

Mentoring Fatherless Boys

Global Insights and Lessons for the UK

Drawing together international fieldwork and UK evidence to identify how boys growing up without a consistent father figure can be better supported through policy, practice and early intervention.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

“Why, across very different countries, cultures and policy traditions, are boys growing up without a consistent father figure so often recognised only once difficulties have emerged?”

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Churchill Fellow, 2025

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With thanks to the Churchill Fellowship for making this research possible, and to every practitioner, researcher, policymaker, mentor, family and young person across South Africa, the United States, Australia and the UK who so generously gave their time, insight and experience to this Fellowship. Full acknowledgements appear at the end of this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive summary

Millions of boys around the world are growing up without a consistent father figure, yet few education, family support or justice systems recognise this as a potential developmental vulnerability in its own right. While many boys thrive because they are surrounded by loving mothers, extended family members and other protective relationships, for others the absence or loss of a father can leave a significant gap at a critical stage in their development, affecting their sense of identity, belonging and understanding of themselves as they grow into young men.

This Fellowship set out to understand how different countries support boys growing up without a consistent father figure, and what the United Kingdom could learn from international approaches to mentoring, early intervention and relational support.

During the course of this Fellowship, that question evolved into a much larger one:

Why, across very different countries, cultures and policy traditions, are boys growing up without a consistent father figure so often recognised only once difficulties have emerged?

That question became the central theme of this report.

Drawing together the international fieldwork, conversations, research and my own frontline experience, five key findings emerged:

KEY FINDING 1

Relationships are the mechanism of change – but they must be intentionally designed and sustained.

Across the countries I visited, the strongest interventions combined trusted adult relationships with carefully designed programmes that created emotional safety, belonging, appropriate challenge, identity development and opportunities for boys to practise new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving over time.

It was not simply the presence of a mentor that mattered, but what happened within those relationships and the consistency with which they were sustained. The most effective approaches did not rely on a single trusted adult or a short intervention alone. They created wider relational networks around boys, combining mentors, peers, families and communities so that support did not disappear when one relationship or programme ended.

KEY FINDING 2

Prevention needs to begin earlier – particularly around the transition to secondary school.

Late primary school and the transition into secondary education emerged as an important window for prevention. This reflected both my existing frontline experience and learning from the Fellowship, reinforcing the value of providing relational support before patterns of disengagement, peer influence and behaviour become more firmly established.

Many services, however, are designed to respond once difficulties are already visible: when attendance has deteriorated, behaviour has escalated, exclusion is being considered, mental health has declined or a young person has entered safeguarding or youth justice systems.

The opportunity is not to predict which boys growing up without a consistent father figure will experience difficulties - many will not - but to recognise unmet relational needs earlier and offer support before difficulties become entrenched.

KEY FINDING 3

Boys' distress is too often recognised only when it becomes behaviour.

A recurring theme was that boys' distress may become visible through anger, withdrawal, disengagement, risk-taking, poor attendance or challenging behaviour rather than through direct disclosure.

Many services depend on children recognising emotional difficulties, finding the language to describe them and asking for help. Some boys do not communicate distress in that way. When behaviour is treated only as a problem to be managed rather than also considered as possible communication, opportunities for earlier intervention can be missed.

This requires professionals working across education, family support and youth services to understand not only what boys say, but what their behaviour may be communicating.

KEY FINDING 4

Father absence is often recognised by practitioners but remains largely invisible within systems.

Many of the practitioners and organisations I encountered understood the significance that an absent or inconsistent father could have in a boy's life, even where father absence was not the primary focus of their work. What was far less evident was systematic recognition of father absence as a distinct relational or developmental factor within the wider systems surrounding children.

Whether a father is absent through bereavement, separation, imprisonment, estrangement or inconsistent involvement, the circumstances and meaning of that absence matter. For some boys, this can involve grief, rejection, confusion or unanswered questions about identity and belonging.

This does not mean father absence determines outcomes, nor that every boy without a consistent father figure requires intervention. Many boys thrive where other strong and supportive relationships are present. But where relational loss is affecting a boy, systems need to be capable of recognising it rather than waiting until its consequences appear elsewhere.

KEY FINDING 5

The greatest barrier is structural – a fragmented system built around response rather than prevention.

Father absence and relational need sit across multiple policy and professional boundaries. Education, family support, safeguarding, youth justice, fatherhood and early intervention each hold part of the picture, but rarely the whole of it.

Research, policy and frontline practice often operate separately rather than informing one another. At the same time, short-term funding and commissioning cycles make it difficult to sustain the long-term relational support that appears to be most valuable.

The result is a system better equipped to respond when difficulties become visible than to recognise and address relational need earlier.

What follows from these findings

This Fellowship argues that boys growing up without a consistent father figure should be recognised earlier, understood more fully and supported more intentionally.

That requires more than creating another programme.

It requires father absence and disrupted father relationships to become visible within early-intervention systems without treating them as destiny; careful exploration of how boys with unmet relational needs might be identified and offered support around the transition to secondary school; sustained relational pathways rather than short-term interventions; clearer cross-government leadership and accountability; funding and commissioning that enable prevention, infrastructure and independent evaluation; and stronger connections between research, policy, practice, funding and lived experience.

Most importantly, this is not only about improving outcomes for boys during childhood and adolescence.

The boys we support today are the men, partners, colleagues, community members and potential fathers of tomorrow. Supporting them earlier is therefore not simply an intervention in childhood. It is an investment across generations.

The central argument of this report is ultimately a preventative one:

We should not have to wait until a boy's distress becomes exclusion, poor mental health, violence, offending or crisis before the systems around him become interested in the relationships that helped shape his life.

If we can see relational need earlier, respond to it safely and proportionately, and build sustained networks of support around boys before difficulties become entrenched, we have an opportunity not only to respond differently, but to prevent some difficulties from developing in the first place.

■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

About the author



Sonia Shaljean is the Founder and Managing Director of [Lads Need Dads CIC](#), a multi-award-winning early-intervention organisation supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure. A mother of three sons, she has spent almost three decades working with women, men, children and families experiencing some of society's most complex challenges.

