



Storytelling for Social Change

A Supplemental Resource to Maine Boys to Men's™
Reducing Sexism and Violence Program™ for Middle School
Version 1.0

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Introduction

Maine Boys to Men engages communities to shift attitudes and actions to end male violence against self and others. Boys and men are bombarded by narrow, confusing, and often destructive messages about what masculinity is and isn't, contributing to a culture of self-harm, disrespect, and violence against others. Our unique set of experiential workshops, rooted in a broader view of masculinity, empowers all people to notice and intervene in potentially harmful situations long before they become violent.

Stories are a powerful way to connect about shared struggles, challenge harmful stereotypes, and plant seeds about what healthy masculinity can look like. Storytelling is a thread that connects all of our work. We also recognize that stories are a unifying tool. They are not only for sharing struggles but are also for connection across all of our human emotions: anger, happiness, gratitude, sadness, and beyond.

Whether we are facilitators sharing our own stories with a group or drawing them out from young people in our workshops, we recognize the incredible potential of stories to reduce feelings of isolation and enable feelings of connection and empathy.

Our programs provide a unifying experience and a path forward for individuals and communities who want to change cultures of harm and violence. We do so through powerful and interactive workshops with a variety of audiences including boys in middle school, all genders in high school, and adults. We lead these experiential workshops using our Reducing Sexism and Violence Program - a nationally recognized set of youth-informed curricula that is based on extensive research, evidence-based practices, and data that demonstrate program impact.

When using storytelling in all of our programs including the Reducing Sexism and Violence Program for Middle School (RSVP-MS), we focus on key questions:

- How do we relate to this work through our stories?
- How do we tell those stories?
- How do we understand our stories?
- How do our ideas about gender inform the stories we tell?
- How do we model vulnerability and keep conversations developmentally appropriate with middle school participants?

In this guide, we will explore these questions and the ways they relate to facilitating the RSVP-MS program.

How to Think About Our Stories

What Do We Mean by Storytelling?

What do we mean by storytelling? For the purposes of this guide, when we say “storytelling,” we mean speaking from our own experiences in order to make meaning of individual experiences for the sake of educating, supporting, or informing others. Stories connect and unify groups. For some participants, a story may be all they remember from a certain training. We also mean talking frankly about how the circumstances of our lives have impacted us. At Maine Boys to Men, we believe that storytelling is the key to powerful and transformative relationships with young people that can shift us from a culture of violence to one of dignity and respect. Our shared humanity is found in our stories.

The Value of Storytelling

Maine Boys to Men is dedicated to making its programs accessible and inviting to all participants, which is one reason we focus on storytelling. Using storytelling throughout our curricula makes space for many different communities to personalize the work and speak to experiences that are most relevant and resonate best with their participants.

Much of the value of storytelling lies in the fact that it is, at its heart, an intersectional process. When we say “intersectional,” we mean that people’s multiple identities are always experienced simultaneously, rather than separately. As a form, storytelling is cross-cultural. It can allow us to hear about people’s complete experiences, told directly from their perspective.

When done well, storytelling can illustrate this simultaneous nature of people’s identities, rather than asking individuals to value one identity over another. This provides a nuanced and much clearer picture of the totality of people’s experiences, leading to heightened understanding.

Storytelling can be effective in elevating the voices of people who have first-hand experience with different forms of oppression — providing a tremendous opportunity for others to learn from them. Stories can build connections in places where we might not otherwise feel connected to those whose lives are different from our own. We also know that privilege influences our perceptions and that the process of storytelling can be an effective way to address and deconstruct privilege. Our approach harnesses the passion for change that exists across communities of many backgrounds and identities.

Storytelling also helps us to have empathy for each other, which can increase our feelings of emotional connectedness — especially across lines of difference. This connection is at the root of Maine Boys to Men’s work. When people feel more connected to each other, it is much more likely that they will practice being engaged upstanders and/or act to actually prevent harmful situations from happening in the first place. This is a powerful possibility that is made real through storytelling.

