



WHAT IS **HEALTHY MASCULINITY,** AND HOW DO WE OFFER IT TO THE BOYS **IN OUR** **NEIGHBOURHOODS** TODAY?

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 12 months, growing concerns over the rise of the manosphere, escalating mental health struggles and deepening loneliness among young men has dominated headlines. From Sir Gareth Southgate's David Dimbleby lecture, which warned of "toxic influencers" stepping into the role once played by father figures, to the runaway success of Netflix's *Adolescence*, to the John Lewis Christmas advert, which featured a rare father-son bonding scene-together, these moments have spurred national debate on the need for boys to have positive male role models.

These warnings, which are recognised at the highest levels of decision-making by both sides of the political divide, point to a boyhood in the West that is in crisis. Well before any of these hit our television screens, the term 'toxic masculinity' - first popularised in 2015 - had blossomed to become a casual, sweeping condemnation of 'any male behaviour that the user disapproves of' (Reeves, 2022: 107). Within half a dozen years, the term, which was deployed without a constructive alternative, was being used to describe anything from not wearing a COVID mask, to voting for Brexit, and almost poisoned 'the very idea of masculinity itself' (ibid: 107).

MEN, MASCULINITY AND FATHERS

With media portrayals of masculinity being what they are, it's easy to conflate masculinity with toxicity. Yet this is not because masculinity is inherently unhealthy, but because its most distorted forms have dominated the public view. As programmes such as Louis Theroux's 'Inside the Manosphere' demonstrate, the boys in our classrooms, streets and churches have easy access to a message that peddles 'alpha' masculinity - a hyper-masculine, money-crazed caricature of power that offers a survival guide to a tranche of boys who lack a healthier alternative.

Yet what does healthy masculinity look like? And, more crucially, how do we offer it to the boys in our neighbourhoods today?

To understand the rise of the phenomena that underpin toxic masculinity, the "Manosphere," and the wider crisis facing the UK's young men, we must view each of them not as root causes, but as symptoms of a deeper absence.

Until the post-war era, it was not uncommon to see a father and son working shoulder to shoulder. A son would learn his trade from his dad, who would pass on his professional skillset,

along with a lived sense of belonging to a nuclear family, and, by extension, to a community. Masculinity, in this context, was not theorised - it was passed on in a 1:1 setting.

... 2.5 MILLION CHILDREN IN THE UK HAVE NO FATHER FIGURE AT HOME.

In modern times, this image has almost entirely vanished. The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) reports an 'epidemic of fatherlessness', noting that 2.5 million children in the UK have no father figure at home. Family stability is now sharply divided by income. Among the wealthiest fifth of families, 96% of children grow up with two parents - 84% married and a further 12% cohabiting. In the poorest fifth, that figure drops to just 28%, with only 19% living with married parents and 9% with cohabiting ones, showing a clear and consistent decline in two parent households as income falls (Davies, 2021).

Why do low-income contexts have over-proportionate levels of fatherlessness? The answer can be put simply: poverty drives family breakdown, and family breakdown drives poverty. This reverse-halo effect hollows out the networks of good men with whom young boys would normally have communed and formed identity-shaping relationships. Added to which is the smartphone revolution, which has led so many teens to claim that the virtual world is more concrete than the 'offline' reality. It is no surprise, then, that when a boy is more likely to own a smartphone than to live with his father by the time he sits his GCSEs (CSJ, 2025), his initiation into manhood is outsourced to influencers, and the algorithm becomes the patriarch.

... WHEN THE VILLAGE NO LONGER RAISES THE CHILD, THEN SOMEONE - OR SOMETHING - ELSE WILL.

Institutions like the church, which once anchored communities, have declined, and secular alternatives are scarce. This has left a male vacuum that influencers are all too happy to fill with a version of manhood rooted in being graded on external metrics rather than grounded in intrinsic worth or relational stability. In other

words, we used to adhere to the notion that it takes a village to raise a child, but that belief has faded, and when the village no longer raises the child, then someone - or something - else will.

At Chapter2, a Reading-based charity that mentors fatherless boys through a network of 1:1 male volunteers, we believe that a male role model does more than redirect a single life. In contexts of father absence - where harmful attachment patterns are frequently passed down - this intervention can break a generational cycle. History suggests that in areas where there is a breakup of the social fabric, gangs will provide the belonging, loyalty and love that fatherless boys are not finding at home. The data on this provides a stark reality: 76% of children in custody report an absent father, and the London Violence Reduction Unit estimates that 60% of boys whose fathers are in custody go on to offend themselves (CSJ, 2009).

