



## Act Like a Man

### The Act-Like-a-Man Box

What do boys learn about what it means to *act like a man*? Think of some of the adult men in your life when you were a child and the messages, they gave you. We can sum up these messages in the box below.

Act Like a Man	
Men...	Men are...
yell at people	aggressive
have no emotions	responsible
get good grades	mean
stand up for themselves	bullies
don't cry	tough
don't make mistakes	angry
know about sex	successful
take care of people	strong
don't back down	in control
push people around	active
can take it	dominant over women

We draw a line around these messages and call it the Act-Like-a-Man Box. As young boys we are supposed to learn to live inside that box. It's a list of expectations about who we should be, how we should act, what we should feel and say.

## **Staying in the Box Has Costs**

It's impossible to live up to the demands in the box. Yet we are supposed to, twenty-four hours a day. When we step out of the box—when we are not acting tough enough, strong enough—we often get called names. If people called us a girl, a wimp, or a fag, many of us fought them to prove that we were *in the box*.

Look at those names we get called. Notice that many have to do with being girls or with being gay. We are taught to fear two things: that we are not manly enough and that we might be gay. Homophobia, which means the fear of gays or of being taken for gay, is a fear we learn as boys and carry with us throughout our lives.

Homophobia promotes violence against gay men as we try to prove our manliness by attacking others. Besides the fights, we were often passed over by girls, left out of activities, teased, and picked on when we stepped outside the box.

Adults keep pushing us to be tough, and that begins early. Many of us were not held after we reached the age of four or five. Besides the emotional and physical abuse from adults, one out of every five or six of us is sexually assaulted as a child. Often the verbal, physical, or sexual abuse was part of our family lives and continued for years.

Of course, it was not safe even to talk about any of this. It still may not seem safe. What about this box makes it hard for a guy who's been abused to talk about it and get help? What names is he afraid he'll be called?

Nobody is born in the box. It takes years and years of enforcement, name-calling, fights, threats, abuse, and fear to get us in this box. By adolescence we believe that there are only two choices: We can be a man or a boy, a winner or a loser, a bully or a wimp, a champ or a chump.

## Exercise 1

Answer yes or no to the questions that follow.

Yes

No

Have you ever worried you were not tough enough?

Have you ever exercised to make yourself tougher?

Have you ever been told not to cry?

Have you ever been hit to make you stop crying?

Have you ever been called a wimp, queer, or fag?

Have you ever been told to act like a man?

Have you ever been hit by an older man?

Have you ever been forced to fight or been in a fight because you felt you had to prove you were a man?

Have you ever seen an adult man you looked up to or respected hit or brutalize a woman emotionally or physically?

Have you ever been physically injured by another person?

Have you ever been injured on a job?

Have you ever been physically injured and hid the pain or kept it to yourself?

Were you ever sexually abused or touched in a way you didn't like by another person?

Have you ever stopped yourself from showing affection, hugging, or touching another man because of how it might look?

Have you ever been arrested or done time in prison?

Have you ever been (or do you plan to be) in the military?

Have you ever gotten so mad that you drove fast or lost control of a vehicle?

Did you ever drink or take other drugs to cover your feelings or hide pain?

Have you ever felt like blowing yourself away?

Have you ever hurt another person physically?

Have you ever hurt another person sexually, or were you sexual with another person when that person didn't want to be?

These are all ways that violence has been used to train us to be men.

### **Exercise 2**

Describe any feelings and thoughts you had while going through the lists above.

Which of the experiences mentioned in the list have been most painful? Who can you talk with further about them?

### **Exercise 3**

List three qualities from the Act-Like-a-Man Box that you are still trying to unlearn.

### **Exercise 4**

What are the names that boys get called when they are not acting tough enough?

What are some names that you used, or were used on you?

What is the effect of this name calling?

What do you think is the connection between this kind of name-calling and the messages from the box that you still want to unlearn?