Modeling Behavior

Modeling behavior is also an important part of any work with young people. When working with young people, storytelling can help us to model behaviors and ideals we are hoping to foster. Storytelling can model self-reflection, self awareness, vulnerability, the potential for growth and learning — all of which are social-emotional learning competencies. Storytelling can also help us to create counter-narratives, help us to seek support, and open up possibilities for alternative ways of being.

Finally, stories give us concrete examples with which to build on theories about how society and interpersonal relationships function. Reflecting on our stories and sharing them as examples of both challenging and inspiring moments can be an opportunity to model healthy vulnerability for young people. This process helps us make sense of larger social patterns of gender bias and gender-based violence.



Hold On, Isn't Storytelling For Kids?

Historically, storytelling has been and continues to be a global tradition across every culture. From the earliest documented forms of communication, storytelling has been a way that humans interact with each other and make meaning out of our circumstances. Storytelling is actually one of the oldest forms of communication, as oral traditions predate writing.

While certain forms of storytelling have been developed for children, much of the history of storytelling is, and continues to be, among adults as they set community norms, inspire different forms of action, recall important events, and provide moral or ethical guidance through fables or allegories. We tell stories every day, but don't always recognize them as such. These pieces of our experiences can be valuable tools for educating and building connections with others. Stories can be as complex as we are as human beings, and are recognized by many people, organizations, and movements as an important part of communicating a compelling narrative about social change work. For example, the [Ashoka Institute](#) harnesses the power of storytelling to support social change across the globe.

Understood. Now, what about the research?

Data is an important part of moving people to action, yet data alone doesn't compel people to act. Stories bring data to life and facilitate a necessary emotional connection to the data. People often need to know about the experiences and passions of the people behind the numbers in order to be moved. The space between the statistics and the deeply personal lies within our stories. While data are a valuable tool, storytelling is often the catalyst that activates youth and adults as agents of change.

Maine Boys to Men has heard many stories from participants in our programs, providing qualitative data. This knowledge wouldn't be possible without storytelling: we are asking young people to share the impact of their experiences on their attitudes and behaviors. As they participate in dialogue and activities that spark new insights, we hear how these influence shifts in their attitudes and reflections on behavior they've seen and participated in. Our programs invite participants to join us in a process that involves frequent sharing of stories which builds understanding and connection in the room. Furthermore, we know our dialogue-based programs work because they are grounded in extensive research, practice, and third-party evidence. For example, a recent evaluation of our work in middle schools, led by two research universities, demonstrated a significant decrease in the endorsement of attitudes supporting male power and privilege and a significant increase in the endorsement of gender equity in relationships.

How To Create Our Own Stories

“I don’t have a story” or “I’m not good at telling stories... this isn’t for me.”

Here's the secret: you don't have to be a formal storyteller to tell a compelling story! The only requirement is to be authentic. Also, modeling healthy vulnerability is as much the value of storytelling as the story itself. Here at Maine Boys to Men we experimented with storytelling: at first, each of us felt that we didn't have a meaningful story to tell and weren't good at storytelling. However, with some practice and a few short exercises (included here), we realized we all have powerful stories. Additionally, we discovered we each have dozens of moments that we can use as stories in workshops.

What is my story?

First, you may want to do some brainstorming about what stories you will feel comfortable sharing through your work as a facilitator of RSVP-MS. It's not necessary for all of your stories to be deeply emotional, though some of them may be: it's possible to illuminate important aspects of gender and gender-based violence prevention with simple, everyday examples. It is, of course, your choice about what you want to disclose under what circumstances. To get you started with thinking about this, we've developed some initial prompt questions about what stories you may want to tell:

- What was one of your first memories of being conscious of your gender?
- Who first taught you about gender? How?
- How did gender stereotypes shape your-

- childhood? (For example, did you have experience with sports or other activities that made you aware of your gender?)
- Was there a particular person who has influenced your perspective about gender identity?
- Was there a time when you felt pressure to perform your gender identity in a way that did not feel good to you?

How do I ensure my story is developmentally appropriate?

First, we will talk about stories as part of the Maine Boys to Men Training Institute, and you will have an opportunity to talk with Maine Boys to Men staff about the content of your story. Second, there are two ways that you can ensure that your story is developmentally appropriate.

