Image before word:
making good contact with boys

It is important to recognise that boys often need a more indirect style of contact in counselling. **Peter Mortola** looks at the reasons for this, and explains how he uses images to initiate the process of honouring the client's style

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For the past seven years, my colleagues Stephen Grant, Howard Hiton and I have been leading counselling groups in schools for 12-year-old boys. We call these gatherings 'BAM! groups' – Boys Advocacy and Mentoring Groups[1]. In these groups we work to help boys develop their relational and communication skills while at the same time using 'boy-friendly' counselling approaches.

We have become aware, through this work, of the difficulty boys often face in making good contact[2], not only with their own emotional states but also with others, as they try to communicate those emotions verbally. While it may be easy to frame this as a 'boy problem', we have come to think of it differently. That is, though we do acknowledge that boys face challenges in easily and directly communicating their emotions to others – especially emotions that reflect vulnerability – we have also come to appreciate that, on average, boys may have a different kind of contact and relational style that must be honoured and addressed in the counselling context.

In this article, we will briefly spell out some of the social influences that make it challenging for a boy to directly express emotions to others, as well as some of the biological influences that may shape a boy's particular kind of contact style. We will then describe an approach to working with boys – using images – in an indirect style that we have found, paradoxically, helps them make better direct contact with each other.

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Boys and contact: cultural limitations and biological differences

Around the world, boys and girls share the same emotions[3], the same capacity for relationship[4], and the same basic cognitive functions and general levels of intelligence[5]. We state these similarities because we do not think that boys and girls should be treated or viewed as different kinds of animals altogether. But we also think it is a mistake to treat boys and girls exactly the same, because of both cultural and biological influences on their development.

Social influences

Boys enter the world full of zest and fully 'in contact' with the world and with themselves. Most boys, however, at some point begin to learn that their openness is a liability. In contrast to their initial authentic, unedited expressions of their own thoughts, feelings and experiences, most boys learn to censor aspects of themselves that they fear do not meet the social expectations for 'being a man'. As William Pollack has described, young males are faced with conforming to the constraints of the 'boy code'[6] and are therefore subject to challenges such as 'boys don't cry' (ie men don't show vulnerability) and shaming taunts if they do cry (eg 'Don't be a girlyman!'). Following the lead of older boys and men, younger boys soon learn to strive for a cool indifference rather than a warm connectedness. Guarding against shame, many boys develop a coat of armour to protect themselves against ridicule and humiliation. The armour that boys wear may serve as a defense against what they see as a threatening world, but it also separates them from necessary contact – from their own experience and from the ability to connect authentically with others.

Biological influences

In addition to these social influences that limit the amount of contact a boy is 'allowed' to make with others, we have learned that there are also biological influences that shape the kind of contact a boy tends to make. From the first day of birth onward, for example, infant baby boys have shown a preference for looking at a mobile hanging over their crib rather than a human face that is gazing back at them. Throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood, females have also demonstrated much greater interest in and success with 'reading faces' (and the emotions on those faces) and therefore empathise more easily with others. Researchers

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are now able to show that baby boys who were influenced by higher levels of pre-natal testosterone show lower levels of eye contact and produce less vocabulary by the time they are walking and talking toddlers[7].

This tendency for girls to have a larger vocabulary and be stronger in various aspects of language use has also been demonstrated across the lifespan, and, importantly, oestrogen is implicated in this strength[8]. For example, when oestrogen's influence declines in women during menopause, so does the edge that women have over men in terms of verbal fluency, naming and articulation. However, when a woman receives oestrogen-replacement therapy, her verbal advantages over men return[9].

Moreover, in addition to using less direct eye contact and fewer words, boys also tend to be more physically active throughout childhood and engage in a 'rough and tumble' style of play that looks different from the face-to-face, verbal style of contact preferred by most girls[10].

The result?

On average, then, a boy's 'contact style' with the world may not look like relational contact at all. That is, in a social situation where you hope to have his complete attention, a boy may tend to squirm and fidget, avoid your gaze, and produce far fewer empathetic statements than you might hope. Spelled out in this way, it is easy to understand how boys are seen as having fewer relational and social skills and less ability to make good contact with themselves and others.