Her professional experience spans criminal justice, domestic abuse, substance misuse, homelessness and work with vulnerable and complex families. Through her frontline work, she repeatedly saw how experiences in boyhood, including growing up without a consistent and supportive father figure, could continue to shape men's lives well into adulthood. Those experiences became the foundation for her commitment to intervening earlier, before difficulties become entrenched.

In 2015, Sonia founded Lads Need Dads in Essex, at a time when the needs of boys were receiving relatively little public or policy attention, let alone the specific needs of boys growing up without a consistent father figure. Since then, she has led the development of one of the UK's few long-term early intervention models designed specifically for these boys. Supporting boys aged 10–18, the model combines trusted relationships with positive male role models, practical and emotional development, school-based intervention, and support for mothers and carers.

Sonia's leadership and the work of Lads Need Dads have received significant national recognition. In 2025, she was named National Agent of Change at the She Inspires Global Awards, and in 2026 was named one of the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys' inaugural Top 100 Champions. Lads Need Dads received the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2020, the highest award given to local voluntary groups in the UK.

Sonia has contributed to national policy discussions around boys, fatherhood and early intervention, including through Parliamentary Select Committees and the APPG on Men and Boys. The work of Lads Need Dads has also been featured extensively across national television, radio and press, including BBC's *The One Show*, *Ross Kemp: Lost Boys*, *Deadly Men*, and the 2026 BBC documentary *Gareth Southgate: Changing the Game for Young Men*, alongside numerous radio interviews and other media coverage.

In 2025, Sonia was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to investigate how other countries recognise and support boys growing up without a consistent father figure. Her Fellowship took her to South Africa, the United States and Australia, alongside further research and conversations in the UK. She met organisations, practitioners, researchers and policymakers working across boys' development, fatherhood, mentoring, male mental health and early intervention, bringing that learning back to inform practice and policy in the UK.

Sonia is a long-serving trustee of the Association of Male Health and Wellbeing and sits on the Advisory Panel for the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, bringing her frontline experience and Fellowship learning into wider research and policy discussions affecting boys and men.

Her work continues to be driven by a simple conviction: boys growing up without a consistent father figure should be seen and supported before difficulties become entrenched, and no boy should have to navigate the journey to adulthood without trusted adults and meaningful relationships around him.

1

 CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Purpose and scope

I began with a simple question: how can society better support boys growing up without a consistent father figure? I wanted to understand how different countries recognised and responded to these boys, what appeared to work in practice, and what lessons could be applied within the United Kingdom. While mentoring and positive male role models formed an important part of that enquiry, I was also interested in early intervention, family engagement and how schools, community organisations and government could work together more effectively to support boys before difficulties became entrenched.

The purpose of the Fellowship was to bring back practical learning that could strengthen policy and practice across the United Kingdom. That learning would inform recommendations for schools, practitioners, researchers and policymakers, while also shaping the continued development of Lads Need Dads' early intervention programmes.

My interest in this issue long pre-dated the Fellowship. Before founding Lads Need Dads, I spent more than two decades working across domestic abuse services, substance misuse treatment, criminal justice and homelessness. Across these settings, I repeatedly encountered vulnerable men who had grown up without a consistent father figure or had experienced damaged relationships with their fathers, yet this was rarely recognised in how services understood or responded to them. Those experiences led me to establish Lads Need Dads, with the aim of intervening much earlier in boys' lives.

Over the following decade, working directly with boys, families and schools allowed me to see the other end of that pattern: the experiences of father absence as they were unfolding during childhood, rather than years later through adult services. It also raised new questions.

Why did this issue remain so poorly recognised? Were other countries identifying and supporting these boys differently? What evidence existed beyond the UK, and what could we learn from it?

This Fellowship was originally titled 'Mentoring Fatherless Boys: Global Insights and Lessons for the UK', and mentoring remained an important focus throughout, both as a subject of international comparison and as the area of practice I knew best from my own work. However, the evidence gathered across South Africa, the United States, Australia and the UK pointed towards a more fundamental question. Before asking which mentoring approaches worked best, I first needed to ask:

Why are boys growing up without a consistent father figure so rarely recognised by the systems intended to support them?

Mentoring remained central to the fellowship but became part of a much larger picture as the evidence unfolded.

1.2 The journey

The Fellowship took me to South Africa, the United States and Australia. Despite their different histories, cultures and policy landscapes, each offered valuable insights into how boys growing up without a consistent father figure are understood, supported and responded to.

Throughout the Fellowship, I met with community organisations, mentoring practitioners, researchers, policy-makers and government representatives. I observed mentoring programmes, school-based interventions and community initiatives, exploring different approaches to early intervention, emotional development, identity, belonging and positive male relationships.

The Fellowship also became a two-way exchange. Alongside learning from the organisations and practitioners I visited, I had opportunities to share the Lads Need Dads approach and our experience of long-term mentoring and early intervention. This ranged from informal exchanges with practitioners to presenting our work to mentors and boys in South Africa and sharing our model with organisations in Australia.

Two more formal opportunities arose during my time in Australia. I was invited to speak at the Fathering Project's National Conference in Sydney, held alongside the launch of the State of the World's Fathers Report. This provided an opportunity to present the Lads Need Dads model while engaging with practitioners, researchers and policymakers working to improve outcomes for boys and fathers across Australia. I also attended the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium's annual symposium in Melbourne, where I presented a research poster outlining the Lads Need Dads school-based early-intervention models, Reading Mentors and Lad Pods.

The international travel was only one part of the Fellowship. Alongside it, I interviewed researchers, policymakers, education leaders, public health professionals and voluntary sector organisations across the UK. These conversations allowed me to test what I was learning overseas against the realities of UK policy, research and front-line practice. They became just as influential to the Fellowship's conclusions as the international visits themselves.



Parliament Square Garden, Westminster

2 CHAPTER 2

Why father involvement matters

Decades of research across a range of countries, including the UK, have shown that safe, loving and positively engaged father involvement is associated with better emotional, behavioural, educational and social outcomes for children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Lamb, 2010; Machin, 2018; Rollè et al., 2019; Government Equalities Office, 2021). Studies have also found associations with stronger emotional regulation, fewer behavioural difficulties and improved engagement at school (Opondo et al., 2016; Baker, 2018; Zhang, Liu, & Hu, 2021).