- 1) Leave out graphic content or trauma.
- 2) Tell a story that you have a little bit of emotional distance from, so that it can be delivered without appearing to solicit support from the youth you're working with.

When we say emotional distance, we mean that this is not the first time that you've told the story or processed its impact on your life. Make sure that you have already done some of that processing so that your emotions about the story are not as raw as they might be at first. There are spaces in the community, such as support groups, mental health practitioners, and faith-based groups, to help process challenging stories. Additionally, you may be served by simply processing with a friend, mentor, or family member.

Your story here is meant to be a facilitation tool used to bolster the strength of the program and should not elicit an inappropriate amount of support from program participants.

Finally, we want to always be modeling through our stories that we have learned something or that we have gained something from reflecting on those situations.

We are Trying to Create a Counter-Narrative:

To show another perspective, based in reflection, of situations that participants may commonly encounter. We also want to provide an opportunity for young people to think more critically about a situation and its impact. Finally, we want some part of the experience to be something that young people can identify with; relatable enough that they can empathize with the circumstances. Through the Maine Boys to Men Training Institute, you will be facilitated through activities that support you in navigating this process.

How is My Story Impacted by My Experiences, Identities, and Perspectives?

We've stated that modeling is an important part of the RSVP-MS work, and that extends to thinking about multiple identities. What does it mean for participants to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the identities and stories of their facilitators? We can't overstate the impact of that process.

Some Questions for You to Consider as You Are Thinking Through Your Stories

- How do my experiences affect the stories I tell?
- How do my experiences of and ideas about gender, race, class, religion, ability, etc. inform the stories I tell?
- In what parts of my identity do I experience privilege? Where do I experience oppression?
- How do my multiple identities shape the way that I experience gender?
- What life experiences have I had that have taught me about gender? About harassment and/or violence?
- Where do I perceive commonality beyond my own experiences? Can this help me to relate to others?

Whether a participant is coming from a place of advantage or of oppression, it is particularly powerful to hear members talk about their life experiences related to gender and gender-based violence from the perspective of their identity(s). This helps make the content relatable and provides role models and examples of thriving adults who have struggled with similar challenges that participants may currently be facing. It can also be beneficial to see adults (facilitators) acknowledge their privileges and use that to shape some of their stories. For participants who may not relate directly to the facilitator, it may put the shared experience into a context that people in the room can understand.

Identifying Feelings and Needs to Inform and Support Storytelling

The practice of expressing feelings and needs explicitly is drawn from the practice of nonviolent communication (NVC), a tool for being able to listen fully to other people's stories and to respond in empathic ways. NVC can influence our storytelling by helping us to more clearly articulate emotions. The premise of NVC is that all feelings are a result of met or unmet needs. Often, a situation in which difficult feelings arise can be understood by considering the unmet needs in that situation. The practice of identifying feelings and needs can be a great way to build compassion for ourselves and our own stories in a culture where we are often encouraged to be deeply critical and unforgiving of ourselves. NVC can also expand our empathy for participants in the RSVP-MS program, especially when we observe behaviors and/or have conversations that might be challenging or painful. In these ways, we are both trying to model to participants the use of expressing feelings and needs as well as building a practice of using these tools ourselves. While identifying feelings and needs is modeled and practiced in the Maine Boys to Men Training Institute, we have illustrated the format below for your reference as you practice this over time. This is facilitated by NVC cards that can be found online [HERE](#).

In this process, a storyteller will be partnered with one or two individuals who will respond to the storyteller in a structured format. The storyteller begins by sharing a story and then identifying the feelings that were present by browsing the feeling cards and selecting the feeling words (on the cards) that they identify with.



Then partners in this practice then respond by browsing their decks of need cards and selecting the needs (on the cards) that they might think were unmet in the experience and led to the feeling expressed. The partners show the storyteller the cards they have chosen and say the following, I wonder if you are feeling _____, because of a need for_____. Each person takes a turn as the storyteller until the process is complete.

The process of expressing feelings and receiving curiosity about our needs facilitates the internal process of empathy or self-compassion and supports the development of our own empathy for others' experiences.

