You Can't Be What You Can't See:
How positive role models can increase health outcomes in primary prevention

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Abstract

Growing commentary suggests working with teenage boys in primary prevention of domestic and family violence is essential. However, current approaches that target adult men should not be generalised to younger populations, as it may unintentionally isolate boys and provoke resentment. When working with boys, we must have conversations with them, not about them; the data suggests utilising a strengths-based approach to empower boys to grow into the best version of themselves. Meeting boys where they are at is not cliche, but crucial.

Within the context of DFV, researchers from The Man Cave collected data from 2,245 teenage boys to understand their attitudes towards their female peers and their efficacy as prosocial bystanders.

This research produced two important findings:

- Positive male role models were the strongest predictor of boys' attitudes towards their female peers
- Primary prevention efforts targeting teenage boys are effective when delivered with age-appropriate, emotional development programs

Introduction

Men's use of violence against women is devastatingly apparent in Australia, yet this violence and its consequences are preventable. Current primary prevention frameworks for working with men highlight the importance of addressing harmful stereotypes and the need to challenge cultures of masculinity that thrive on dominance, control, and aggression. When working with teenage boys, it is important to acknowledge that these boys are growing up in a different landscape to previous generations. As we work toward ending gender-based violence within a single generation, primary prevention approaches should understand the influences that shape the life of a teenage boy, so that he can live a life free from violence - both to himself and others.

Recognising the need to adapt and tailor initiatives to the rapidly evolving context of teenage boys, researchers from The Man Cave have conducted a study to address the following questions:

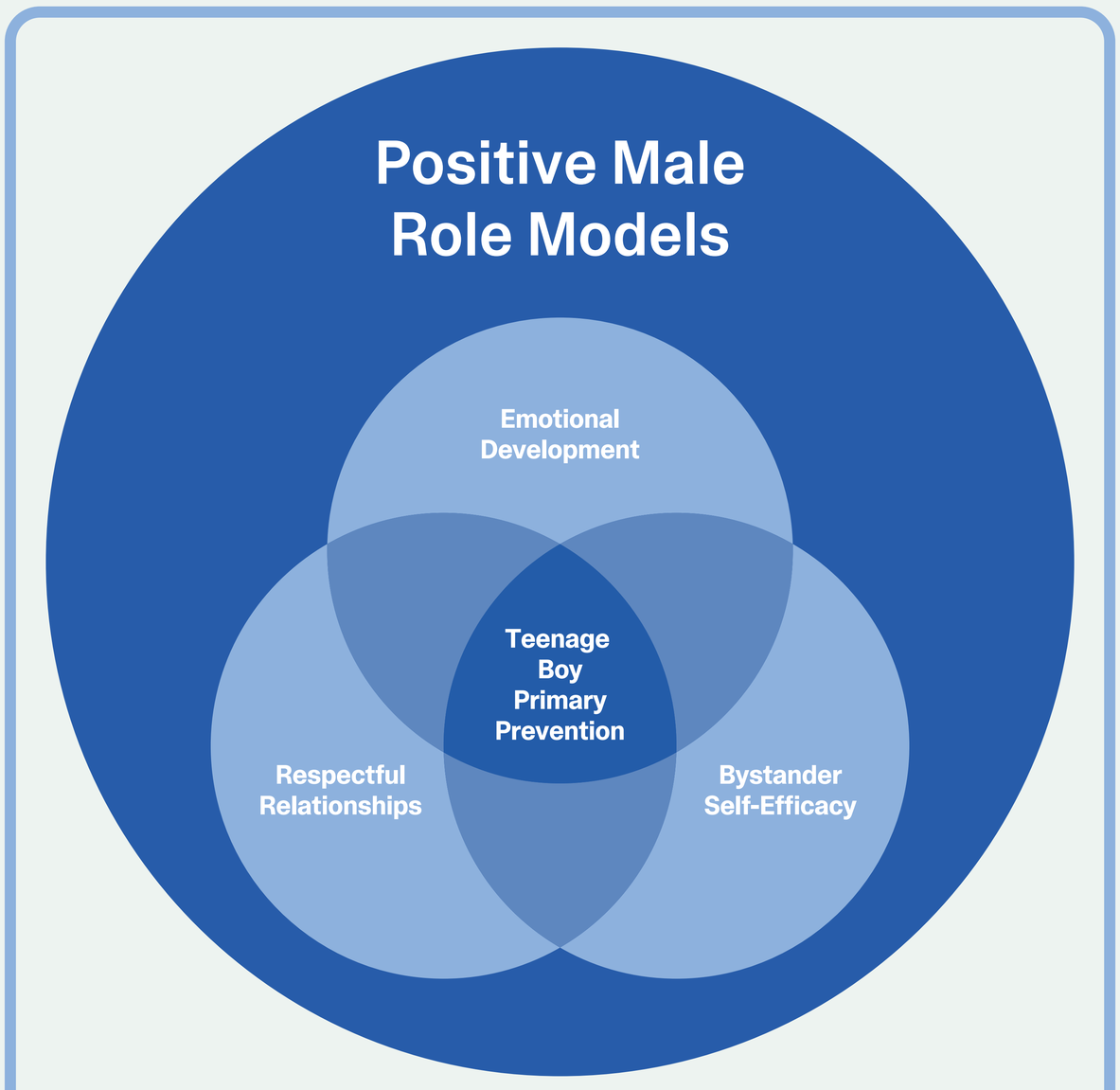
1. **What are teenage boys' attitudes towards their female peers?**
2. **How confident are teenage boys in intervening as bystanders?**
3. **What factors influence boys' attitudes towards their female peers and their confidence in prosocial bystander intervention?**

