

Working with Boys

“There’s no such thing as a bad boy – just a bored one!” (quote from a children’s leader in the online survey)

These are the findings from an online Scripture Union survey, which ran from September 2009 to February 2010 on working with boys.

Who took part?

More women than men took part. There is a good spread of ages and churchmanship. The majority of you work as children’s or young people’s leaders with co-ordinators, children’s or youth paid professionals and a small number of church leaders also represented. Nearly 90% of you are engaged in church-linked work with the majority working with children or young people mainly on Sundays during church services and some at other times including holidays. Just under half of you work with a fairly equal mix of boys and girls while 25% work with a mix but with girls in the majority and 23% with a mix but with boys in the majority. Some (7%) work exclusively or primarily with boys. You work with a variety of age groups and group sizes.

What did we ask you to do?

We asked you to react to a number of statements about working with boys. These were all statements that had emerged from an earlier, much smaller research project and therefore needed wider testing. While we recognise that each person is an individual, we feel it is still valuable to explore what many boys may find helpful. These statements focused on what boys may find helpful there was no inference that girls may not also find these things helpful. We also asked if you had comments about specific activities that work better with boys-only or mix-gender groups and if you had any other general comments from your experience of working with boys.

What did you tell us?

8 out of 10 or more of you agree with the following statements. Indeed a fifth to a half of you *strongly* agree with these statements. Those of you who don’t agree tend to be neutral with very few of you disagreeing.

- Leaders should seek to understand the world in which boys live day to day.
- A supportive team spirit and training opportunities help build a strong leadership team.
- Leaders of all ages, including older leaders, are valuable in boys’ ministries.
- Leaders working with boys need to do so on a regular basis and be highly committed to building relationships.
- Boys are looking for positive male role models.
- Younger boys benefit in seeing the spiritual development of boys older than themselves, using them as role models.

- Boys have a need for hand-on activities and when this need has been met they are able to be more open and engage in more reflective activities.
- Relationships with individual leaders are important to the faith development of boys.
- For effective groups, the recruitment of a wide variety of leaders needs to be an on-going priority.
- Boys value having a specific role that uses their individual gifts.
- Boys like sports activities.
- Meetings in small groups encourage trust and openness so vital for the spiritual growth of boys.
- Boys are varied in their interests and any attempt to stereotype them should be avoided.
- Boys prefer variety in activities with information given in small chunks.
- Groups need to function at times other than Sunday mornings for boys who are football/sports enthusiasts.
- An integrated programme where group activity provides leaders with the opportunity to speak about God is more effective than one single 'God slot'.

For 3 statements, 7 out of 10 of you agree:

- A leadership team of both men and women is as effective with boys-only groups as with a mixed group.
- Leaders can engage particularly effectively with boys who share the same interest area as they do.
- Active men's and father's groups can foster environments ideal for the spiritual growth of boys.

While still receiving majority agreement, fewer (just 5 or 6 out of 10) of you agree with the following statements:

- Boys who play an instrument find this an ideal way to participate in worship involving music and/or singing.
- Boys prefer to be more active or physical in prayer.
- Boys respond well to specific training and mentoring in preparing them for a leadership role.
- Boys enjoy belonging to programmes involving large groups of boys.
- Boys enjoy being involved in setting up sessions and generally serving others in practical ways.
- Boys need language that communicates a spirituality which is acceptably 'masculine'.

The majority of you (53-58%) are neutral about whether there are specific activities that work better in boys-only groups or mix-gender groups. Many of you gave us specific comments on these statements. Among comments on activities that work better in boys-only groups, the strongest theme emerging is about *the approach* to activity, rather than necessarily the activity itself with emphasis on how boys prefer 'doing' or physical activities. A second theme emerging is how discussion can work better in single-gender groups, particularly on matters relating to relationships and sex. Regarding specific activities that work better in mix-gender groups, the responses you gave are wide ranging but include drama, team games, sung worship, discussion (providing not too personal a subject), music groups, and community work e.g. decorating a room.

Many of you also made comments on your experience of working with boys. The strong theme of boys preferring a doing or more active approach comes through again and is applied to a range of activities, including prayer, Bible study and craft. The emphasis again is on the *approach* to the activity rather than the activity itself. A second theme coming through strongly is the need for positive role models, both in the form of older boys and male leaders. A third theme is around leadership with comments including the desire for male leaders where boys are present.

What happens next?

Scripture Union has appointed Richard Witham as the 'ministry champion' for boys and young men.



Richard will be developing this ministry further, working with other organisations and 'championing' good practice. He can be contacted on richardjw@scriptureunion.org.uk

Scripture Union will be creating *Your MOT on Boys' Ministry* to help you look at how you work with boys and consider changes that might make your work even more effective. The results of this survey and other research information will feed into that. If said you wanted this, it will be sent to you as soon as it is available.

We've got lots more ideas in the pipeline: look out for news in the Christian media and visit www.scriptureunion.org.uk

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