Making better contact with boys, indirectly

We have described how boys tend to make contact with the world and other people in more physically active and less verbal ways – tending to be more comfortable with active, side-by-side interactions rather than verbal, face-to-face communication.

Although this kind of 'indirectness' may not look like the kind of 'direct' contact we often work toward (or demand?) in the counselling professions, we have come to see it as a difference that must be addressed respectfully if we want to make good contact with boys in counselling contexts. It is for this reason that we have worked to find ways to approach boys in counselling that allow them the opportunity to practise the relational skills they need while honouring the different ways they tend to be in contact and relationship.

Images as prompts

We have learned in our work with boys in groups, therefore, that it is helpful to approach emotional issues with boys, for example, in a more indirect way. With the help of 4-inch by 8-inch laminated pictures on card stock, we have found that, by encouraging boys to choose and talk about images on cards, we can help them be in better contact with their own emotions as well as helping them find words to express such emotions effectively to others. We have called this collection of images Talking Cards and we share with you next some examples of our work with them.

Deborah Tannen[11] has stated that the use of images in conversation acts to facilitate involvement:

> *Details create images, images create scenes, and scenes spark emotions, making possible both understanding and involvement... it is in large part through the creation of a shared world of images that ideas are communicated and understanding is achieved.*

Based on a method of using Medicine Cards[12] and other visual media described by Oaklander[2,13], we collected pictures from magazines, calendars, and old books to create a stack of more than 100 laminated Talking Cards. In choosing the images, we looked for interesting pictures that carried some emotional weight (eg a butterfly, a tin man, a moody sky etc), but also chose some that were ambiguous and open

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to interpretation (eg beads of dew on a spider's web, an advertisement showing a man from the waist up as an astronaut and from the waist down wearing shorts and swimming fins).

Treasure chest

We keep these cards in an old metal box that looks like it could be holding treasure. This is because it heightens the boys' interest and engagement with them. Also, on account of the slick surface of the cards created by the lamination, we can toss a stack of them across the floor and they will spread out like a deck of playing cards. This dramatic action also seems to enhance their appeal. When the cards are spread out in a colourful and chaotic collage, it's difficult for boys to resist rooting through them.

Once they start the search for the card that best fits them at that moment, they become deeply involved in the process of projecting their own experience onto the cards. This process, paradoxically, helps them to be aware of and in touch with their own emotions, thoughts and experiences as they shuffle through a random pile of images.

We have used our Talking Cards with both individuals and groups. For instance, as a kind of 'check-in' at the beginning of a session we might say: 'Pick a card or two to represent how you are feeling today.'

We have also used the cards as we move towards closure in the terminating session for an individual or a group. To close our 10-week BAM! groups with boys, for example, we give them the following prompt:

> *We want you to look through all these pictures on the floor until you find three cards that you like. The first card we want you to pick should represent something about you before you came into this group. The second card should represent something about your experience here in the group over the past eight weeks. The third card we want you to pick should be about something you want to have happen in the future.*

We let the boys take a long five minutes to sort through all the cards and have fun doing so. Sometimes we ask them to do this silently to increase their focus on the images they are choosing. We include below two brief examples using the Talking Cards as a way to close the group. In the first example, Isaiah shares his images, and two other boys in the group, Theo and Sorin, chime in with their own contributions:

> *Leader*: It's all yours. You tell us about all three of your cards, one at a time.
> *Isaiah*: Okay. The first one is ... a walrus [There is general light laughter as Isaiah holds up an image of a walrus lying on its side with its flipper covering his face] ... and you see it's covering its eye. Its eye with its hand...and that's because before I came into this group, I used to be, like, shy about meeting new people. And so that's what that resembles...
> *Leader*: That's cool, Isaiah.
> *Isaiah*: And then this one resembles what we did in the group...
> *Leader*: Make sure everyone can see the picture... [Isaiah holds up his picture of a group of people helping each other climb up the wet ledges of a waterfall] ... So, there are people walking on a waterfall...
> *Isaiah*: It looks like they're working together to help one person up. Or they're working together to help each other. And that's what we did in this group.
> *Leader*: That's what you experienced in the group...
> *Isaiah*: And the last one ... was really cool...
> Leader: Make sure everybody sees it [Isaiah holds up an image of a bunch of blueberries covered in ice]...
> *Theo*: Frozen blueberries...
> *Sorin*: [gently teasing him] You wanna be a frozen blueberry?
> *Isaiah*: Close, but no...
> *Leader*: His turn to talk, guys...
> *Isaiah*: Okay, and, like, it would symbolise us being close as friends.
> *Leader*: Nice...
> *Isaiah*: And then I don't know what the ice would symbolise...
> *Leader*: Cold friends...
> *Isaiah*: Yeah.
> *Sorin*: That's cool...
> *Leader*: Cool friends!
> *Theo*: Cool, exactly! [laughter]
> *Isaiah*: Okay.

