



**New York City Alliance
Against Sexual Assault**

MEDIA CAMPAIGN BACKGROUND

The Alliance developed a media campaign designed to reduce the incidence of sexual violence amongst adolescent boys through a series of public awareness posters. The project will be implemented in high schools throughout New York State with initial funding from the New York State Department of Health.

In order to develop an improved understanding of the situations and issues a teenage boy is confronted with, as well as his attitudes, behaviors, daily influences and media preferences, the media project began with a thorough examination of the appropriate research in three key areas, looking in particular at how they relate to the problems of sexual violence:

1. Research literature on key developmental issues for boys in the target age group
2. Focus groups involving boys in the target age group across New York State
3. Review of other anti-sexual campaigns developed by other programs and coalitions across the US and Canada.

Following the collection of research, a brainstorming session was held.

Research Literature

Research literature on the target group (boys, age 11-15) tells us much we already know. In addition to dealing with puberty and their emerging sexuality, boys of this age are beginning to develop a sense of themselves both as individuals and as moral beings. The influence of the peer group and role models such as sports heroes begins to have a greater influence over their attitudes and behaviors than the family does. One interesting point here was that in much of this research (including our own focus groups), boys acknowledged the influence of role models in terms of material goods, but preferred to hear from other kids like themselves concerning more personal matters.

It is also during this period that heterosexual boys begin to explore relationships with the opposite sex. The research suggests that these early relationships, and the level of aggression they may or may not contain, can be strongly influenced by how these boys understand and experience 'Masculinity.'

Masculinity Defined

The basic assumption in most of the current literature on this topic holds that masculinity is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. In other words, society determines what it means to be a man.

"Traditional" ideas of masculinity include strength (as in physical strength), aggressive and/or dominating behavior, independence, and control, especially of the emotions. A "Real Man" is not only able to dominate women but other men as well.

However, over the past 10-15 years, researchers have begun to notice that many boys are now being exposed to more egalitarian ideas of masculinity, particularly in terms of heterosexual relationships. Some credit the women's movement and feminism with influencing the emergence of new perspectives and criticisms of the old constructions of masculinity. Boys are now being told that it is OK to be sensitive and emotional.

However, at the same time the more traditional concepts of masculinity are still present and going strong. Researchers now refer to 'multiple masculinities' or a 'hierarchy of masculinities,' in which the more traditional interpretations still come out ahead. For example, rowdy and aggressive behavior may be punished in one context while being rewarded in others, particularly in sports. In the media, strength and power are still equated with physical force and the ability to dominate others. This message is particularly strong in venues popular with boys, such as video games, wrestling, and other professional sports.

What Boys Say Themselves

Recent ethnographic studies of adolescence in America (such as *A Tribe Apart*¹ and *Real Boys' Voices*²) suggest that many boys are acutely aware of the conflicting messages they get about 'being a man' in this society. While the cultural definitions of gender roles for women have expanded, there is still a tremendous amount of resistance to change in our culturally perceived and transmitted definitions of male gender roles. Sadly, the worst of this pressure seems to come from their peers of both genders. For example:

Masculinity:

- Boys begin to learn very early about the dangers of being perceived as "feminine" in any way, not only by adults but by other children as well. Reactions from one's peers to any behavior deemed to be less than masculine range from name calling (fag, wuss, wimp, girly) to bullying and even violence. This type of negative reinforcement appears to escalate as boys approach and enter adolescence. Many of the boys who tell their stories in these studies dislike this type of stereotyping, particularly the name calling, but feel powerless to stand against it. This kind of pressure can also lead to conflict and confusion on the part of boys trying to figure out how to regulate their own behaviors.
- Recent research, including work being done by Carol Gilligan, suggests that this type of cultural reinforcement of 'traditional' gender role behavior begins much earlier for boys than it does for girls, including peer pressure from both sexes. This pressure can begin as young as 4 years of age.

Relationships & Peer Pressure:

- As adolescents move towards the formation of intimate (heterosexual) relationships, they face one of the most stressful hurdles of the teenage years: dating. The pressures on boys are exacerbated by the fact that the process appears to be starting much earlier than it used to. Boys of 11 and 12 worry about it, boys of 12 and 13 are already being pressured to have sex by their peers. One of the most interesting facts to emerge from the ethnographic studies in particular is that this peer pressure comes from girls as well as from other boys:
 - In "Real Boys' Voices," one 14 year old talked about not wanting to have sex but feeling pressured into it by his girlfriend's constantly talking about a previous boyfriend. This

¹ Patricia Hersh, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballentine, 1999).