In this report, father absence does not refer only to a father who is physically absent. Some boys have never known their father, while others have lost him through bereavement. Some have little or no contact following separation, imprisonment, illness or migration. For others, a father may be present or remain in contact, but the relationship is inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, unsafe or damaged by conflict, domestic abuse, addiction or other complex circumstances. This report therefore considers both physical father absence and disrupted or inconsistent father relationships.

Father absence does not determine a boy's future (Flood, 2003). Many boys thrive because strong relationships surround them. But the loss or absence of a safe, consistent and positively engaged father relationship can represent a developmental disadvantage and a risk factor. This means it may increase a boy's vulnerability to difficulties, not that those difficulties are inevitable. Like other risk factors, its significance will vary according to the boy's individual circumstances, and the protective factors and relationships present in his life.

Yet schools, health services and family-support systems rarely record or consider father absence or disrupted father relationships in this way. It is more often treated as background family information than as a reason to ask whether a boy may need additional protective relationships or earlier support.

The presence of a father matters, but physical presence alone does not guarantee a healthy father relationship. What matters developmentally is whether a boy experiences the love, consistency, protection, guidance, affirmation, appropriate boundaries and secure sense of belonging that healthy fathering can provide. A father can be present without providing that relationship, just as a father who lives elsewhere may remain safely, consistently and positively involved.

Where no such father relationship exists, another committed father figure may provide some of these protective qualities. This does not erase the loss of a boy's own father, but it can give him access to consistent fathering that might otherwise be missing.

Mothers, grandparents, wider family members, teachers, coaches, mentors and other trusted adults also make invaluable contributions to boys' lives. These relationships can provide powerful protection and help boys to thrive. Different relationships can make different contributions (Government Equalities Office, 2021; Rollè et al., 2019). Additional trusted adults should therefore be understood as strengthening the network around a boy, not as simply replacing his father.

The evidence establishes why fathers matter. This Fellowship asks the question that follows:

What should families, schools, communities and governments do when a boy grows up without that protective father relationship?

That question lies at the heart of this report.

3 CHAPTER 3

Why focus on boys?

Girls are affected by father absence too, and positive father involvement benefits children of both sexes (Lamb, 2010; Government Equalities Office, 2021).

However, this Fellowship focuses specifically on boys for three reasons.

1. Boys continue to experience poorer outcomes in several key areas.

They continue to fall behind girls in educational attainment, are more likely to be suspended or permanently excluded from school, are heavily overrepresented in the youth justice system, and have higher suicide rates than girls (Department for Education, 2025b, 2025d; Office for National Statistics, 2025; Youth Justice Board, 2026). No single factor explains these outcomes, but the pattern is too consistent to ignore and strengthens the case for earlier, more focused support.

2. Boys and girls may experience growing up without a consistent father figure differently.

As boys move through adolescence, fathers and other trusted male role models can play a distinctive role in modelling masculinity, emotional regulation, relationships, responsibility and adult identity. How boys navigate these developmental tasks without a consistent father relationship remains comparatively underexplored.

3. Policy and research rarely examine boys growing up without a consistent father figure as a distinct group.

Their experiences are more often absorbed into broader discussions about family breakdown, disadvantage, mental health or behaviour. As a result, the specific needs of these boys can remain hidden until difficulties become visible.

Most fatherhood research begins when men become fathers. This Fellowship begins much earlier. It asks what happens during boyhood and whether supporting boys today may be one of the most effective ways of strengthening fatherhood tomorrow.

But the case for supporting these boys is not only about the men or fathers they may one day become. Their experiences, relationships and wellbeing matter in childhood too.

4 CHAPTER 4

Why this matters now

The urgency lies not only in the outcomes described in the previous chapter, but in how little we know about the boys who may be at risk. Many factors contribute to educational underachievement, exclusion, poor mental health and involvement in the youth justice system. The question at the heart of this Fellowship is whether one potential vulnerability, growing up without a consistent and positive father relationship, is being recognised early enough within policy and practice.

Throughout my visits and interviews, I became increasingly aware that one simple question is rarely asked:

How many boys are growing up without a consistent father figure?

In most schools and services, the answer is unknown. Schools routinely identify and record pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, those eligible for free school meals, children in care and, more recently, young carers. Yet relatively few systematically identify boys growing up without a consistent father figure or consider whether the absence of that relationship may indicate a need for earlier support.

In 2022, Lads Need Dads surveyed 1,411 teaching, pastoral and leadership staff working across primary, secondary and specialist education settings in Essex. Among the 639 secondary-school respondents, 93% believed there was a link between father absence or limited access to a positive male role model and disruptive behaviour, 78% with lower attainment and 66% with poor attendance. A follow-up survey conducted in 2025 with 408 staff across ten Essex secondary schools produced similarly strong findings: 97.6% believed there was a link with behavioural concerns, 92% with mental health concerns, 90% with attainment and 86.5% with attendance (Shaljean & Hine, 2022; Lads Need Dads, 2025).

These surveys reflect the professional observations of school staff rather than establishing that father absence directly causes these outcomes. However, the consistency of the findings across two surveys strengthens the case for schools to identify this group and consider whether earlier support may be needed.

This creates a significant blind spot. If schools do not know which boys are growing up without a consistent father relationship, they cannot consider what support may be needed until other difficulties become visible.

The national conversation has shifted while this Fellowship has been underway. The Centre for Social Justice's [Lost Boys Report](#) brought sustained public and political attention to boys falling behind in education, employment and mental health. New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) and Movember's [The Invisible Field](#) drew attention to how work supporting boys and young men is funded, or more often is not (Centre for Social Justice, 2025a; New Philanthropy Capital & Movember, 2026). Both reports are welcome and overdue.

This report adds a different lens. It focuses specifically on boys growing up without a consistent father figure and asks why this particular vulnerability remains so poorly recognised. It also examines what can be learnt from countries and organisations attempting to respond.

These issues also received greater public attention during the course of the Fellowship. Lads Need Dads' [LadPods Programme](#) featured in the BBC One documentary Gareth Southgate: *'Changing the Game for Young Men'* (Gareth Southgate: Changing the Game for Young Men, 2026). LadPods asks schools to identify boys entering Year 7 who are growing up without a consistent father figure and then trains male members of school staff to deliver a structured early intervention programme. It demonstrates an important principle running throughout this report: identifying these boys is only useful if appropriate support follows. The documentary showcased this approach nationally and led to increased interest from schools around the UK, while this report was being completed.

