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The Man Cave facilitators running an in-school program at Sandringham College in Victoria. Picture: Supplied

Q&A: How The Man Cave talks to boys about gender-based violence

By: Erin Morley | in School Management, Top Stories | May 14, 2024 | 0

A special National Cabinet meeting, held after weeks of rallies protesting gender-based violence broke out across the country, saw state and federal government leaders commit to ending violence against women and children in a generation 150 – but, how can we explain to school boys what is going on?

Funding towards [protecting children online](#) and efforts to combat [male extremist views online](#) are some outcomes of that meeting, meant to prevent sexism and gender-based violence attitudes in school-aged boys.

[The Man Cave](#) is a healthy masculinity student support service that, along with offering other resources, runs emotional literacy programs in schools for young boys.

Product manager Lucy Barrat runs the in-school programs. She has worked in education for 14 years, and was a teacher for eight.

She spoke to *Education Review* about why creating spaces for young men to share their thoughts, and feel seen is so important to stopping them from harming themselves and harming others.

Q: To what extent do you think the pressure to figure out 'what it means to be a man' has on young boys' mental health and perception of themselves?

A: A big one. Probably the first and obvious answer is just to go back one step: young men are feeling quite disconnected from the world around them, and a bit left behind.

There's a lot of advancement and a lot of attention on bringing women into the conversation. We want to have [boys] empowered in these conversations, not shamed, so when they're feeling kind of lost and a little



The Man Cave product manager Lucy Barrat. Picture: Supplied

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unsure about what it is to be a man, they can, as all of us do, look for role models.

Historically, men have had some great role models in the form of their fathers, or people within their society. It was really clear what was required of men in those times. They really needed to be the strong, stoic, tough provider. And that's shifting.

What we actually need from men in our societies at the moment are those that are emotionally literate enough to not harm themselves or harm other people.

What role models do we have out there showing that? It's so nuanced, but that's why young men are gravitating towards [Andrew Tate](#), and other influencers, because those influencers are saying: 'this is what it is to be a man, follow me.' As I said, anybody who can give us a nice roadmap seems incredibly helpful.

But, what [those influencers are] espousing are outdated norms of masculinity, and that's not what we need from men currently. It is also not representative of modern masculinities, or 21st century masculinity.

It's absolutely fine to be stoic and strong and resilient, they're beautiful qualities that we want men to hold, but we also want them to be able to have conversations where they can support one another. They're not seeing any men like that out there at the moment.

Adolescence is a time where we build our identity; we build our attitudes and our beliefs and our mindsets.

[The Man Cave] works with young boys in a preventative way in the time where those perceptions of the world and identities are being formed. We send in relatable young, healthy male role models that can show a different way. Boys can't be what they can't see.

Normalising conversations about what's going on in their lives, who they are, boundaries, healthy relationships, all the things that seemingly aren't part of the normal dialect with young men or men more broadly [is what we do].

Q: Do you think young boys are craving to be 'seen'? Along with role models, what else could support them?

A: Well, the healthy male role models don't necessarily help the boys be seen. To make boys feel seen we invite them into conversations.

There's so much exclusion of men, and young men in particular, in conversations about social media influencers, or consent, or gender-based violence.

There's a fear to speak up or speak to any of these things, a fear they might get it wrong, or a fear they don't have the language to talk about it, or a fear they just don't have the emotional safety in the spaces to speak about it.

We invite them into conversations from a non-authoritative position. That's also one of the mindsets our facilitators bring in; to hear boys' voices, take the shame out of opening up and welcome them into the conversation.

By pushing [unhealthy influencers] boys are aligning with – or that we don't believe are right or healthy – into the shadows, they then become more alluring.

What we need to do is ask: 'what is it about Tate that you are aligning with? I'm really curious to know about that'.

[When we picked a little bit deeper](#), [they boys aligned with values of Tate's] physical healthiness and wanting to earn money.

There are actually some things in here that are fine. It's just obviously some of the other gendered misogynistic views that, without broader context and broader understanding, these young men don't have any additional information to make an alternative decision.

So how do we give them context and understanding? We talk about it, we unpack it more, we get curious about it.

Q: Do you think that young boys get confused because the world's telling them they have lots of privilege, but they can't necessarily feel that privilege?

A: Yes, I absolutely do. It's kind of a case of they inherited a mess that they're not responsible for, but they're responsible for cleaning up.

Put that logic on literally any problem out there and whoever's at the end of it would have a challenge with it.

Climate change is a perfect analogy for it. There's this heavy responsibility because it's the future that they're going to be stepping into. Boys are telling us 'we're [going to] inherit this, so start listening to us please!'

Recently, a Year 11 student told our facilitators: "I read stuff about how I need to open up more, and share how I'm feeling, and that bottling feelings up is a problem. But I don't know how to open up. How do I figure that out?"

We have participants saying this all the time: 'I feel things, I have thoughts, I have feelings and I want to be able to express them, but how do I do it?'



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The greatest fear of pretty much any teenager, irrespective of gender, is not fitting in. Friends and social networks are the life rafts of a teenager, so if you are going to do something against the grain or against the norm, that is so terrifying, so frightening.

Sharing feelings as a young man to other men or other people, that is against the grain. Shame comes because, more times than not, sharing feelings is not received in a positive, supported, welcomed way.

Consequently, as we can appreciate, they're less likely to do it again.

[The Man Cave] is trying to change the narrative that sharing feelings is weak or powerless, and certainly trying to dismiss the feeling that it's feminine, because that also puts women down.

We tell boys there's real stoicism and strength in sharing how you're really going, and redefining that.

Our programmes aim to increase emotional literacy and the ability to support one another and to have conversations around boundaries and consent.

Q: What are some things that teachers can do in the meantime for the boys in their classes?

A: For conversations about gender-based violence, or [what happened at Yara Valley Grammar](#), [The Man Cave looks to] create spaces where those topics can be spoken about. And it's not to correct. It's not to insert personal opinion, or the right opinion.

The purpose of the space is to understand the attitudes and mindsets of young people around these topics. Because, if we don't understand why they're aligning or what they don't understand, how can we then address it?

And the boys feel seen. For example, we say: 'we know that there is a huge social discourse at the moment around gender-based violence, specifically violence at the hands of men. How are you all feeling about this conversation about gender-based violence? Where are you at? Do you have any questions around it? Do we want to talk about it?'

This is to understand there's no right or wrong answer, but create a safe space for that conversation to actually take place, and it will take some time.

It won't work the first time, but if there are spaces within schools – and it's understood by students that there are going to be spaces to talk about the social discourse that's going around – they'll come to the party eventually. They absolutely will.

Young people have got some fantastic things to share, and so we need to understand what it is for them so we can best support them.

Now, is it a silver bullet solution? Absolutely not. And we'll never claim to be, this is such a complex thing that we're trying to address, but we do think that it's one that can start to shift the needle a bit.

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