

ABOUT THE BUILDING CHAMPIONS PROGRAM

WHY HAVE A BOYS' GROUP?

Let's face it—those of us who have boys know that they can be a handful. Young boys are full of life, full of energy, and full of hope. It's not surprising to hear parents talk about the difference between raising boys and girls. Boys are rougher, messier, and always into something. But it can be hard to grow up male in today's society. Many boys growing up today lack the opportunities and resources to establish male bonding and identity groups. Many boys today also have few male role models because most schoolteachers are female and the majority of single-parent households are run by women. In addition, African American students and those from lower economic backgrounds may encounter even fewer healthy alternatives for defining their male identity than do their white and wealthier counterparts (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 2010).

In schools, boys are four to five times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Thompson, n.d.), and boys are more likely to disrupt class than girls. Boys who disrupt class and do not feel academically engaged are also more likely to do poorly in middle school (Downey & Vogt Yuan, 2005). For students who are held back a grade level, middle school boys are retained twice as often as their female counterparts (U. S. Department of Education, 2012). When it comes to grades and homework, girls outperform boys in elementary, secondary, high school, college, and even graduate school, and women outnumber men in higher education, with 56 percent of bachelor's degrees and 55 percent of graduate degrees going to women (Thompson, n.d.).

A boys' empowerment group can help members grow and support one another, avoid risky behavior like gang involvement, and encourage boys to make healthy choices that can lead to positive growth (Hall & Charmaraman, 2011). Boys who need support in choosing positive and healthy pathways can benefit from an intervention that gives them space and time to share information, to work and play cooperatively, and to grow healthy identities. While inclusive grouping is an important part of building community in a youth development program, common-interest groups such as girls' or boys' empowerment groups can help members grow and provide mutual support (Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, 2010).

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Building Champions program is a small-group counseling program designed to help upper elementary through middle school boys build trust, respect, and peer connections while reducing classroom conflicts, discipline issues, and anxiety. Building Champions uses many active learning activities that will help maintain students' interest and allow them to practice targeted skills while learning. Active learning such as that promoted in this program has been found to help students grasp concepts more quickly, engage with the material being presented, and be active participants in the learning process (Jackson, 1993).

LESSON FORMAT

This group curriculum uses an experiential learning model. In each lesson, students are asked to complete an active learning activity and then are led through a series of questions that ask the students to reflect on each stage of their learning:

- *What?* What happened? What were the results?
- *So what?* What do the results mean?
- *Now what?* Where do we go from here?

Each lesson follows a set procedure:

- Warm-up: 5 minutes
- Activity: 20–25 minutes
- Discussion: 5–10 minutes
- Evaluation: 5 minutes

Through this format, students quickly grasp concepts and easily identify how the activity connects to future learning and experiences.

LESSON SCHEDULING

Ideally, this group program should meet weekly over the course of eight weeks. Each lesson is designed to take place during a 35- to 45-minute class period. You can choose to meet with your group during lunch, an elective or core class, or an advisor/advisee period. You may use a rotating class schedule or conduct lessons after school. You should choose a schedule that will work best within your school or program setting. Several factors that you should take into consideration when scheduling your groups include the needs and preferences of classroom teachers, school activities that students may miss (including lunch and recess), and the ability to minimize interruptions to avoid losing the attention and focus of the group.

GROUP COMPOSITION AND OTHER REQUIREMENTS

For upper elementary and middle school students, the optimal group size is between 6 and 8 students. The program is adaptable for secondary-level students. In that case, groups may be increased to 12 students. More than that number can decrease the effectiveness of the group. Groups may include boys who are friends but ideally should not include only members of the same friend grouping. A mixture of several friend groupings would be best. In addition, it may be helpful to have at least one boy who is a positive role model among his classmates.

The program's active learning activities require space for the boys to move around, so a setting permitting this will be required. A photocopier or printer is needed for producing various handouts; other necessary materials include a whiteboard or poster board, writing utensils, and basic art supplies. Other materials, specified in each lesson, are generally available in the classroom.

LESSON OPTIONS

Each Building Champions lesson is meant to build upon the prior one, and for Lessons 2 through 7, three different lesson options are provided. The group leader is encouraged to preview and read over all the lesson choices and make a decision based on the group's needs. Options typically include a low-level activity and a more active, higher energy activity to choose from. Discussion questions that follow the lesson allow the boys to further converse and learn from the activity. Each group culminates with boys' filling out an "Exit Slip" that will help you, as a leader, assess whether the students are walking away with an understanding of the objectives of the lesson. (Exit Slips are provided in Appendix A.)

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR GROUP LEADERS

You don't need to be an expert to lead a group. You just have to be willing to start and have fun. Be optimistic, energetic, and patient. It might take a session or two for the boys to bond, get comfortable with one another, and work together. Being positive yourself will have a positive effect on the boys and will inspire them to take your lead. Monitor group interaction to ensure that all boys are participating. Encourage participation, especially by those who are shy or hesitant to share. However, always allow students to have the option of a "pass" if they are uncomfortable sharing.

Always be prepared for boys to share information that may be too personal, inappropriate, or off topic. This is particularly the case with younger students. If a boy shares too much, thank him for his contribution and let him know that group time is limited but that you would love to talk with him more about his disclosure during a time after group. With older boys, remind them of the group rules and ask the boy who is sharing if he is comfortable sharing with the other group members.

Understand the limits of confidentiality and take appropriate action if a member engages in behavior that presents a clear and imminent danger to himself or others or discloses physical or sexual abuse. Establishing confidentiality in the group will allow the boys to feel they have a safe place to share their concerns, ask questions, and let their guard down. It is through this ability to share freely that the best results occur. If a situation occurs where you, as the leader, feel that you must disclose confidential information, let the member know ahead of time that you plan to do it and what you plan to say.

If conflict arises within the group, use the group process to identify the problem and resolve the issue. Acknowledge the boys' feelings and offer your guidance. Discuss with the group how they feel about the conflict and make sure each boy feels heard.

Use open-ended questioning to encourage student dialogue. Ask, "Why," "How," and "What" rather than asking questions that look for a simple yes or no response. Specific phrases that can encourage discussion include these:

- "Can you tell us more about . . ."
- "Help us understand . . ."
- "Explain to us . . ."
- "Can you share an example of . . ."

Most important, be ready to get moving, get talking, and have fun!

ASCA MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORS

The ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (American School Counselor Association, 2014) provide a framework for school counseling programs, and the Building Champions program has been developed to meet the student competencies the model identifies. The table on the following page lists ASCA mindsets and behaviors that are met by the Building Champions program. The Building Champions Small-Group Action Plan, adapted from ASCA materials (American School Counselor Association, 2012) and included in Appendix B, will help you in your endeavors in developing a comprehensive school curriculum plan and Recognized ASCA Model Program.

PROGRAM ORGANIZATION AND EVALUATION

Various forms to help you start your Building Champions group and keep track of your group's progress are included in the last two appendixes of this book. Appendix B provides program organization and progress tracking forms. The forms in Appendix C will be useful in collecting data, analyzing it, and reporting it back to stakeholders—essential steps in any counseling intervention. The data collected on these forms can not only identify areas of concern but also document

the knowledge gained and changes in attitudes and beliefs of the boys involved. Included is a parent letter used to obtain permission for group counseling and evaluation and a parent follow-up evaluation form, which should be sent home to notify parents that the group has ended and to check in to see if parents have noticed an improvement in behavior and attitude at home. The group member follow-up survey also provided should be given to the group about four weeks after the group has ended. The information you collect on these and other forms will help you to evaluate the group's effectiveness and share your findings with other interested parties.