5 CHAPTER 5

How the fellowship question evolved



Cabinet Office

A few days after being awarded my Churchill Fellowship, I was invited to meet two Cabinet Office officials involved in the Government's new Test, Learn and Grow programme, a £100 million initiative exploring community-based interventions to reduce crime and improve outcomes for at-risk groups. They were Neil Thomas, then Deputy Director for Public Sector Reform and Efficiency, and Kim, a user-centred interaction designer. The meeting was not about funding Lads Need Dads or discussing my Fellowship. They wanted to explore how community-based approaches might help address some of the social problems the programme was seeking to tackle. Looking back, the discussion proved significant because it crystallised many of the questions that would shape my Fellowship over the following months.

Three things stood out.

1. The officials already recognised that outcomes for many boys and young men were deteriorating. The discussion was not about persuading them that there was a problem. It moved quickly to what could realistically be tested and what an effective response might look like.
2. The emphasis was on prevention rather than waiting for crisis. Neil asked how an early intervention model could be piloted, evaluated and eventually scaled if it proved effective. I talked them through our early intervention programmes: [Reading Mentors](#) for primary school boys, [LadPods](#) in secondary schools and the longer-term mentoring pathway, designed to build confidence, belonging and direction.
3. The meeting revealed something important about how support for boys is framed. I was asked a hypothetical question: if Lads Need Dads received investment through a programme like this, what would we do with it? In answering, the conversation turned to how that investment would need to be justified. I was told that funding along these lines would need to be evidenced through its contribution to reducing violence against women and girls.

Preventing violence against women and girls matters greatly. I have spent much of my professional life working in domestic abuse services, so its importance did not need explaining to me. But the exchange exposed a contradiction. We were discussing early intervention for boys, yet the case for supporting them was still being framed primarily through the future risk they might pose to women and girls.

I remember saying that boys may struggle to engage if they believe they are being helped only to prevent harm to someone else. They need to know that their own lives, experiences and wellbeing matter. There was a noticeable pause on the call.

That exchange shaped my thinking throughout the Fellowship. Support for boys is often easier to justify once their difficulties are linked to crime, violence or risk to wider society. But boys should not have to be viewed as potential perpetrators before their needs are taken seriously. Prevention should also mean recognising their vulnerability, their experiences and what may be missing around them before problems emerge.

I began the Fellowship intending to identify effective mentoring approaches for boys growing up without a consistent father figure. The Cabinet Office meeting made me see that a prior question needed attention. *Before asking which interventions work, were systems recognising which boys might need them?*

If government is serious about preventing later harm, why are boys growing up without a consistent father figure still largely invisible within early intervention systems? I did not yet know how the position in the UK would

compare with what I encountered elsewhere. My visits to South Africa and the United States provided valuable insights into frontline and community practice, while the longer period spent in Australia allowed me to examine more closely how research, policy and practice connected at a wider system level.

My question was no longer simply how different countries support boys growing up without a consistent father figure. It had become:

Why do systems so often struggle to recognise these boys before crisis emerges - and what would it take to change that?

6 CHAPTER 6

Methodology and countries visited

Throughout the Fellowship, I wanted to understand not only how organisations described their work, but what that work looked like in practice. Wherever possible, I observed programmes directly, spoke with practitioners, mentors and participants, and considered what I saw and heard alongside published research and my own front-line experience. I also met with researchers, policymakers, government representatives and community leaders, allowing me to explore the issues from different perspectives.

My aim was to identify learning that could genuinely inform practice in the UK, rather than relying solely on organisational descriptions or reported outcomes.

South Africa, the United States and Australia were selected because each offered a different cultural, policy and practice context in which to explore the central question of the Fellowship. The international fieldwork took place over two months. I travelled to South Africa and the United States in August 2025, before spending a further month in Australia between April and May 2026. The Australian visit was deliberately timed to coincide with the Fathering Project's National Conference in Sydney and the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium's annual research symposium in Melbourne, providing opportunities to engage with a wider network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers.

While in Johannesburg, I also met Eric Mungai, Founder and CEO of Kenya-based Yazua Africa. Eric was attending a conference and had contacted me to ask if we could meet while we were both there. Although Kenya was not one of the countries formally examined, our conversation about community mentoring, values-based development and equipping boys as future leaders provided an additional African perspective.

Running alongside the international fieldwork was a substantial programme of UK-based learning. I interviewed researchers, policymakers, education leaders, public health professionals, government representatives and voluntary-sector organisations. These conversations allowed me to test what I was learning overseas against the realities of UK policy, research and frontline practice.

This was a practice-led, qualitative enquiry rather than a formal evaluation of each country's national system. The depth and type of access varied between countries, with the longer period in Australia providing greater opportunity to examine connections between research, policy and practice. The findings therefore reflect the organisations, programmes, people and evidence included in the Fellowship and should be understood within that context.

6.1 How the findings are presented

The chapters that follow present what I found in South Africa, the United States and Australia. They are not travel notes, but an analysis of what I encountered in each context and what it contributed to the central question of the Fellowship.

The later chapters examine the UK policy landscape and bring the international and UK learning together with published research and lived experience. From this, I identify the key findings that emerged across different contexts, before considering how the Fellowship has changed my own thinking and practice and setting out recommendations for UK policy, practice and research.

Throughout, the central question remains the same:

What would it take for the UK to recognise and support boys growing up without a consistent father figure before difficulties become entrenched and the human and social costs increase?

6.2 Approach and limitations

Organisations and individuals were identified through professional networks, recommendations from practitioners and researchers, and targeted outreach in each country visited. Priority was given to those with established experience in mentoring, fatherhood, early intervention or supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure.

Interviews were conducted in person or by video call and typically lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Most were recorded with participants' consent, while detailed notes were taken where recording was not possible. Individuals quoted by name agreed to be identified. Direct observation of mentoring sessions, group circles, school-based delivery and community programmes supplemented these interviews wherever access was available.

The depth and type of access varied between countries. The longer period spent in Australia provided greater opportunity to examine connections between research, policy and practice, while the visits to South Africa and the United States provided important insights into frontline and community delivery. None of the country visits was intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of a national system.

