, brings several such disclosures.)

Kedar, Cooper and Timms ask the boys to sit along an imaginary line. One end, near the wall, represents feeling very judged at school; the opposite end, no judgment. A rump of boys sit down the judgy end. Here, one boy called Ollie* sits with his back against the wall, a long curtain of fringe hiding his face. He's called on gently by Kedar. "Why are you sitting there, brother?"

Staring at the floor, he answers quietly. "I have severe social anxiety. And because of that, I believe everyone here wants to kill me or they hate me. Because of how I look or how I am." Every now and then, with small flicks of his head, his beautiful, high-cheekboned face emerges: he could be a Bowie-style lead singer in a 1980s band. "Is there anything that anyone could do to make you feel more comfortable at school?" Kedar asks. "No," Ollie says. All the teenage fidgeting, the tapping of feet, quietens. It's like the world has briefly stopped.

Hunter Johnson with year 8 students at a Man Cave workshop in 2019. COURTESY OF HUNTER JOHNSON

On a muggy Thursday morning, I arrive outside The Man Cave warehouse and am greeted by Joshua Payne, a facilitation team leader. He has blond-tipped long hair, feathered earrings and a rose-embroidered leather vest over a half-unbuttoned shirt. "I'm your welcoming party!" he says, arms wide. I shake his hand and sense this has fallen short. "Do you take hugs?" he asks. The Man Cave is a huggy place. Best to give in.

Today is the end-of-year debriefing. There's a lot of hair: dyed locks, ponytails, man buns. Also an ethnic mix with Polynesian, Vietnamese and Indian backgrounds, among others. Six women work for the Cave and several are here, but Johnson admits they've not always got integrating women right. "We've had to grow up a lot as an organisation." The facilitators form a circle and play warm-up games. Johnson then leads a meditation. Two men hold hands. Another sits with his arm around his mate. "Deep down, you know your superpower is your open heart," Johnson

says. They break into small groups for the "check-in". They are great listeners: leaning forward, nodding, not interrupting.

Johnson is out front with Al Green, who became Johnson's right-hand man after co-founder Jamin Heppell amicably left in 2017 to set up a leadership coaching business. Johnson tells the group that last year was The Man Cave's biggest yet, with a record number of boys reached. But funding is still tricky. The Cave subsidises poorer schools by charging full fees to private schools, underpinned by some philanthropic and government money. Many schools, though, can't afford all three workshops (the first one is about dealing with your emotions, the second one respectful relationships and third community leadership). The Victorian government has wound up a healthy masculinity pilot, which paid The Man Cave $150,000 to deliver the first workshop to 100 schools. But Johnson is hopeful of securing some of the federal government's recently announced $3.5 million healthy masculinities funding.

And then there is Stuff. The Man Cave is the major Stuff shareholder, with 18 per cent, followed by Johnson (he won't divulge the number of boys funded through the $2 million-plus sales so far). There's a roll-call of other, high-profile investors too, such as Olympian Ian Thorpe and venture capitalist Paul Bassat. In response to the company's credit crunch last year – which sent him "crying in the back alleyways of Melbourne" – Johnson crowdfunded $1 million and tapped more investors, but is still looking for someone to pitch in another $1.5 million. "We have enough cash for another nine months," he says.

As the facilitators take turns telling beautiful stories of teen transformation from their year's work, it's easy to forget there is some scepticism about the long-term impact of healthy masculinity programs. A Monash University evaluation (limited by COVID-era restrictions, including smaller-than-expected focus groups) found that while The Man Cave skilfully promoted empathy and a positive culture, it didn't necessarily translate to better interpersonal skills and participants conveyed limited understandings of gender and feminism.

Steven Roberts, a co-lead researcher in the evaluation and professor at Monash's School of Education, Culture and Society, told *Good Weekend* that he recognised the value of The Man Cave but felt that the content evaluated in 2021 was more about mental health – "a hugely valuable operation" – and less about preventing family violence. "The idea that men's social and emotional wellbeing is a silver bullet, or even a contributor to the prevention of violence against women is hugely contested and not very evidence-based," Roberts says. "It leans into this idea that anger, emotional deficit and powerlessness are drivers of sexual assault and gender discrimination. My own view is that they're expressions of power rather than powerlessness."

"The problem is much bigger. It's the male role models in the boys' lives, it's the behaviours on TV, on the internet, it's in the news, on the streets, at the supermarket, in our families."

Steven Roberts, professor at Monash's School of Education, Culture and Society

To me, this seems somewhat binary, surely we should do both: help men regulate their emotions, particularly by putting rejection and failure into perspective, and address the broader

societal power issues. Roberts agrees, but thinks organisations wanting to achieve more permanent change need much more funding to be effective. "A one-off intervention doesn't work to shift attitudes to women. The problem is much bigger. It's the male role models in the boys' lives, it's the behaviours on TV, on the internet, it's in the news, on the streets, at the supermarket, in our families."

Back at the debrief, Johnson announces he's decided to keep The Man Cave name, a possibly exclusionary moniker in a gender-fluid world. Johnson employs non-binary and gender-fluid facilitators but says that, with large numbers of students still identifying as male, they need to stick to what they're good at. It's tricky: I wonder whether some of the less-macho boys in the workshop would be more comfortable had the facilitators talked more about gender fluidity or sexual orientation. Or if they'd find the name alienating. I ask a friend's son, who had just done the program. The 15-year-old, who loved the experience, had spoken to his queer and non-binary friends about the name. The feedback, he says, was that even though it is a bit exclusionary, "the facilitators are so nice it probably doesn't matter."

In one of the last exercises of the day, they practise "honouring" each other – calling out a classmate for something they appreciate. "Men don't know how to show each other love," says Kedar. Lucas tells a mate he loves him. Meanwhile, Ollie, the boy with severe social anxiety, goes unhonoured and leaves. Johnson follows him. Later, Lucas, who has probably been one of Ollie's tormentors, honours him in person and in front of the group: "We saw more of him today and we all love him."

When the boys leave, Kedar, Cooper and Timms gather for their "check-out". They've done a remarkable job and are spent. "It's been a really powerful day," Johnson says, as he leads them in a meditation. "It's changed the course of some young men's lives and I really want you to sit with that feeling." When they open their eyes, Johnson praises Kedar on winding back the out-of-control energy: "A masterclass." Johnson offers final thoughts: the alphas got a lot of airtime today. There wasn't much said about how they treat the young women in their lives. He heard a few boys calling others "pussy" without being picked up. The suggestions are met with gratitude. Kedar says to Johnson: "You're a black-belt in this, man, and I feel so grateful to have you here. Thanks for coming back to the roots, man."

*** Names have been changed.**
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