



# YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PANELS

LESSONS FROM WHITE  
RIBBON AUSTRALIA

 **White Ribbon**  
Australia

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White Ribbon Australia's youth engagement program called "You Can Ask That" has heard from 2800 Australian high school aged boys between September – December 2022. These panels asked boys to tell them what they are talking about with their mates around respectful relationships. From these insights we were able to have a deeper understanding of what is going on for them and provide education, support and solutions. We need to be encouraging young men to intervene in and advocate for the end of violence toward women but we first need to understand what is going on for them.

## YOU CAN ASK THAT PANELS BACKGROUND

In 2022, White Ribbon Australia introduced a new program "You Can Ask That", youth panels, supporting young men and boys by answering in a safe, confidential and open forum questions they had about issues relating to masculinity (such as Pornography, The Manosphere, Respectful Relationships, Violence Against Women, Gender Equality). Answering their questions through assemblies facilitated by their schools and following up with relevant education material, advice and resources that cover a range of topics relating to healthy masculinity.

These youth panels engaged over 2800 young men and boys across SA, WA, NSW, VIC and Tasmania, as well as 200 young women and 4 gender diverse young people who joined the programs.

Some of the themes that emerged, that White Ribbon Australia feel requires more attention and resources include:

- 1. Gender equity creating a perceived sense of loss for young men**
  - confused identity formulation
  - carrying a burden from historical abuse
  - strong sense that it feels like a zero-sum game
- 2. Domestic violence and implications on families**
  - complexities and causes are unknown
  - how widespread the issue can be
  - the damage of victim blaming and how can we avoid it
- 3. The role of social media and influential people, such as Andrew Tate, who perpetuate unhelpful masculinities**
- 4. Pornography utilisation and its connection to violence against women**
- 5. Understanding how to adopt a positive masculinity mindset and how unhealthy notions of masculinity affect young men.**



First-hand we saw the genuine curiosity young men have when navigating the world around them, and their willingness, when prompted, to seek out support from trusted adult experts in this space. Demonstrated by those with critical thinking capabilities, the youth panels revealed young men and boys are looking for challenging exchanges with adults to discuss, debate and learn from others around them.

Our youth panels made clear the support needed for young people and the gap in education around the constraints of masculinity and the serious consequences these harmful attitudes have in contributing to gender inequality, violence, and poor mental health outcomes.

White Ribbon Australia, in response to these findings, have developed a way forward to engage young men and boys with three recommendations:

- 1. A comprehensive national primary prevention strategy that empowers boys to end men's violence against women that is co-designed with Australian boys and young men facilitated by White Ribbon Australia and the Commonwealth Government.**
- 2. Commonwealth and State Governments to host roundtables that engage boys and young men to co-design solutions to address the current gaps in prevention policy and programs. These roundtables look at the impact of respectful relationship education, how to build more positive male role models and the effectiveness of attitudinal change programs.**
- 3. That the words and language that is used in campaigns to engage young men to stop men's violence and abuse towards girls and women resonates and is non-shaming.**

## COMBATING TOXIC MASCULINITY

From a young age, boys and young men are pressured to conform to narrow, and often unrealistic, standards of masculinity. Boys and men are socialised in a culture that normalises, and even condones, violence against women. Not only is this socialisation harmful and limiting, but it can lead to attitudes and beliefs that support male dominance, aggression and control over women.

Young men are at a crossroad, caught between a world that is transitioning from traditional masculine values and expectations, to one that expects differently of them <sup>1</sup>. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the challenges that boys and young men in Australia face as they navigate changing ideas of masculinity <sup>2</sup>. This new understanding has come from academic research that highlights the negative impacts on men who adhere to traditional masculinity, such as mental health problems, limiting opportunities for boys and men to express themselves, acting aggressively, abuse of drugs, and engaging in hazardous sexual conduct, all of which are damaging to both themselves and others.