This was a practice-led Fellowship rather than a formal academic study. Participants were not a statistically representative sample, and the Fellowship was not designed to establish causation or produce nationally representative findings. Throughout the report, I distinguish between published research, interview material, direct observation and lived experience.

7 CHAPTER 7

Introduction to the international chapters

South Africa, the United States and Australia are not direct comparators. Patterns of father absence in each country have been shaped by different histories, cultures, economic conditions and policy decisions. Understanding those differences is essential if the learning from this Fellowship is to be interpreted fairly.

In South Africa, apartheid, migrant labour, poverty, violence and the HIV/AIDS epidemic have all affected family and community relationships across generations. In the United States, the organisations I visited were working within communities affected in different ways by economic inequality, racial discrimination, incarceration, substance misuse and family instability. Australia presented a different picture again, with a more developed national conversation about fatherhood, boys' wellbeing and prevention.

The purpose of visiting these countries was not to decide which performed best or to find a single programme that could be imported into the UK. Their social and policy contexts differ too greatly for that kind of comparison to be meaningful. The aim was to understand how different approaches had developed and to identify the principles that might be transferable even when the programmes themselves were not.

Despite the differences, similar themes recurred across the organisations, practitioners and communities I encountered. Boys needed safe and consistent relationships, a sense of belonging, appropriate challenge and adults willing to remain present over time. The routes into father absence varied considerably, but many of the underlying relational needs were strikingly similar.



8 CHAPTER 8

South Africa: mentoring under pressure

South Africa was the first stop of this Fellowship. It was there that I first understood how consistency itself could be protective. In some of the communities I visited, mentoring was not simply an opportunity for personal development. It provided structure, belonging and protection in environments where boys faced very real risks.

This chapter draws on fieldwork with The Character Company in Johannesburg and Soweto, and in Cape Town, particularly Delft on the Cape Flats. It included observing camps, workshops and a live mentoring session, visiting residential care settings, and speaking with mentors and boys.

8.1 The Character Company: relationships, values and belonging

The Character Company is a Christian organisation providing long-term mentoring to boys growing up without an active or emotionally available father. Its model combines consistent male relationships, structured teaching around values, outdoor experiences and faith-informed practice. The emphasis is on character formation and prevention rather than waiting until difficulties have become entrenched.

At the centre of the model is a distinctive mentoring structure. One man is matched with a small group of up to five boys, meeting them weekly and remaining involved over the long term. This sits between conventional one-to-one mentoring and the larger group or circle-based approaches I encountered elsewhere. The group is small enough for the mentor to know each boy well, but large enough for boys to develop friendships, learn from one another and experience a sense of belonging. Activities are generally practical and outdoors rather than classroom-based, with the organisation's five values of courage, kindness, self-discipline, honesty and respect woven through what the boys and mentors do together.

My first weekend with the organisation took place at a camp deep in the South African bush. The generator normally used to power the lights, and equipment had been stolen the night before we arrived. Rather than scaling back or cancelling, the team found another way to power the camp so the weekend could continue as planned. It was an early indication that difficult circumstances would not be allowed to reduce the care or ambition offered to the boys.

During the camp, I also had the opportunity to help facilitate a group session on relationships. A conversation about dating led one boy to acknowledge that he had entered a relationship largely because his friends were doing the same. What appeared initially to be a conversation about girls became a much wider discussion about belonging, peer pressure and whether he felt secure enough

in himself to make his own choices.

It reinforced for me why relationship education needs to go beyond consent and communication. Boys also need opportunities to examine what is driving their choices, what they may be trying to prove and how their developing sense of identity influences the relationships they form.

The boys at the camp had different experiences of father absence, but they struck me immediately as emotionally intelligent, respectful and remarkably open. They were unafraid to ask thoughtful questions or seek help. Mentors were addressed affectionately as "Uncle", followed by their first name. It was a small detail, but it showed



how deliberately the organisation created a sense of kinship rather than offering mentoring as a detached professional service.

Older boys who had progressed through the programme, known affectionately as “sprouts”, were already taking on trainee “big brother” mentoring roles. This closely resembled the Ambassador pathway we use at Lads Need Dads, where boys who have received support are given opportunities to develop into leaders and support those coming behind them.

Mentors were not recruited casually. Several had completed trauma-aware and faith-based leadership training, reflecting the organisation’s understanding that supporting boys who may have experienced significant loss or trauma requires more than goodwill. The principle that “hurt people hurt people” shaped an approach concerned not only with managing behaviour, but with understanding and addressing the pain that may sit beneath it.

Sport, particularly football, was also used deliberately to provide structure and belonging. One mentor told me that he had established a football team to give local boys somewhere safe and consistent to go. During a six-month period when the team was not running, two boys associated with it were killed. He believed that the loss of this structure had left boys more exposed to gang involvement and street violence.

The story impacted me because it changed how I thought about continuity. In the UK, a break in programme delivery may result in boys disengaging or losing trust. In some of the South African communities I visited, the possible consequences were far more serious. It made me see continuity not simply as a feature of good programme design, but as something that could be protective in itself.

National data provide important context. In 2022, approximately 33% of children in South Africa lived with both biological parents. 44% lived with their mother but not their father, 4% with their father but not their mother, and 20% with neither biological parent (Hall & Hendricks, 2025). These figures (rounded to the nearest % point) describe living arrangements and do not, by themselves, tell us whether a father living elsewhere remains involved in his child’s life.

Mentors working in the communities I visited believed that only a small proportion of fathers were both physically and emotionally present. This was their professional perception, not a national statistic. What I observed was that extended family members, mentors and community networks often played a visible role in supporting children when fathers were absent.

Reflecting on a later conversation with Dr Anna Machin in the UK, I was struck by how visible those wider networks were in the South African communities I visited. Grandparents, uncles, neighbours, mentors and other trusted adults appeared to form part of the wider structure around a child. This contrasted with many of the families I had encountered through my work in the UK, where support could be more isolated and dependent on formal services.

Community support also extended to the organisations themselves. The owners of Broeders room B’Sorah Trails allowed The Character Company to use their land without charge year after year, while families were asked to make a small contribution based on their income. This reflected a sense of shared ownership around the programme and reduced its dependence on families’ ability to pay. It also offered an important contrast with the UK’s greater reliance on formal funding, commissioning and institutional partnerships.

