

How Community-Based Mentoring Supports a Wholesome Path for Adolescent Growth in At-Risk Boys: A San Diego Success Story

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In San Diego, 49,937 boys are growing up in fatherless homes. These boys are at a higher risk of educational failure, gang participation, and incarceration. Seventy percent of youth in state institutions today are fatherless. These boys show signs of unresolved trauma, anger, and frustration. Early intervention is crucial in rebuilding positive academic and behavioral habits and a healthy, sustainable lifestyle. Because at-risk youth are more likely to experience failure in school or drop out entirely, schools and providers continue to look for effective interventions for school-related problems affecting them. This is a critical community need.

The purpose of the innovative Boys to Men Mentoring program is to empower fatherless and at-risk teenage boys to follow their dreams. This is done by facilitating weekly, in-school mentoring groups consisting of other boys, volunteer mentors, and staff facilitators, and encouraging emotional wellness through the development of positive decision-making skills. Group meetings are designed to build trust allowing boys to express themselves without fear of judgment. At the end of the program, boys will have been given the tools to (1) make healthier life decisions, (2) use positive coping skills, (3) be self-accountable and responsible, (4) set realistic goals and work to achieve those goals, (5) effectively and positively engage with others, (6) understand the consequences of their actions, and (7) seek help from others when they are unable to handle problems on their own.

BTM's mentoring program is person-centered, allowing each boy to individually address his behavioral health needs and challenges him to learn how to articulate these needs, therefore making him directly responsible for the healing and help he receives. Each boy's decision-making is self-directed, and the program's curriculum is designed to allow him to articulate his decisions and evaluate the consequences of the actions he makes with the other boys, mentors, and staff facilitators present. The program is open to boys, aged 12-17 years. Currently, most participating boys are 12-14 years old, a critical transitional age for forming lifelong habits, relationship skills, and goals.

One of the most important tenets of BTM is that mentors do not tell the boys what to do, but instead, share with them their own feelings when they were teens, their mistakes and the lessons learned, and the consequences of their actions. This approach encourages the boys to tell the truth about their own challenges, make their own decisions on how to deal with those challenges, and take responsibility for their choices and the consequences of their actions. BTM trains mentors to listen to their instincts and take action if they feel that the boy needs additional support to meet his goals. The program is designed to create a safe space for boys to openly express themselves without the fear of judgment. Staff facilitators are also trained to (1) identify healthy behavioral habits, (2) know the general stages of adolescent development, (3) utilize group dynamics and effective communication skills, (4) employ cultural awareness in group discussions, (5) understand tribe mentality, (6) utilize active listening skills, and (7) understand BTM policies/procedures and mandated reporter obligations.

The weekly mentoring provides boys with caring, male mentors and rewards their success with positive affirmation. Without positive male role models, boys struggle to develop emotional maturity. For many of the boys, the meetings can be the first time they witness men being open and honest. This exposure enables boys to develop more positive decision-making skills by learning how to analyze their choices and assess the consequences of their actions. The ultimate goal is for each boy to prioritize his emotional and mental wellness. To reward participation and improvement, boys are invited to Adventure Mountain Weekend, a transformative, weekend camping experience. Boys are engaged in emotional development activities and a rite of passage that encourages self-reflection and exploration. Boys often shed tears as they relinquish years of anger, gaining greater clarity, and self-confidence. Through these critical breakthroughs, the boys are supported with a community of staff, mentors, and peers.

In September of 2013, the Caster Family Center for Nonprofit and Philanthropic Research at the University of San Diego conducted a case study using a wide variety of methods to collect and analyze data to evaluate the extent to which BTM's goals had been achieved. Over the years, BTM has formed several collaborative relationships with middle and high schools, and the study focused on the participants of the most established middle school site. The participants of this study included individuals from both within and outside the BTM organization. From within BTM, three administrators (including a program founder), five volunteer mentors, eleven parents, and twenty-three boys (ranging in age from 12-15 years) participated in this qualitative research study.

The research questions that guided the study were as follows: (1) How does the collaboration function? (2) What is the impact of the collaboration on participants? (3) To what extent are the goals of both organizations, schools and BTM realized?

While this study elucidated several of the structures and workings of the collaboration, it also documented the effectiveness of the BTM mentoring approach. Many of the boys

within this study were coping with multiple compounding risk factors. These same risk factors, i.e., poor academic performance, truancy, frequent disciplinary actions in school, and aggressive and defiant behavior, appear to be related to school drop-out, suspensions or incarceration. The case study findings indicated that program participants were able to improve academic performance, behavior, and relationships with adults. This study not only gives hope for the future of fatherless or at-risk boys, but also underscores the urgent need to implement similar partnerships and programming within other high risk schools. The study investigators conclude with a strong recommendation to invest in the further development, research, and evaluation of the BTM organization and its partner schools.

With regard to the three specific research questions, the findings of the study concluded the following: (1) The BTM organization provides the school with increased resources that aid participants in improving their overall success in and out of school. 100% of parents strongly agree BTM is a good thing for their son. (2) Improved grades, increased attendance, and school engagement show that BTM positively influences student behavior. There are less high-level infractions at school, boys report being happier, have a more positive outlook on life, have improved self-esteem, and engage in less risk-taking behavior. BTM enhances boys' relationships. Students are able to build more friendships, and be more trusting of adults. They are also able to communicate more effectively. (3) Both the school and BTM benefit from maintaining the collaboration. For more details about the study and its findings, please go to <http://boystomen.org/case-study/>

What does the future hold? BTM is currently running almost fifty weekly meetings serving over 780 teenage boys in the San Diego area. The goal is to continue expanding the program to every school in San Diego County. For over twenty years, BTM has found that creating communities of positive male mentors for a fatherless or at-risk teenage boy to get support, encouragement, and guidance from caring and responsive male adults can drastically change the trajectory of a boy's life.

“We have grieved the tragedy of good boys lost to gang violence, suicide, and drug abuse. We know that every boy wants to be a good man; they just need men to show them the way. We know that all it takes to change a boy's life is a few good men who show up and care.” - <http://boystomen.org/the-problem/>,

Innovative programs for high risk boys which intervene at a critical time in adolescence have been urgently needed to reach out and direct boys to a wholesome and fulfilling life path. Their well-being contributes significantly to our community's health and prosperity, as they are part of the future fabric of society. They are an effective way to disrupt the school to prison pipeline. BTM currently has seventy mentors and mentor recruitment is an ongoing process to fulfill the needs of the community. Meetings typically occur during the day at participating middle schools in North and East County, and the organization has plans to expand into Chula Vista. If you would like more information on the BTM program, or are interested in volunteering to be a mentor, check out their website.