

# Redefining MASCULINITY

Growing up, young males are bombarded with stereotypes of the idea of “masculinity”. These stereotypes include the need to act *tough, self-reliant, aggressive, emotionless, sexually promiscuous, or physically strong*. The pressure to live up to these stereotypes leaves many men unequipped to handle situations or feelings that do not fit into these stereotypes.

## Violence

According to an article by Luolui Hong, MPH, PhD, this limited view of masculinity that men are given may “predispose men to be [both] perpetrators and victims of violence”.

Author Gary Barker of Dying to be Men: Youth and Masculinity and Social Exclusion, states that worldwide research on violence has confirmed that young men are most likely to be the instigators and recipients of violent acts. Researchers claim that the violence coming from these young men is related to social exclusion and a lack of flexibility when it comes to the idea of what it means to be masculine. The result is often aggression in an attempt to prove one’s masculinity.

Three male psychologists, William Seymour, PhD; Ramel L. Smith, PhD; and Hector Torres, PsyD, are committed to changing the notion of masculinity. All three grew up in vastly different backgrounds—however, they all found common ground when they decided to combine their education, experience and upbringing as tools to help redefine masculinity for today’s youth.

According to the trio, American society places an emphasis on men and boys conforming to an ideal of masculinity that portrays toughness, self-reliance, stoicism and acquisitiveness. This in turn leads to aggressive, emotionally stunted males who may harm themselves, their children, their partners and their entire community. The authors’ concerns for violence, over-populated prisons, and issues that were consistently identified through their clinical work with young men and boys, were all factors in developing a program to break stereotypes.

## Positive Values for Maleness

To bring awareness to these issues, the three launched a pilot program bringing middle school and high school males together for eight weeks of facilitated discussion regarding the positive and negative aspects of traditional masculinity. One of the goals? “**We want to teach men how we can remain positively assertive while removing negative aggression**”, says Smith, a child and adolescent psychologist at the Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin.



Torres feels that due to limited coping mechanisms, males travel very rapidly to explosion and aggression, so they hope to expand the notion of *maleness*—retaining the positive notions such as bravery and protectiveness, while creating a new definition that includes a full range of human emotions. They hope that this new definition is more encompassing instead of defining what is male and what isn't.

Three major themes are integrated within the program: intrapersonal awareness, interpersonal skill development, and service to others. A wide array of role models is also used to showcase how men can use their authority positively.

The psychologist's end game is to evaluate the pilot program, and then launch a larger-scale effort to replicate the program all around the country. Eventually, they would like to include females in the conversation, but for now, "We want to start the conversation men to men.", states Torres.

## Men Against Violence

These three are not alone in trying to generate shared norms of non-violence and communication when it comes to redefining the notion of masculinity. Student organizations, much like MAV (Men Against Violence) have been popping up all over the country. MAV focuses on college-aged males, under the idea that college men are in the midst of developing gender and sexual identities. Their focus is based on creating male-female equitable relationships, resolving conflicts in a non-violent manner, overcoming homophobia, developing meaningful relationships with other men, and expressing both anger and fear appropriately.

### **ACES- What You Can Do**

#### **A**wareness

- Recognize, share, and distribute media efforts to break stereotypes

#### **C**ommunity Action

- Join a volunteer project
- Recognize when you need to step in and speak up

#### **E**ducation

- Educate yourself
- Take a class or workshop to familiarize yourself with the topics

#### **S**upport

- Join a support group
- Be a supportive friend, colleague or family member



**If you or a member of your family is having trouble handling issues in a non-violent manner, contact your EFAP for help.**

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