8.2 Community protection and relational authority

Through my fieldwork with The Character Company, I also encountered a more informal layer of mentoring taking place in homes, churches and neighbourhoods, led by men whose influence extended beyond a formal mentoring session and whose authority came from years of being present in their communities.

In Delft, the Cape Flats and parts of Soweto, mentors described streets, taxi routes and even pavements divided by gang territories. Boys learnt these boundaries early because crossing into the wrong area could place them in danger. Redmond Louw, Business Development Manager and mentor at The Character Company, told me about

boys who could not walk freely to school, shops or friends' homes because of territorial control. He also described communities in which residents had little confidence that police or emergency services would respond when called.

Mentors described gang recruitment as gradual and deliberate. Boys might initially be used as lookouts or messengers. These roles appeared to require little commitment but began to build loyalty and dependency. Some were later asked to store weapons or become involved in violence. Mentors believed children were targeted partly because gangs knew they would be treated differently from adults by the criminal justice system.

Across these conversations, practitioners identified the ages of ten and eleven as particularly important. They believed there was still an opportunity to reach boys before peer identities and loyalties became much harder to interrupt. If systems wait for clear evidence of behavioural problems before offering support, that opportunity may already be narrowing.

In Orlando East, Soweto, I met Boykie Tsosane, a local mentor connected with The Character Company. His work grew from his own experience of paternal rejection.

"Everything that happened to me, that I didn't like while growing up, I'm now making sure it doesn't happen to the rest of these boys."



Boykie had converted a garage forming part of his modest home into a daily after-school space for local boys. Six television screens connected to PlayStations lined the back wall, with much of the setup assembled with help from the boys themselves. Half of an old minibuss van had been repurposed as a second gaming area. There was also seating and a small tuck shop.

For a contribution equivalent to around 50 pence, boys could spend several hours playing, talking and, most importantly, remaining somewhere safe. The games drew them in, but the space gave them something much more valuable: somewhere to go after school and a trusted adult who was there every day.

Alongside the daily drop-in, Boykie ran weekly mentoring sessions using Character Company materials. These covered values including respect, self-discipline, responsibility and making good choices. He also

fed some of the boys who arrived hungry.

The primary purpose of Boykie's space was simple. It kept boys safe. For several hours each day, they were off the streets, supervised and in the company of a consistent adult man. There were no referral forms or waiting lists, no term-time restrictions and no gaps between programmes. The door opened every day.

Once that safety was established, other things could develop. Boys formed friendships, talked informally with Boykie and gradually learnt to trust an adult who continued to be there. In this setting, safety was not simply something needed before the intervention could begin. Safety was part of the intervention.

At the time of my visit, almost everything depended on Boykie. The project relied on his home, his time and his willingness to keep going. If he became ill, exhausted or unable to continue, the boys could lose the space on which they had come to rely.

I could see that Boykie needed support to move the work beyond something resting entirely on him. During our conversations, I encouraged him to register the project as a not-for-profit organisation, strengthen its governance

and involve other people from the local community. This would allow him to seek funding, develop partnerships and share responsibility while protecting the personal relationships that made the project work.

Boykie has since registered the project as a not-for-profit organisation and begun forming partnerships with other charities, including a football-based organisation. He is now using football and coaching to develop the boys' skills and create further opportunities for them. We remain in regular contact, and I continue to offer advice and guidance as he builds community support, strengthens the organisation and plans for its future.

What began with one man opening his home is now developing into a wider community project. It retains Boykie's daily presence and personal connection with the boys while beginning to build the support and partnerships needed to make the work more sustainable.

In Delft, I spent time with Raymond Weaver, a mentor and faith leader working in a community experiencing extremely high levels of violence. His safety did not depend on formal authority. It came from relationships and credibility built over many years. This included conducting funerals for gang members whom, he told me, other churches had refused to bury.

Because local people trusted him, mothers contacted Raymond with the most immediate of requests:

"Can you just keep my son safe for the day?"

That request changed how I understood mentoring in this context. These mothers were not asking about measured outcomes, qualifications or long-term transformation. They were asking for someone they trusted to keep their sons alive and out of danger.



Raymond described standing between rival gang members who were attempting to shoot one another and using the relationships he had built to interrupt the confrontation. He also spoke about attending the funerals of boys he had known since childhood. The work involved not only mentoring, but repeated exposure to loss and grief.

Walking through Delft with Raymond made that reality much harder to keep at a distance. He introduced me to a woman who lived beside the church he ran. Her son had been murdered. He was a boy who had once sat beside Raymond in the same pew on ordinary Sundays. It is easy to talk about rates of violence and numbers of young people killed. It was very different standing beside a mother whose son had been one of them.

In Delft, faith appeared to function as more than private belief. Churches and faith leaders provided a form of social infrastructure and trusted authority in places where formal systems were often weak, absent or mis-trusted. Where boys did not trust institutions, relationships with known adults became especially important.

The scale of violence I encountered in Delft has no direct equivalent in the UK, and I would not suggest that the contexts are the same. However, I recognised some of the same underlying pressures: exposure to violence, father absence, trauma, hopelessness, limited access to trusted adult men and a powerful need to belong. The circumstances were different, but the need for someone safe and consistent remained familiar.

8.3 Residential Care: continuity, care and male mentoring

My visits to the Johannesburg Children's Home, Villa of Hope and David House offered a different perspective on the role of mentoring. The Character Company had established relationships with these homes and provided consistent male mentors to boys living there. This was important because much of the boys' day-to-day care was

provided by women. Those women offered stability, commitment and care, but the partnership also ensured that boys growing up without an active father had regular contact with trusted men.

This reflects a wider gender imbalance historically reported within South Africa's child and youth care workforce. A national training dataset held by the National Association of Child and Youth Care Workers recorded 11,833 individuals who had attended its training courses, comprising 10,070 women and 1,763 men - approximately 85 per cent female (Jamieson, 2013). These figures are not a current census of the workforce, nor do they relate specifically to staff employed in residential children's homes, but they provide useful historical context for the gender imbalance within the sector.

Staff described residential care as the last stop for children whose extended-family and foster-care options had been exhausted or judged unsafe. Children often arrived following repeated experiences of loss, instability and disrupted relationships. They did not simply need a safe placement. They needed adults who would continue showing up, including when their behaviour tested those relationships.