² William S. Pollack, Ph.D, *Real Boys Voices* (New York: Penguin, 2000).

boy felt he had to 'perform' to prove himself better, more of a man, than the previous boyfriend.

- In "A Tribe Apart" a 13-year-old boy talked about his first girlfriend. Although very nervous about 'dating,' he liked the girl and enjoyed the time they spent together. Nevertheless, he ended the relationship after a few months because he couldn't stand the pressure from their friends. His were pressuring him to push for sex and hers were threatening to beat him up if he were to break up with her.

- Adolescent boys still find there is a lot of pressure from their male peers to 'score,' as early and as often as possible. Virginity is unmanly, an anathema, any boy who admits to being a virgin runs the risk of being taunted or bullied. While many boys believe that most of the guys lie about their sexual exploits, the race to lose one's virginity is intense and even competitive among Junior High and High School boys. One result of this kind of pressure is that many adolescent boys are experiencing sexuality and intimacy in relationships as completely separate issues.

Focus Groups

In addition to a review of the literature, the Alliance contracted Applied Research & Consulting LLC to conduct qualitative research in order to inform the development of the campaign concept and to evaluate potential messages to be created. Arc conducted four focus groups with boys in the target age group of 11-15, in New York City and near Albany. Because of developmental differences, separate groups were conducted with boys in age groups 11-12 and 13-15.

Early in the project it had been decided that the overall goal was to develop a campaign with positive messages about relationships with and attitudes towards girls and women. To this end, the focus groups were designed to explore the following three areas:

1. Relationships - including acceptable and unacceptable models of behavior, with special attention to aggression towards others and popular strategies or models for conflict resolution.
2. Self-Identity Issues - including how boys perceive themselves and what do they consider the most desirable images of 'manhood' or 'adulthood.'
3. Media and Information Issues - in particular, who teenage boys identify as authorities or experts and where they look for guidance and information about acceptable and unacceptable behavior with girls and women.

Basically, the findings of the focus groups support the existing research in this area. Some of the high points concerning specific behaviors and opinions relevant to this project include the following:

External Rules and Internal Principles

Teens resent externally imposed rules. Most of these boys felt that external rules are made to be broken, if you can get away with it. However, knowing the "why" reduces rule-breaking. When the reason for a rule is clear, boys indicated that they are less resentful of the rule and less likely to break it. Also, a sense of control increases flexibility regarding rules, as for example when boys participate in the making of rules among peers for playing games.

Generally, internal rules or principles make more sense. Although these are acquired through outside influences, they are internalized in a way that transforms them to individual ethical stances. Internal rules "make sense" to the boys - from their perspective, because these rules are 'truth,' they are not debatable. But when presented with certain hypothetical situations, the boys were able to create scenarios in which they thought it might be justifiable to break even closely held principles.

Navigating the Social Environment and Sexuality

As expected, there was a tremendous amount of posturing among the boys throughout the interviews. They demonstrated a strong need to prove that they are in control and are masculine (tough, brave, strong, and experienced with girls). Because of this posturing, what they said could not necessarily be taken at face value, particularly when it came to issues of fighting and sex. Nevertheless, a few key points were quite clear.

First, boys consider other boys as their natural cohorts. Their perception of gender reflects an acceptance of traditional gender roles. Most of their learning about gender roles comes from observation and experience. For most of these boys, girls are exciting but scary. Although some felt that it was important to "be yourself" with girls, most of these boys felt that they need to act differently, that they can't be themselves with girls.

Much fear was expressed about girls taking advantage of boys, such as: "Sometimes they'll just go out with you for your money."

Respect

The concept of respect was loaded, complex and ambiguous for these boys. In terms of respect towards girls, respectful behavior was characterized by stereotypical, socially conventional behaviors like opening doors and being polite. Disrespectful behavior was characterized as crude behavior, like whistling or hooting. Negative behaviors by girls that elicited the most visceral response were the ones in which the boys felt shame vis-à-vis their traditional "manly" gender roles. However, mutuality in relationships is valued and respect is generally accorded to those who treat you the way they want to be treated, whether male or female. In some cases, though, superficial respect is given to people with social or physical power.

While the concept of respect is potent, it is unclear whether the word "respect" will be effective in messages, partly because of the ambiguity of the nature of respect, and partly because the word has lost meaning as a result of overuse in the culture and media.

Anger, Aggression and Violence

When asked about the kinds of things that make them angry, the boys cited the following:

- An unfair situation
- Being misunderstood

- Being prevented from doing something
- Being made fun of or embarrassed
- Disrespect

Aggression is a completely acceptable phenomenon for these boys. Fighting is fun. They seem to see their aggression more as an activity than as an emotional outlet for anger.