This process helps us develop deeper empathy for ourselves and others. With regards to storytelling, this helps us be clear about what underlying needs we have or that others have, which can be useful when crafting stories. This process allows us to understand our current emotional reactions to past experiences, ultimately offering some freedom from pain incurred in those experiences. In this way, we can communicate the story clearly in a manner that remains instructive to the participants learning and constructive to the dialogue in the room. As we understand our feelings and needs, we can convey our stories without seeking the validation of our audience (participants) in the process. This is ultimately about maintaining healthy boundaries between you, the facilitator, and the participants in the program.

Some questions to consider about using NVC to help shape the way you give and receive stories in the RSVP-MS program:

- How does nonviolent communication (speaking from a place of feelings and needs) inform me about responding to others' stories?
- How can I show self-compassion for the feelings I have/had as a result of unmet needs?
- How can I understand my emotional reactions, regulate those when sharing with youth, and use them to inform the experience and impact of sharing?

How do I ensure my story has impact?

All stories that include feeling and needs statements have the potential to be very powerful. As discussed in this guide, being genuine is the most important part of any storytelling. While it's not possible to guarantee a story will have an impact, it is likely that if you are telling a story from your heart, being vulnerable, staying on topic, and modeling self-reflection, that the story will activate participants' empathy. This is, again, at the root of the work: providing an opportunity for participants to experience a different way of being than they might otherwise be exposed to in their lives. The impact is then seen through the opportunity created for reflection and deeper understanding.

As you're crafting your story, you should reflect on what you are comfortable sharing, and only be as vulnerable as you are comfortable with. It is important to keep in mind that some stories may be so intense that they may cause secondary trauma or fracture relationships with patients.



There will undoubtedly be space for growth, and you should, if you want or find necessary, seek outside resources or input for processing your story.

Crafting a story about your experiences with gender and/or gender-based violence can feel like a daunting task. However, the guidelines set forth in these materials aim to simplify the process for you and to encourage you to express your authentic self. Stories don't have to be about huge life events in order to have an impact; sometimes the most powerful lessons come through thoughtful

As you begin using your stories during the delivery of RSVP-MS, you might wonder if you're having the impact you hope for. It can be difficult to fully gauge the impact of our stories on participants. It's impossible to prescribe a certain response that indicates that stories are resonating with participants. However, we know that storytelling is particularly important in upstander education, as it can illuminate ways where prevention or intervention could have changed the course of events.

There are also indicators that a facilitator can look for to determine whether their stories are having an impact. Often, participants will become quiet and listen more closely if they are engaged in a story. Conversely, sometimes participants might begin to act out if a story hits too close to home and feels uncomfortable; when individuals haven't developed language or skills in appropriately expressing emotions, those feelings can manifest in disruptive behaviors. Finally, levels of participation in group discussion and further storytelling from the group can also indicate whether they are engrossed in the material. Sometimes there will be a cascade of storytelling if the facilitator has hit on a topic that feels particularly relevant to group members. It's important to watch for these moments and nurture them, as encouraging participants to share authentically and appropriately about their experiences with gender and gender-based violence is at the core of the work.

For Additional Guidance, Contact Us

We have provided some space on page 13 for you to begin thinking about the stories you want to tell. Don't hesitate to contact a member of the Maine Boys to Men team with any questions about your stories. Thank you for doing the work to help end gender-based violence, one step and one story at a time.

- Maine Boys to Men
- info@maineboystomen.org
- (207) 774-9994
- 170 US Route 1, Suite 230 Falmouth, Maine 04105



Questions to Frame Your Story

Here is a series of questions to help you craft your story. Appropriate stories for the RSVP-MS curriculum help illustrate learning about masculinity that aligns with the core content of the Maine Boys to Men's RSVP-MS training program.

What do I want to talk about related to gender and/or gender-based violence?



What is the purpose of sharing this story?

What are my feelings and unmet needs about this event or story?

Have I talked about/shared this story before? If not, do I have enough emotional distance from the story to be able to tell it safely?

What does this convey about me?

What pieces of myself do I want to reveal in this story?

What pieces of myself do I want to remain private?

What can others learn from this story?

My Story Is:

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