

A Facilitator's Memoir:
It's A Guy Thing Boys Mentoring Group
By Okpara Okafor-Newsom

One of the most exciting experiences I have had while implementing the *It's A Guy Thing* boys empowerment group occurred at Harrison Street Elementary in Sunbury, Ohio. The boys were a diverse and energetic group of fifth graders preparing to enter middle school. Since the group was being facilitated on Friday in the spring during recess, I had to make an extra effort keep the boys engaged including holding some of the sessions outside. We met in the art room, which offered a flexible environment that I could rearrange in order to break any monotony. The boys in the group entered the setting with fascinating stories of their experiences as young males. They used the activities to reveal their knowledge, goals, relationships, and emotions. Admittedly, I felt the sessions were at times chaotic, however, by the end of each session they displayed true understanding of the learning goals. This was quite pleasing to see how this active bunch was truly engaged. They were supportive of one another appeared to enjoy the input of their fellow group members. I was proud to be here working with such an exciting group of students.



One the most memorable moments took place during a session about bullying and being an active bystander. The boys read a short book titled "Nobody Knew What to Do: A Story About Bullying" (McCain, B.R., 2001). After reading the book, we had a brief discussion of the story and then proceeded with our activity. The boys were to select badges with anti-bullying messages to wear and pass out to their peers. In addition, the boys were to create a PSA about bullying. I presented several PSA options for the boys to select. As they looked at their options, they suddenly decided to "tag" the school with messages that promoted peace and ending bullying. They cut out several slogans and illustrations and began their mission to promote a positive school environment. They moved quickly throughout the school posting the message in the hallways, on doors, and in classrooms. Their energy was incredible. Many of the boys stated their commitment to ensuring their classmates understood what they were doing.

Before we knew it, the session was over and I was preparing to leave. As I left the building, the halls filled up with students moving to their next class. I was surprised and pleased to see almost every student wearing an anti-bullying badge. Some students were even wearing two badges. Some of the badges even had messages intended for girls. These badges said things like 'I'm Beautiful the Way I am' and 'Rumors Ruin Relationships'. When the boys saw these badges, they immediately knew who they would give them to. I left the building feeling invigorated, knowing the students took the lesson seriously and wanted to share their learning experience with their classmates.

This year I have experienced some setbacks implementing *It's A Guy Thing*. I've learned to adjust the curriculum to ensure the activities are student-centered, active and fun. The goal is keep them active and ensure they understand, almost overstand, the concepts. And, I've accepted that they may not display this understanding until the end of a session or few sessions down the line. Also, there isn't much room for sitting around and explaining things or quizzing them on their knowledge. During a forty-five minute session, we may spend five minutes reviewing the group rules and introducing the learning goals. The rest of the time is spent completing the activities. Our group discussions may last ten minutes or less with each boy expressing their personal understanding. Sometimes we don't even have a discussion because their understanding is revealed during an activity or in their completed products.

Working with early adolescent boys is challenging and takes patience. No wonder there are not many programs of this kind. The boys can be impulsive, easily distracted, and sensitive. I really enjoy this setting. These boys are impressionable, creative, and intelligent. They often reveal an understanding that one might not expect. The goal is to have them internalize their knowledge and let it be revealed in their actions.

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