Toward the end of the focus group the boys were presented with a couple of hypothetical scenarios involving kids their age engaged in violent behavior. They were asked what they would think about the situation and what they might do. When presented with a scenario of seeing a boy beating up on another boy, most indicated a general reluctance to get involved unless the boy being hit was clearly smaller and weaker than the aggressor.

This reluctance seemed to spring from a sense of self-preservation: both physical (fear of being hurt) and social (fear of challenging the social order). Concern about physical safety was particularly strong for the older boys from New York City.

When presented with the scenario of a girl being hit, the response was swift and immediate - the boys were outraged by the idea and reported that hitting a girl is against all principles; it's "something you just don't do." However, this certitude wavered somewhat when discussing scenarios in which the girl had taken advantage of her boyfriend or had cheated on him. The macho posturing in response to this was particularly strong among the older boys in New York City.

When asked to come up with messages to stop violent behavior (towards girls), almost all of the solutions they presented involved external, punitive messages (like you'll go to jail), an indication that messages about negative consequences of behavior is the only way in which they are spoken to.

Some messages did focus on the idea that violence towards females is not manly. Only one message of restraint emerged.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In terms of the demographics of the focus groups, the following was observed:

- Geographic considerations: The differences between the New York City and Albany groups are generally typical of the differences found between urban and suburban youth. Basically, the New York City group showed a somewhat higher level of sophistication and expressed a greater level of concern over their physical safety.
- Developmentally, there are significant differences between the younger and older boys. Because of this, ARC recommends that the campaign be targeted to the older group of boys (13-15). It is believed that messages tailored for the older boys would initially have greater immediate impact.

Review of Anti-Sexual Violence Campaigns

In order to better understand what has already been done in terms of media campaigns focusing on sexual violence and young men, an informal survey was conducted to collect information on other campaigns developed by anti-violence coalitions and programs across the United States and in Canada. While we were able to collect a great deal of information on

the kind of campaigns that have already been done, two significant problems emerged from this survey:

1. We were unable to locate any campaigns targeting an age group as young as the target group for our campaign. Most anti-violence campaigns target older boys and young men (college and/or high school students).
2. None of the campaigns reviewed were able to conduct a successful evaluation to study the impact of their efforts. The main reasons for this appear to be time and money.

After reviewing many of the anti-sexual assault campaigns recently run throughout diverse areas of North America, it is clear that there is a significant difference between campaigns that are constructive and affirmative, those that are negative and punitive, and those used to heighten general public awareness. A focus on the consequences of being raped (e.g., pain, depression) or being a rapist (e.g., prison or peer rejection) or what to do if you've been raped (e.g., hotline or rape crisis services) deals with rape as already having happened, treats every boy as a potential rapist, and presents rape as common enough to have a unique infrastructure solely designed to address it. Many organizations have designed campaigns reflecting these negative ideas and punitive consequences.

The **Pennsylvania Coalition Against Sexual Assault** has recently completed focus groups of boys aged 11-14 and girls aged 12-14. With a goal to develop a magazine for both boys and girls throughout the state, focus groups were done in rural, urban and suburban areas. However, boys reported they would not read the magazine or use the internet. They found that while rape was not on the younger boys' radar, music certainly was, especially rap. For the younger group, the issue of respect did not include the self or girls. Older boys were much more difficult to control and had a "macho" attitude that was not prevalent among the younger group.

In reviewing campaigns done by other anti-violence coalitions, we found that several campaigns have generated positive, proactive messages. For example, **San Francisco's Commission on the Status of Women** created a print media campaign of posters throughout the city of San Francisco in English, Spanish and Chinese. The ads were the first in the nation that speak to men, not as perpetrators of violence against women, but as participants in solutions to preventing violence. These ads were placed in men's rooms in bars and restaurants, on billboards, busses and bus shelter sites. The "Respect is What's Sexy" campaign used messages such as:

- If you really want to make a woman feel good, ask for her permission.
- The sexiest thing you can say to a woman is, "Is this okay with you?"