Method

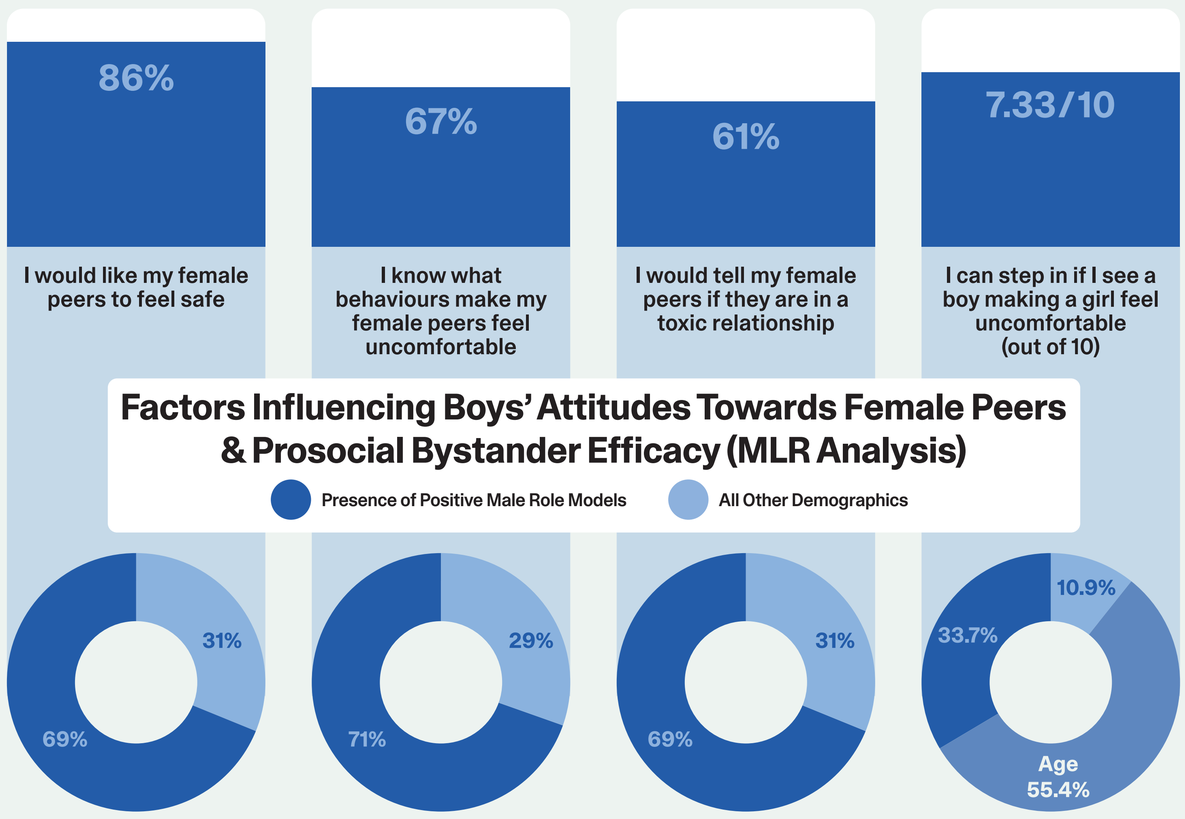
- Pre- to post-workshop surveys between February and April, 2024
- 2,245 boys participated, average age being 14.4 years-old
- Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) analysis conducted in Qualtrics