1. Gaddis, S. M., Ramirez, E., & Hernandez, K. (2020). Masculinity in Flux: A Longitudinal Study of Masculine Norms among Young Men in the United States. *Sex Roles*, 82(7-8), 451-464

2. Yoon, E. (2021). Changing Masculinity in the 21st Century: A Review of Current Research on Men and Masculinities. *Journal of Men's Studies*, 29(2), 148-167

## EXAMPLES OF THE ISSUE

YEAR	INCIDENT
2019	A group of male students at a Brisbane high school were suspended after creating and spreading a "hot or not" list of female students containing derogatory comments <sup>3</sup>
2019	A group of male students at a Melbourne high school were filmed singing a sexist chant on a school bus, with derogatory lyrics about women <sup>4</sup>
2020	Report by the Inspector-General of the ADF found that there was a "warrior culture" within the military that perpetuated sexism, bullying, and harassment. This was found to have negative impacts on the well-being of both male and female service members <sup>5</sup>
2021	A group of students at a Sydney high school were caught sharing explicit images of female students on social media, without consent and accompanied by derogatory comments <sup>6</sup>
2023	Man Cave reported that young men are questioning their identity formation particularly as they navigate rhetoric created by men like Andrew Tate <sup>7</sup>

3. Stern, C. (2019). Female students hot not list demand action. DailyMail. Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-6860743/Female-students-hot-not-list-demand-action-school.html>

4. The Guardian. (2019). Elite private school students filmed singing sexist chant on Melbourne tram. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/global/video/2019/oct/22/elite-private-school-students-filmed-singing-sexist-chant-on-melbourne-tram-video>

5. Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020, Respect @ Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces

6. Rachwani, M. (2022). NSW police investigating 'inappropriate' group chat run by Knox Grammar students. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/sep/01/knox-grammar-school-students-nsw-police-investigating-group-chat-discord>

7. The Man Cave. (2023). Who is Andrew Tate and why do young men relate to him?

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# PATHWAYS TO CHANGE

## 1. Strengthening knowledge and skills on respectful relationships

Research has shown that teaching men and boys about respectful relationships, consent, and positive masculinity is essential in promoting gender equality, preventing gender-based violence, and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of men and the safety of women. Firstly, education is a critical component in teaching boys and young men about respectful relationships and consent. Secondly, the National Curriculum positions the teaching in the classroom where young men are telling us that they need the teaching to be completed at home and in the community.

Being socialised in an environment that can perpetuate unhealthy relationships and toxic masculinity, education must be used as a catalyst to break these norms. Engaging young people in conversations around healthy communication, boundaries, and the importance of seeking consent in all aspects of sexual and romantic relationships, supports the positive development of young people and establishes healthy attitudes. Additionally, providing access to this critical information in a multitude of ways, including interactive workshops, online modules, and social media campaigns, ensures the greatest reach when educating youth.

White Ribbon Australia's barber shop program was developed to help strengthen knowledge and skills<sup>8</sup>. The online hub houses information on a range of topics, educating Australian boys and men on bystander intervention, respect in relationships, the constraints of gender stereotypes and fathering. The online tool is also supported, at times, by physical barber shops, through the conduit of a trusted barber in a space where men feel comfortable sharing and receiving information.

## 2. Promoting attitudinal change

Toxic masculinity awareness is necessary, before boys and young men can adjust their attitudes to generate lasting change. Boys and young men's gender and violent views impact their behaviour.

Conventional masculinity normalises dominance, aggressiveness, and control over women, which perpetuates physical, sexual, and emotional violence against women and girls. We must challenge destructive mindsets and encourage respect, equality, and non-violence to end this violence.

8. White Ribbon Australia. (2023). Digital Barber Shop. Retrieved from <https://www.whiteribbon.org.au/Learn-more/Digital-Barber-Shop>

Boys and young men need as much assistance as possible to negotiate this. We may promote alternate viewpoints among boys and young men in schools, sports teams, workplaces, and community organisations. We can teach children to think differently in certain settings. Encouraging young men and boys to question conventional masculinity will advance a more egalitarian society.

### **3. Building positive male role models**

Australian boys require good male role models to learn about positive masculinity because they are not born with an innate understanding of what it means to 'be a man'. Instead, they learn about masculinity through the culture they are raised in, which often normalises harmful attitudes and toxic traits of masculinity.

Modelling nonviolent masculinity and healthy relationships sets a standard to follow. There is a growing body of academic research that suggests providing male role models for men across the masculinity continuum can be an effective way of transforming norms of violence against women and girls in Australia.