Washington D.C.'s **Men Can Stop Rape (MCSR)** also created a positive campaign in an effort to prevent rape and dating violence among high school youth in the DC area. Taking advantage of multiple media vehicles, the "Strength Campaign" sends the message that men can be strong without being violent and promotes healthy relationships based on equality and respect. In order to gain appropriate input on the content and wording of the media, each high school in the city was represented by a student on the MCSR advisory committee. Ads were strategically located on METRO bus and bus shelter sites and posters were placed in all DC public high schools. REP, an original mini-magazine for students created around Campaign themes, was given to over 12,000 students, guidebooks were distributed to all

school personnel, and "Safe and Strong" workshops by MCSR speakers were conducted with over 300 students in select schools. The Superintendent of schools endorsed the Strength Campaign, which used messages such as:

- My Strength Is Not For Hurting...so when I wasn't sure how she felt, I asked.
- My Strength Is Not For Hurting...so when other guys dissed women, we said that's not right.
- My Strength Is Not For Hurting...so when she wanted me to stop, I stopped.
- My Strength Is Not For Hurting...so when she said no, I said OK.
- My Strength Is Not For Hurting...so when I wanted to and she didn't, we didn't

Many campaigns have chosen to market their messages in a different direction, taking either a negative or punitive stance. Campaign research and focus groups have indicated that finding the right message is quite a challenge. While the campaign created by the **Utah Coalition Against Sexual Assault** did not target young males specifically, they found that males responded most to the idea that the victim could be a female family member. With an ongoing five-year media plan Utah used posters and radio PSAs in schools, busses, colleges, churches, community centers, and law enforcement offices. Using two main messages, Utah's PSAs and posters read:

- Men Speak Out Against Sexual Assault. Every victim is someone's daughter.
- What do you call a man who believes someone he loves will never be raped?
Uninformed.

While several state campaigns have borrowed from the Wisconsin campaign, the **Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs** also used the consequences theme for boys and rape statistics for girls in their campaign aimed at 14-17 year olds. Posters, flyers and newspapers were used in the community, particularly in high schools. An ongoing piece in the high school newspaper incorporated aspects of the campaign to reach a larger population. Posters with a shiny, mirror-like surface had messages for boys that read:

- If she says no and you make her, you're looking at a mug shot.

The Brainstorming Session

After all of the above research was completed, a full-day 'Brainstorming Session' was held at the offices of ARC. Attending were the Alliance, the ARC staff that had conducted the focus groups, the communications firm of Schneider & Shapiro, and representatives of the Washington D.C. based organization, Men Can Stop Rape. After spending the day reviewing and discussing all of the collected material, the group came up with the following suggestions and guidelines for the development of our media campaign:

Things we know

- For any message to be salient, it needs to tap into existing internal principles that boys of this age already hold.

- The message(s) should not focus on a “rule,” or the punitive element of boys’ actions. Punishment is viewed as an external or imposed rule and may not be consistent with their internal value system.
- Sexual and violent images/messages are pervasive throughout all forms of media, often reinforcing outdated gender expectations and gender bias. As adolescents are developing their moral and ethical codes, taking cues from their surroundings, the media is an increasingly influential force in their lives.
- Adolescent boys do not think of their future in certain terms, they see it in a very distanced, abstract way. Therefore, the message(s) should not address consequences of the boys’ actions, as they would relate to months or years from now.
- Issues of fairness are pre-eminent in boys’ lives. However, fairness is not necessarily the same as what is right and wrong.
- Gender anxiety is a constant in boys’ lives and this anxiety may conflict with their capacity for moral reasoning. Messages should not evoke gender anxiety.
- Aggression is part of our society’s normative belief about masculinity. Aggression is viewed as acceptable behavior, but all boys agree that it is wrong to hit girls.
- It is crucial that adolescents not be perceived by themselves or others as “outsiders”

Approaches and Campaign Requirements

- The main theme of the campaign speaks to the idea of sexual responsibility.
- The campaign should be from the boys’ perspective and should not address what girls think about them, as this is already an area of concern for them.
- The message(s) should focus on something that boys already believe.
- Adolescents are more interested in hearing from their peers than they are in hearing from a celebrity. However, it could be powerful to have a mix of celebrities and peers.
- Respect **should** not be dealt with in general terms, because for boys of that age it is an ambiguous concept and has little to do with mutuality.
- The message(s) should be action-oriented and should not speak down to boys. Rather it should speak to their better selves.
- One aim of the campaign should be to normalize different situations for boys. While they are expected to know the right/fair way to act, the reality is that many of them do not. We should give them tools to deal with the many gray areas that they face on a daily basis.
 - If boys are provided with the natural conclusion to a situation, then they do not need to figure out the conclusion for themselves. For instance, if a boy is conditioned to believe that the natural response to being unsure is to ask or seek out information, then he is more likely to do so.
- The message(s) should discuss identity and not empathy. Empathy is a tricky subject at that age because it can play in to victim blaming. Boys’ actions can be justified by the actions of the girls

- The campaign needs to deal with boys as individuals, but the message should be couched in terms of the larger group. We should aim to target them as an individual within a group.
- The message(s) could be conveyed through a narrative that gives numerous flashpoints.