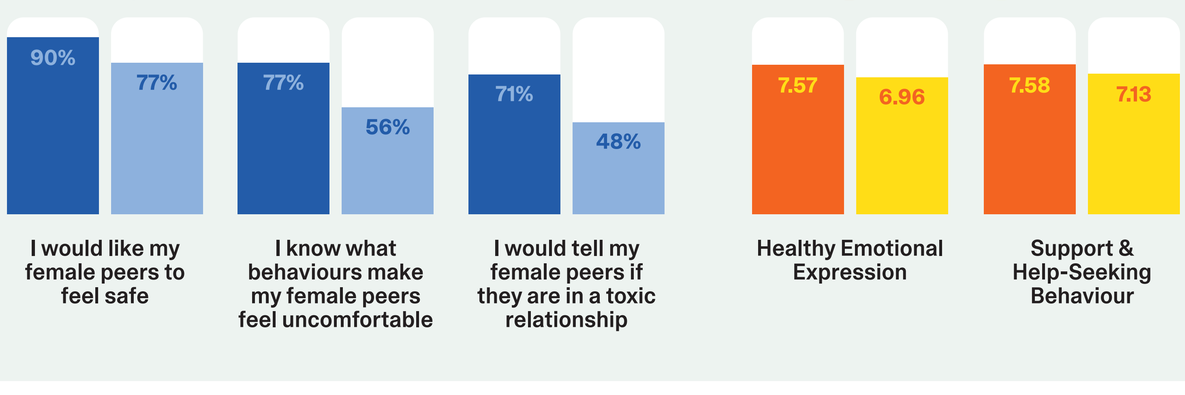
Seven Independent Variables were analysed:

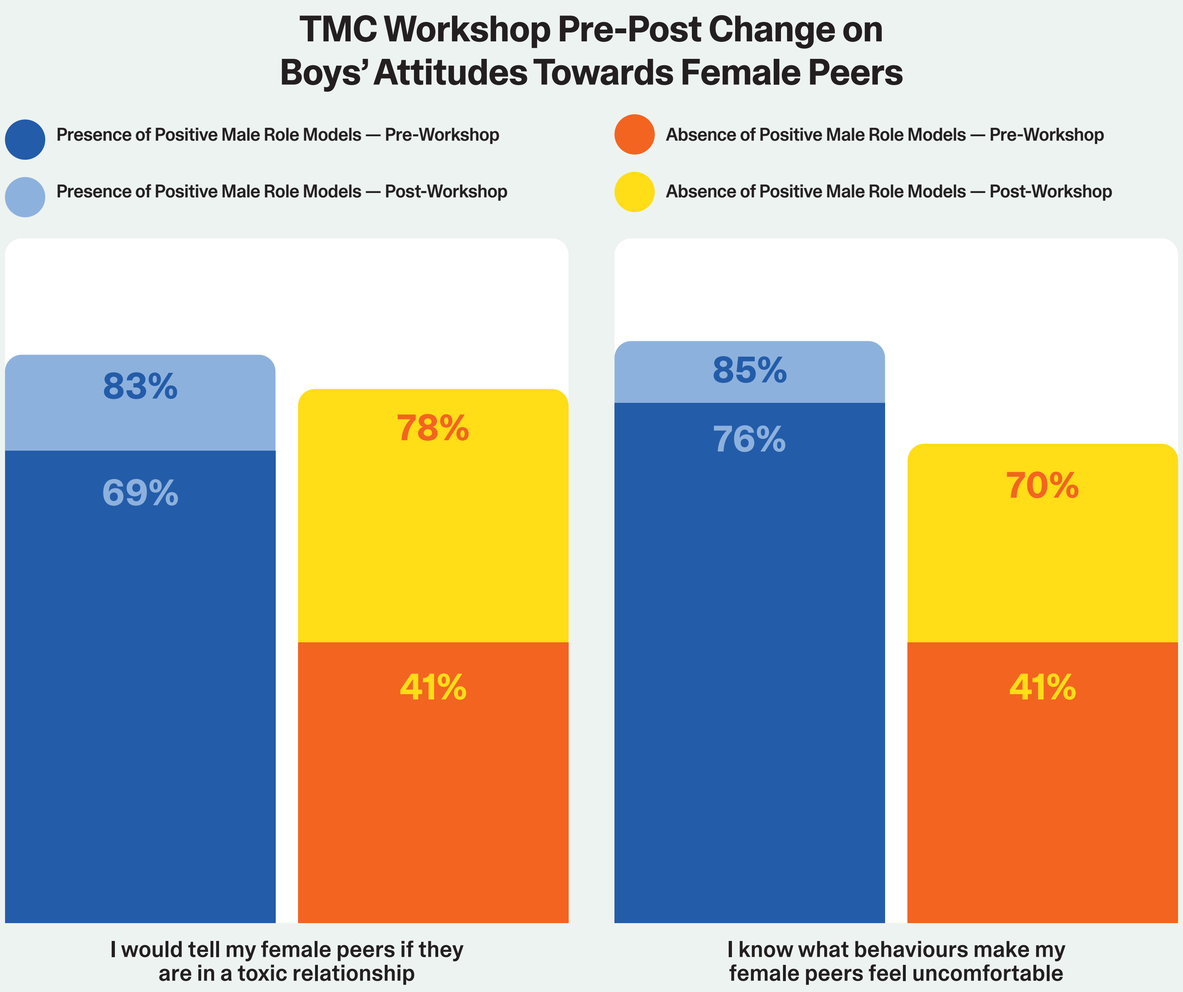
- School Type (Public, Catholic/Independent & Private)
- School Region (Metro, Regional, Rural)
- All Boys vs. Co-Ed Schools
- LGBTQIA+ Status
- Age
- School's ICSEA (Socio-Educational Advantage) Value
- Absence or Presence of Positive Male Role Models



Conceptual Framework of Primary Prevention for Teenage Boys







Conclusion & Future Direction

Boys Can't Be What They Can't See
Positive male role models' (PMRs) influence on teenage boys is profound and multi-layered. The presence of PMRs in boys' lives was the strongest predictor of prosocial attitudes towards their female peers, and this suggests that exposing boys to PMRs - even for a day - has the potential to shift their attitudes towards girls.

Meet Teenage Boys Where They Are At By Fostering Emotional Development
Teenage boys are interested in being prosocial bystanders but have not been fully equipped with the emotional intelligence to do so. This data suggests that capacity-building for DFV primary prevention in teenage boys is dependent on boys' emotional awareness, help-seeking behaviours, and ability to healthily express their emotions.

The Messenger Is Also The Message
When working with teenage boys, the messenger delivering a primary prevention program is a critical component of the message. When the message is embodied authentically by the individual delivering the program, boys are given permission to transform.

What is a Positive Male Role Model?
This research is built upon an 'absence of' positive male role models, with the contention that boys can identify when they are missing from their lives. The Man Cave plans to conduct future research to unpack boys' interpretations of what a positive male role model is to them.

An Ecosystem of Change is Necessary
Emotional development workshops are not a silver bullet approach. This research suggests emotional development is a fundamental driver of effective primary prevention, but it is not solely sufficient - a broader ecosystem of prevention is necessary.