Founded in 1892, the Johannesburg Children's Home supports children and young people from the age of three into early adulthood. Staff explained that care extends beyond eighteen because expecting young people with complex histories to become fully independent at that age is often unrealistic. At Villa of Hope, long-term carers functioned as parental figures within a family-based model.



One woman, Sharon, who had lived with the same group of children for more than a decade, described herself simply as their mum.

At David House, run by Resthaven Ministries, I encountered a small, family-style children's home originally established to care for children orphaned or abandoned during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, including children living with HIV. When I arrived, Gift, one of the boys I had met earlier at The Character Company camp, was there to greet me. He had lived at David House since he was a baby. This was not a temporary placement or a brief stage in his life; it was the place in which he had grown up. He had also been supported by The Character



Company for several years, giving him a consistent male mentoring relationship alongside the long-term care provided by the home.

The length and continuity of these relationships were striking. This differed from much residential care in England, where placements can be relatively short and children may experience several moves. That makes continuity harder to build, but arguably even more important. A community mentor who remains involved when a placement, school or professional changes can provide a thread of stability through an otherwise disrupted childhood.

8.4 Rites of passage, ritual and emotional literacy

Where fathers are absent, inconsistent or unsafe, boys may have fewer opportunities to learn what becoming a man means from a trusted adult. The need for belonging, recognition and a sense of growing responsibility does not disappear. If adults do not provide positive ways for boys to explore these questions, peer groups, gangs, violence, sexual activity or displays of toughness can offer their own answers.

Several mentors described boys asking similar questions in different ways: What would a man do in this situation? How do I know whether I am doing it right? What is expected of me now? Without clear guidance, some boys attempt to establish their identity through aggression, withdrawal, extreme self-reliance or the need to appear tough.

The Character Company has developed a four-day Rites of Passage experience combining time away from home, physical and emotional challenges and formal recognition by mentors and peers. I interviewed Sinola Lakana,



aged fifteen, who had been involved with the organisation for nine years and completed the rite at thirteen. He described a change in how he understood manhood. It was not about overpowering other people, but about being able to control himself, particularly when nobody was watching.

What mattered was not simply completing the activities. Afterwards, he was trusted with greater responsibility, expected to set an example and encouraged to support younger boys. The rite marked a change in how others saw him and what they now expected from him.

This was not an initiation based on toughness or dominance. The challenge was structured and purposeful, and it took place within mentoring relationships that continued long after the four days had ended. Boys were not given status without responsibility. They were recognised as growing young men and then expected to live up to that recognition.

The lesson for the UK is not that we should reproduce this particular rite. It is that boys benefit from having important transitions deliberately recognised by trusted adults. A well-designed rite of passage can give a boy a clearer sense of who he is becoming, what is expected of him and where he belongs. Without the relationships before and afterwards, however, the event itself would have limited value.

I saw the same principles operating on a much smaller scale during a mentoring session at the Johannesburg Children's Home. It was one boy's seventeenth birthday, but the celebration carried particular sadness because he and his brother had lost their mother only two months earlier.

The session began with a familiar check-in: an acorn, representing something good, and a thorn, representing something that had hurt. One boy's acorn was celebrating his brother's birthday. His thorn was that their mother was not there to see how much he had grown.

The mentor used a structured curriculum based on five values, which the boys could recite from memory: kindness, respect, courage, self-discipline and honesty. Their discussion explored the difference between consequences, which can teach, and punishment, which can sometimes make a boy harder and more defensive.

One boy said that he did not like promises because people had made them and failed to keep them. Behind that statement was the hurt caused by adults who had let him down. By the end of the discussion, he had reached his own conclusion: if he made a promise, he needed to keep it.

Small rituals mattered that day. Doughnuts appeared, we sang happy birthday and a candle was blown out, leaving a thin ribbon of smoke rising into the air. Beneath the table, I noticed that one of the boys was wearing a pair of sports socks I had included in goody bags given to the boys at camp several days earlier. He had chosen to wear them without saying anything about it. It was a tiny detail, but it told me that the gesture had mattered to him and that he had held on to something that was his.

Character development can sound abstract when described in a programme manual. In that room, it was much more ordinary and much more human. It was a candle in a doughnut. It was a boy deciding that if he made a promise, he needed to keep it. It was a group able to acknowledge grief while still making room for a birthday.

Across these sessions, four elements appeared particularly transferable to mentoring in the UK: a consistent check-in, a clear value or theme, something practical for boys to apply between sessions and a restorative process for addressing harm. None is complicated in isolation. Their strength comes from being repeated within a relationship in which boys feel known, challenged and supported.

8.5 The men who mentor



Across my conversations in South Africa, I noticed similarities in what had drawn men to mentoring. Many spoke about disruption in their own childhoods: an absent or emotionally unavailable father, parental separation that was never properly explained, being raised by grandparents or extended family, exposure to violence or instability, or having to take on adult responsibilities too young. Thando Malepe, whose experience of paternal absence, rejection and eventual forgiveness is explored later in this report, was one example of a much wider pattern.

A difficult childhood did not automatically make someone an effective mentor. What appeared to matter was whether the man had understood and worked through his own experiences. Mentors who had spent time reflecting on their histories could draw on them without making the boy's experience about themselves. Where that reflection and support were

missing, there was a greater risk of over-identifying with a boy, carrying too much personal responsibility or finding it difficult to maintain appropriate boundaries.

Kingsley, one of the mentors in Redmond's team described this as the "mirror effect". Mentors sometimes find themselves supporting boys whose lives resemble their own childhoods. A boy's rejection, anger or fear can bring the mentor face to face with experiences he thought he had left behind. That shared understanding can help a mentor connect with a boy, but it can also bring unresolved pain to the surface. Kingsley also saw mentoring as a reciprocal relationship: the mentor brings his own life experience while remaining open to learning and growing through the relationship too.

This is why lived experience should be valued but not relied upon in isolation. Men who have experienced father absence, adversity or rejection can offer boys a depth of understanding that cannot always be taught. But personal experience is not a substitute for training, supervision and self-awareness. A mentor must be able to recognise where the boy's story ends and his own begins.

