

‘He’ll be Okay: Growing Gorgeous Boys into Good Men’
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The reality of adolescent boys.

‘What is the definition of a good man?’

‘What is the essence of being male?’

‘What does it mean to be a young man in today’s world?’

‘What makes a good man in the 21st century?’

These questions formed the basis of an energetic discussion that took place at a Heads of Boys’ Schools Conference held in Nelson, New Zealand, in September 2001, and it was as a result of this discussion that the Good Man Project became a reality. The aim of the project was to facilitate discussion within and between boys’ schools in New Zealand with a focus on developing a working definition of what makes a good man in the 21st century, a definition that it was hoped would influence the direction taken by boys’ schools in the education of their students.

My experience as someone who had worked within male prisons for a number of years had led me to believe that for many young men, too many in fact, prison has become ‘the’ rite of passage, the place to which they come to prove they are men. They don’t come deliberately, but rather as a result of choosing to indulge in behaviour they see as manly without pausing to consider the likely consequences, behaviour that includes drinking alcohol in significant quantities, fighting to defend their own or their mate’s honour and driving cars fast. The challenge presented by the negative statistics associated with young men is to identify and provide more positive rites of passage than those outlined above, rites of passage that celebrate manhood and maleness while increasing the chances of young men making it safely through the turbulence that is male adolescence.

Discussions with over a hundred classes of boys as part of the Good Man Project gave me an insight into the pragmatism and intuition of boys and a sense of how we might be able to harness these attributes and so make their journey through adolescence a little easier on both them and us. The discussions also allowed me to view the parents of adolescent boys through the eyes of their sons, the result being a clearer understanding of the different and complimentary roles parents might want to think about adopting as the stresses involved in managing boys caught up in a flood of testosterone build. The physicality of boys, the degree to which they live outside their bodies for a great deal of the time are also factors that influence boys’ behaviour in classrooms, another area to consider in the management and enjoyment of adolescent boys.