

## Main Messages

This is a literature review of programs across the world aimed at helping boys to break the cycle of family violence. Berry Street has commissioned the report in order to provide guidance about best practice, in preparation for a new Berry Street Program. The authors found that:

- Multi-modal, structured interventions, particularly those that include interpersonal and social skills training, are more effective in reducing violent and other anti-social behaviour than purely educational, vocational or undirected therapeutic approaches.
- Effective programs focus the intervention around an *exciting, physically involving activity* such as sport, film-making, martial arts, outdoor activities, other creative activities or experiential/practical learning. Active programs — where physical activity is connected to higher, abstract thinking processes — are more engaging to young male participants because they match the ways that boys generally interact, learn with and connect with others.
- The best programs include *clear structures and predictable processes* that promote safety and cooperation. Effective programs also *vary the methods and techniques*, in order to maintain freshness, interest and full involvement.
- Effective programs are based on an *understanding of the antecedents of violence and aggression* in boys and young men, including factors such as family, peer, community, socio-economic and individual factors. This includes careful *assessment of the bio-psycho-social, attachment and neuro-developmental histories* of the participants. Effective programs respond to the needs and learning styles of participants.
- Effective programs find ways to *help boys to feel significant* from positive involvement rather than through destructive aggression or violence. Effective programs also *help boys to feel connected* and part of a larger group with whom they can identify.
- Effective programs *help boys to develop and grow* in terms of their internal self-management skills (including anger management), their knowledge about how to get along with others, their interpersonal skills (including conflict resolution skills), their general competence in life skills, and their ability to take increasing responsibility and face challenges.
- Programs for boys often mark significant achievements and movement through stages of development with rites of passage and/or ceremonies of recognition. Effective programs also help boys to feel that they can *make a contribution*, help others and serve as an example to others (and in so doing, to be *held in the esteem* of others).
- Effective programs encourage appropriate levels of personal disclosure and do not come across to participants as ‘counselling,’ which tends to make boys feel embarrassed and unwilling to participate.
- Program effectiveness depends as much on the quality of implementation as on the type of intervention. Optimal engagement of young people hinges on the skills and personalities of the facilitators.
- Boys nine years old and above show more positive effects from school-based violence prevention programs and from cognitive-behavioural therapy for anger-related problems than younger children.
- There is some evidence that interventions are more effective when delivered to mixed-gender groups rather than to boys alone.
- Programs must be culturally relevant to participants and must ensure that the approach is truly inclusive and works for a range of learning styles and needs. Cultural relevance includes facilitators’ awareness and affirmation of interests that may be particularly important to the cultural identity of young people, such as music, television programs, media, sport, computer games, social networking, comics, fashion/clothing, and peer group activities.
- Programs can be effective at three different levels of intervention — the *primary* (universal), *secondary* (selected ‘at-risk’ or ‘high-risk’ sub-groups) and *tertiary* (identified/indicated individuals) levels — and each level requires particular adaptations. Each level is addressed in this report.
- Well managed programs can be highly cost effective when targeted correctly (Appendix B).

## Executive Summary

In May 2011, Berry Street commissioned Change Point Learning and Development to undertake a literature review of programs across the world aimed at helping boys to break the cycle of family violence.

In keeping with the assigned brief, this report focuses on research about programs for boys between the ages of 8 and 18, with emphasis on groupwork approaches. The report emphasises programs for boys who have direct or indirect experience of violence in the home, and/or boys who show signs of developing violent behaviour themselves.

This report explores and makes recommendations regarding options for developing interventions to prevent and reduce violence amongst boys aged between 8 and 18 years of age.

Young people may be involved in, or at risk of, specific types of violence, including school violence, bullying, dating violence, domestic violence, gang violence and sexual violence. Each of these has its own literature and specialist interventions. We examined some of the research on these related types of violence and present some of the programs, research findings and other resources from these in this paper.

### What the evidence shows

Based on our reading of the literature, the following approaches and principles of delivery are the best evidenced thus far:

#### *Theoretical approach/content of program*

Multi-modal, structured, cognitive-behavioural interventions, particularly those that include interpersonal and social skills training, are more effective in reducing violent and other anti-social behaviour than purely educational, vocational or undirected therapeutic approaches. The more behavioural, skills training approaches seem to work best in reducing aggressive behaviour.

No single approach has been proven to be more effective than any other. A meta-analysis of school-based violence prevention programs found, unexpectedly, that those programs that were *not* based on a particular theory were more effective than those that were. This reminds us of the importance of context, such as the way in which a program is implemented and the characteristics/mix of the participants. It also reminds us of the importance of being purposefully eclectic, choosing the methods and approaches that work best with particular groups and individuals, as opposed to relying rigidly on a manual or

dogmatic approach that may benefit some participants but have neutral or harmful effects on others.

The best programs include *clear structures and predictable processes* that promote safety and cooperation. Effective programs also *vary the methods and techniques*, in order to maintain freshness, interest and full involvement. Effective programs find ways to *help boys to feel significant* from positive involvement rather than through destructive aggression or violence. Effective programs also *help boys to feel connected* and part of a larger group with whom they can identify. Effective programs also *help boys to develop and grow* in terms of their internal self-management skills, their knowledge about how to get along with others, their interpersonal skills and their general competence in life skills. Effective programs also help boys to feel that they can *make a contribution*, help others and serve as an example to others (and in so doing, to be *held in the esteem* of others).

Effective programs encourage appropriate levels of personal disclosure and do not come across to participants as ‘therapy,’ which tends to make boys feel embarrassed and unwilling to participate.

#### *Implementation/delivery*

Actively engaging young people (especially those who are ‘high-risk’) is critical to the success of a program. Effective programs focus the intervention around an exciting, physically involving activity such as a sport, drama, film-making, self-defence/martial arts, outdoor activities, other creative activities or experiential learning. Active programs — where physically involving activities are connected to higher, abstract thoughts and concepts such as cooperation, planning, consequences, moral reasoning and empathy — are more engaging to young male participants because they match the ways that boys generally interact and connect with others.

Effective programs are based on an understanding of the antecedents of violence and aggression in boys and young men, including family, peer, community, socio-economic and individual factors. This includes careful assessment of the bio-psycho-social and neuro-developmental histories of the participants. Effective programs are responsive to the needs and learning styles of participants.

Program effectiveness depends as much on the quality of implementation as on the type of intervention. Optimal engagement of young people hinges on the skill and personality of the facilitators. Good quality interventions, particularly with young people who are at-risk or already