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Men (and boys) at work

An interview with David Hatfield, specialist in work with men and boys

by [BEN SICHEL](#)

David Hatfield has worked with over 18,000 men and boys in his career as a leadership consultant and facilitator. He was recently at the Tatamagouche Centre in Northern Nova Scotia delivering a 2-day workshop entitled "It's Better to Build Boys than to Mend Men," a seminar aimed at people who work with adolescent males.



David Hatfield with a group of boys in Metchosin, BC (Photo P. Owen)

Hatfield describes his work as "social justice, masculinity, and leadership". Though programs aiming to create healthy young girls and women are becoming more common, similar programs for boys are sorely lacking, says Hatfield. The Halifax Media Co-op caught up with Hatfield before he returned to his home in Vancouver.

What kind of work do you do with teenage boys?

I describe my work as masculinity work that focuses on exploring male identity and building male community. Once we step into that male identity conversation we can aim that focus on any particular aspect of life. "Brotherhood is a constant possibility" is a line I use often – that's how it's meant to feel and that's how I think it should be felt.

How do you go about your work?

Whether it's boys or men I ask them the same question to start off with: What do you feel the world is telling you and expects from you as a male? I'm not telling people how to be, like I've got some thing about masculinity all figured out. It's more their views, their opinions, their experiences. That's the raw material.

Then we look at the world, our lives through that lens. Examples would be relationship to self, relationships with other males, relationships with females, relationship to father figures, mothers, sexuality and intimate relationships, emotions, power, conflict, and violence, assertiveness, life purpose, body image, peaceful power.

We do some thing just for fun, some games. It's all very creative as well. The emotional aspects are often the least familiar for some males, so I bridge those parts with easy, fun familiar topics or activities. Laughter and humor is a fundamental part of all of this too.

How did you start doing this kind of work?



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I started with a violence prevention company that worked with youth, and we did violence and sexual violence prevention work. We did it by gender, split the boys and the girls. After 2 years of doing this I was promoted to direct the boys' program and was invited to become a business partner, at which time I was told to think critically about both programs, the girls and the boys.

What I saw was a gender bias in compassion for the experiences of girls and women. There was no equivalent space made for the experience of boys and men. It was a group of grade 8 boys one day who called me on it, in their own way, and I realized they were right. I was treating them unfairly, and I was doing it because that's how I'd been trained to run that program.

It was a real politicized moment for me, an awakening – that I was biased in my own teaching. I had to take a step back and start experimenting and learning how to work with males with the same sense of compassion and critical thought that I'd been doing on behalf of females.

Fate took me to New Zealand in 2003. There I met a man who is the catalyst for the men's movement in New Zealand. He saw me as a peer and he mentored me and invited me into the men's network there. Since then it's been a process of trying to initiate the work here in Canada on that, with the intent of building mainstream infrastructure, mainstream consciousness.

It's an ironic way of saying it, but for me men needed defending. They needed someone to go first.

How do you know if it's effective?

I know my work starts being effective about 20 minutes after it starts. At that point what I see is the basic level of suspicion, resistance, unconscious homophobia, and general worry that participants have about looking stupid or weak, has melted away. They're connecting with that same longing that I connected with to be in brotherhood with other men. They're realizing that other males have the same questions. There's something about the way that we're just hanging out together having experiences, sharing stories, eating food, that's radically different from what they're used to. I'm listening to them learn it: "I want this, I'm supposed to have this."

I know it works when I see men crying openly. I see it when they admit anything that normally they don't want to admit. I see it when I see more physical contact between men. Handshakes, high fives, hugs, when men look each other in the eye for longer.

Then I see it in the aftermath of the work. The call for more. Men and boys waking up to their own callings within masculinity work. This may be shocking for Canadians, but in New Zealand what I see is men quitting their jobs laying carpet and going back to school to become counselors to help other men.

If you've ever watched young guys at a skateboard park, trying to nail the same trick 127 times in a row and only hitting it a handful of times, they just keep going. That's the innate drive I want to enable. So that some men who are called to it can give that level of drive back to the community be of service to men, to families and to women, through conscious masculinity work.

What are some of the biggest challenges you face?

The single biggest challenge is getting men to show up. There's nothing harder than that right now. It's countercultural work right now. It's not normative, it's not mainstream. It has major stigma. Part of it is the first glimmering of a men's wave in the 90s, where some really good men and women got some good stuff started. But part of that was the image of the wild man, the man connecting with nature. The

image of that was men naked, drumming and dancing in the woods. That became the lampooning of the whole thing. It became the butt of jokes.

Another source of stigma is that men getting together over time have done a lot of damage in the world over time. War, gangs, mass rapes, genocides, the list is long and disturbing.

The last part is: during my lifetime, the enlightened, socially progressive point of view has been the women's or feminist inspired viewpoint. It took me a while to realize that masculinity work doesn't take away from feminist work or women's work. There's a concern among some that if I'm coming to work with young men or boys or train teachers or whatever, that somehow if men gain something, that women lose as a result. That perception also stands in the way.

The reality is, so many women have thanked me, encouraged this work. They see this is the other part that needs to happen. It's not women's job to do this, it's men's. It's our honour and our responsibility.

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[What a great interview. This](#)

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What a great interview. This is some great work that is happening, and so necessary. Thanks for sharing it with us.

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Submitted by Halifax Anonymous (not verified) on Mon, 12/21/2009 - 15:40.