In this second example, Sorin chooses four cards to address our prompts. The first two cards both describe Sorin's experience before the group started. Once again, Theo also chimes in during Sorin's description:

> *Sorin*: My first one that I picked, um, I felt kind of alone...I have this one, this little tree thing in the desert [Sorin holds up a picture of a single Yucca plant surrounded by sand in the desert]
> *Leader*: A yucca plant in the desert...
> *Sorin*: Yeah. And then this is my other one [Sorin holds up a picture of a number of sea plants clinging to a rock while being washed over by waves] ... I'm one of the little ... I'm one palm-tree thingee...
> *Leader*: Yeah.
> *Sorin*: And all the waves are like ... doynggg ...
> *Leader*: So what is this about you?
> *Sorin*: It's just kind of, I used to be kind of

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alone. Just like the other ... that one ...
Leader: The yucca plant, yeah, they're kind of similar...I'm excited to hear your next one here...
Sorin: [Sorin holds up a very colourful image of an abstract painting] And um, when I was in the group, I kinda felt, um, colourful...
Theo: [thoughtfully] Colourful...
Sorin: Yeah...it's all kinds of colourful...
Theo: That's tight...
Leader: [to Sorin] What does that mean...
Sorin: Um, I just felt like, or it could be just, I felt like more comfortable with being with other people, like see I was one little colour with others...
Leader: You know what I think is so interesting is that you, more than one time in the group, you brought up how you like to wear different colours ... and how boys get teased for wearing different colours...
Sorin: Oh yeah! And that.
Leader: I think that's really cool.
Drake: He's wearing different colours right now...
Leader: Yeah, your green hat and your blue shirt ... What's your last card?
Sorin: Um, I'm gonna share this one [Sorin holds up a picture of a boy in a swimming pool sitting in a pink, inflatable hot-rod] It's um, it's ... I want to have that in the future. And it would really just be fun and I like pink and um ... yeah, and I want that car...
Leader: It's a pink, inflatable hot-rod.
Sorin: I want that in the pool and I want a real car like that ... and, I also have a flamingo necklace...
Leader: Oh look at that! A flamingo necklace that's pink and yellow, colourful...
Theo: Oh, that thing is so tight...

Rich relational contact

We have described how a boy's contact style is limited by socialisation and particularised by biology. In order to assist boys in making rich relational contact with their own emotional experience as well as making good contact with others (in the communication of that personal experience) we have described how, paradoxically, it sometimes helps to allow a boy to talk about something else (eg an image or a colourful abstract painting) as a way to talk about himself. This 'indirect' approach to working with boys not only helps boys get around the understandable resistance they feel about making themselves vulnerable (because of pressures from socialisation), but it also helps them make contact in a way that seems more naturally suited to them (given the influences of their biology).

Without the help of an image of a walrus with his flipper covering his eyes, we think it would have been very difficult for Isaiah to describe in words his own emotional experience of shyness at the outset of our group. Without the metaphorical support provided by the image of a yucca plant standing alone in the desert, we also think it would have been near impossible for Sorin to look us directly in the eye – instead of gazing, as we all were, at the image of the yucca plant – and describe his feelings of aloneness. By assuming that boys have the emotional and relational capacity to make good contact – but also by respecting the fact that they may have a different approach to making that contact – we have been encouraged in our work with boys in our BAM! groups. Sometimes the indirect route, it seems, gets you more quickly to where you want to go. ■

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