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

But if we look beneath the surface, we see a crisis that is not merely sociological. In each of our mentees at Chapter2, we consistently see how multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences cause a physical "weathering" of the developing body (CDC and Kaiser, 1998). The chronic release of stress hormones causes such an upheaval to the neuronal connections that our mentees' nervous systems are often in a state of high alert (ibid). So, what may appear behaviourally as defiance is often neurologically rooted in survival.

Added to which is the pressure of economic instability when a father is absent from a household. This means that a fatherless boy not only carries the imprint of early-life trauma on his mental wellbeing, but he often lives with the fear of not knowing where the next meal will come from. These mutually compounding pressures come with significant long-term risks to physical health, and the absence of paternal involvement correlates with increased rates of smoking, drinking, and drug abuse.

WHERE ARE THE MEN?

So, where are the good male role models to point our boys in the right direction? And what does healthy masculinity have to do with all this?

... WE BELIEVE THAT THE GREATEST SYMBOL OF HEALTHY MASCULINITY CAN BE FOUND IN THE "HEALING ARCHITECTURE" OF 1:1 MENTORSHIP.

At Chapter2, we believe that both questions are inextricably linked, because we believe that the greatest symbol of healthy masculinity can be found in the "healing architecture" of 1:1 mentorship. If human connections create neuronal connections, then the antidote to trauma must be relational. Research confirms that the presence of even one stable, non-parent adult can fundamentally rewire a child's damaged neuronal connections and thus alter their life's trajectory.

We recently used a phrase in our marketing push that was simply: 'the world needs good men'. The mentor offers this vision of a good man in its clearest form. He is not a "hero" in the cinematic sense; he is a value-driven man who is consistent, non-judgmental, and present. By providing unconditional acceptance, the mentor allows the mentee to move out of a state of hyper-vigilance as trust gradually forms and can help arrest the decline in wellbeing that would otherwise continue well into adulthood. In this sense, mentoring is not merely supportive, but therapeutic and reparative.

... EVERY £1 SPENT ON EFFECTIVE EARLY INTERVENTION YIELDS UP TO £17 IN NET SOCIETAL BENEFIT.

Besides the benefit to the community, the economic case for this intervention is overwhelming: RAND Corporation studies suggest that every £1 spent on effective early intervention yields up to £17 in net societal benefit (Dying to Belong, CSJ). A large part of this high rate of return is due to the preventative nature of youth mentoring. Well-intentioned attempts to

cure issues of youth crime or gang recruitment without an early treatment of deep-seated trauma will only address the symptoms - and will likely have less leverage on the outcomes. And yet, mentoring's deepest value cannot be captured in economic terms, as it is the most direct and credible way to prove to a boy who has experienced abandonment that he is worth staying for.

... "I MERELY CHIPPED AWAY AT EVERYTHING THAT WASN'T KING DAVID".

CONCLUSION: CHIPPING AWAY THE MARBLE

Five centuries ago, a 26-year-old Michelangelo took a block of marble that other artists had abandoned as 'unworkable' and flawed. After two years of secret labour, he unveiled the statue of David. When asked how he had achieved such perfection, he famously claimed that his process had been simple: "I merely chipped away at everything that wasn't King David" (Hepburn, 2018). To Michelangelo, the figure already existed inside the stone; his job was simply to free it from its prison.

When we train our mentors, we tell them that the boy they will mentor is - like King David - encased in marble - layers of internalised rejection, the clamour of hyper-masculinity, and protective shells of mistrust.

So how do we offer healthy masculinity to the boys in our neighbourhoods today? At Chapter2, we believe that the better question begins closer to home. It requires shifting our language from the collective and abstract - "we" and "our" - to the personal and concrete: "I" and "my."

How do I offer healthy masculinity to the boys in my neighbourhood today?

I show up for them. I pick up a chisel. And I work deliberately, patiently, and relationally until the real image emerges.



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CHAPTER2

If you would like to learn more about Chapter2's work, please visit our website at **chapter2.org.uk** or scan the QR code. If you live near Reading and would like to register your interest in becoming a mentor, you can do so via our website. If you'd like to support our work financially or if you'd like to get involved in our advocacy work, please get in touch via our website.