Good role models, such as fathers, coaches, teachers and community leaders, can set an example of what it means to be a man, reinforcing positive attitudes and behaviours. These relationships can be newly established through mentor programs, sport programs or activities, designed to foster engagement between young men and boys and potential role models.

We must demonstrate to our young men and boys that strength does not come from dominance or aggression, but rather from respect, compassion, and empathy. As role models, we must teach them that vulnerability is not weakness, but rather a strength that allows us to connect with others and build healthy relationships. Young men and boys need to be reminded that masculinity does not have to be a zero-sum game, but rather a collective effort to build a better world for everyone.

### **4. Co-designing place-based primary prevention for boys and young men**

In order to mobilise young men and boys to adopt new perspectives and behaviours, we should engage with them in environments they feel comfortable, safe and are open to discussion. Typically, these are informal settings where young men or boys would typically gather, for example sport teams, online, music festivals, barbershops, shopping malls. These spaces are more conducive to engaging in honest and open conversations, where individuals can be more vulnerable<sup>9</sup>. As a result of this vulnerability, it is more likely Australian

9. Friedman, A. (2010). Informal learning. In S. K. Hart (Ed.), Learning and Teaching on the World Wide Web (pp. 25-43). Springer

young men and boys will be receptive to messages of respect, equality, and non-violence, adopting alternative, healthier versions of masculinity that prioritise respect <sup>10</sup>.

Supported by research, informal learning and peer-learning is pivotal in shaping behaviours. These can be powerful tools to promote positive behaviour change, with peers being perceived as more credible sources of information and influential when adopting new attitudes <sup>11</sup>. In addition, knowing masculinity, and manhood, is learnt through socialisation <sup>12</sup>, engaging young men and boys in environments where these norms are fostered, it is possible to intervene in this socialisation process and nurture alternative views of respect, equality and non-violence.



10. Carson, J., Gibbons, M. M., & Tracy, K. (2018). Peer education and behaviour change. In D. G. Singer, & J. L. House (Eds.), *The Wiley Handbook of Educational Psychology* (pp. 557-573). John Wiley & Sons.

11. Casey, E. A., & Smith, M. A. (2010). Capturing the multiplicity of masculinity: The theory of masculinities and domestic violence. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 11(3), 207-220.

12. Smyth, J. M., & Robinson, N. M. (2019). Men's health and well-being: An overview and recommendations for future research. In M. R. Levant & S. J. Wong (Eds.), *The Psychology of Men and Masculinities* (pp. 417-441). American Psychological Association.



## CONCLUSION

There are expectations on young men and boys to conform to traditional views of masculinity and pressure to live up to rigid norms around what it is to be a man. These are detrimental not only to men and boy's wellbeing, but also can perpetuate harmful attitudes and behaviours towards women. Consequently, creating hostile and unsafe environments for women and girls and furthering barriers to gender equality.

To combat this, a nationwide approach is needed to address toxic masculinity, recognising that it is a complex and systemic issue that cannot be solved by individual or isolated efforts alone.

Reinforced by our youth panels program, White Ribbon Australia has established four key ways forward to better engage young men and boys in this issue:

- 1. Strengthening knowledge and skills on respectful relationships**
- 2. Promoting attitudinal change**
- 3. Building positive male role models**
- 4. Co-designing place-based primary prevention for boys and young men**

However, we need the support of government and policy makers, to develop and implement comprehensive strategies, provide resources and collaborate with the many stakeholders it will require to promote positive change. Tackling toxic masculinity is a collective responsibility with efforts of individuals, families, communities and institutions across society.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- A comprehensive national primary prevention strategy that empowers boys to end men's violence against women that is co-designed with Australian boys and young men facilitated by White Ribbon Australia and the Commonwealth Government.
- Commonwealth and State Governments to host roundtables that engage boys and young men to co-design solutions to address the current gaps in prevention policy and programs. These roundtables look at the impact of respectful relationship education, how to build more positive male role models and the effectiveness of attitudinal change programs.
- That the words and language that is used in campaigns to engage young men to stop men's violence and abuse towards girls and women resonates and is non-shaming.