I encountered versions of this "mirror effect" again in the United States, where practitioners spoke about the difference between a wounded healer and a stable role model. The distinction was not whether the mentor had been wounded. It was whether he had processed that experience sufficiently to remain steady when a boy's story touched his own.

I also became more aware of the pressures mentors can place upon themselves. Warning signs may be: refusing to take breaks, resisting supervision, treating exhaustion as proof of commitment or believing that no one else can support a particular boy as well as they can. These behaviours do not necessarily indicate poor practice, but they can show that too much responsibility is resting with one person.

No mentoring model should depend on the exhaustion or personal sacrifice of individual men. Good systems spread responsibility, provide regular supervision and create space for mentors to reflect honestly on the emotional impact of the work. They notice when somebody is struggling and make it acceptable to ask for help. Good-will matters, but it cannot provide that structure on its own.

Two further ideas from Redmond's team connected strongly with the wider Fellowship. The first was that supporting boys well in childhood could have an impact far beyond the present, helping to shape the men, partners and fathers they may later become. It also made me reflect on the importance of supporting boys both for who they are now and for the men they may one day become.

The second concerned the relationship between mentors and fathers. Mentoring was not intended to replace a boy's father or compete with him. Its purpose was to provide stability where something important was missing, while leaving room for reconciliation when that was safe, appropriate and wanted by the boy. Mentors should be able to welcome a positive reconnection with a father rather than feel that their own role has been diminished.

This has important implications for recruiting mentors in the UK. Men should not be excluded simply because they have difficult histories of their own. Lived experience that has been properly understood and processed can be a genuine strength, but it must sit alongside careful selection, training, reflective supervision and safeguarding, within a mentoring culture in which no individual is expected to carry a boy's life alone. The strongest mentors I encountered were not men without wounds of their own, but men who had learned enough from those experiences to stand alongside a boy without asking him to carry them too.

8.6 What transfers, what does not

South Africa did not provide a model that could simply be replicated in the UK. Its history, communities and level of violence are very different. What it showed clearly was what can happen when formal systems respond too late or are not trusted to respond at all. Local men become protectors, churches provide vital community support, homes become safe places for boys, and mentoring is as much about keeping boys safe as helping them develop.

Several principles are relevant to the UK. The first is continuity. Boys need adults who remain present over time, particularly when other relationships in their lives have been disrupted. The second is timing. Mentors identified the period around ages ten and eleven as an important opportunity to reach boys before harmful peer influences and patterns of behaviour become harder to interrupt.

The Character Company's small-group model was also significant. One mentor works consistently with up to five boys, offering a middle ground between one-to-one mentoring and the larger circles I later encountered in programmes in the United States and Australia. It allowed one man to know each boy well while also creating friendship, belonging and shared accountability between the boys.

Lads Need Dads uses a different balance, with four mentors supporting eight boys, broadly equivalent to one adult for every two boys. This gives boys access to several trusted men and allows responsibility, observation and safeguarding to be shared across the team. The comparison reinforced that there is no single ideal ratio. What matters is that every boy is known and that responsibility does not rest entirely on one mentor.

Ritual and recognition were also important. They gave boys a sense of progress, belonging and growing responsibility. Mentor credibility came through behaviour rather than position or title. Boys watched whether men kept their word, returned the following week and remained steady when things became difficult. But credibility was strongest when it was supported by training, supervision and clear organisational accountability.

Some aspects of what I witnessed do not transfer directly. The scale of violence in the communities I visited has no straightforward equivalent in the UK, and British mentors should not be expected to act as frontline protectors between boys and armed gangs. Nor should informal safeguarding arrangements based mainly on personal trust and reputation be reproduced here. Community credibility matters, but it must sit alongside proper safeguarding and oversight.

Faith played a central role across the community I encountered through The Character Company. It provided not only personal belief and shared values, but buildings, volunteers, community authority and relationships developed over many years. The lesson is not that UK mentoring must be religious. It is that effective programmes need to be rooted in trusted communities and built around clear values and lasting relationships. Faith organisations may provide that foundation, but they are not the only organisations capable of doing so.

The South African approaches that appeared strongest were those in which expectations were clear, mentors were supported and leaders were accountable. Before expanding any mentoring model in the UK, we should ask who is responsible when something goes wrong, who supports mentors with the emotional demands of the work and what happens to the boys when a mentor needs to step back.

South Africa showed me the importance of reaching boys early and remaining alongside them. But I do not need to suggest that boys in the UK face identical conditions to make the case for earlier support. The circumstances may be different, but the need for safety, belonging, guidance and consistent adult relationships remain.



The Character Company Camp

9 CHAPTER 9

United States: mentoring belonging and the power of community.



Before travelling to the United States, I spoke with Nicky Wilks, co-founder of Journey-men Institute on Vashon Island, Washington. My US fieldwork then brought together visits and conversations with organisations and individuals approaching the needs of boys and young men in different ways. These included Boys to Men Mentoring Network in Virginia and San Diego, Journeymen Triangle in North Carolina, L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life in Virginia, Daniel Harris of Illuman, and Dr Warren Farrell.

The organisations and individuals I encountered differed in their purposes, methods and communities. Boys to Men placed mentoring circles and emotional safety at the centre of its work. Journeymen combined mentoring with outdoor challenge, community involvement and rites of passage. L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life used practical activities, life skills, leadership opportunities and support for the wider family. Illuman worked primarily with adult men, offering a different perspective on the reflection and support mentors themselves may need. My conversation with Warren Farrell placed these experiences within a broader discussion about father involvement, prevention, research and the needs of boys and young men.

Rather than presenting these encounters in the order in which they took place, this chapter draws together the principal themes that emerged: the gradual development of trust, the role of circles and shared experience, rites of passage and recognised transitions, the different qualities men bring to mentoring, family involvement, identity and the evidence needed to influence policy.

9.1 Boys to Men: circles, brotherhood and emotional safety

The defining feature of both Boys to Men organisations was the circle: a consistent, voluntary and adult-facilitated space in which boys were given time to speak honestly with one another. The aim was not to fix boys or simply manage their behaviour. It was to create enough trust for them to talk about what was really happening in their lives.

Boys did not enter a circle and immediately disclose their most difficult experiences. They tested it first. They might begin with something light or relatively safe and watch how the adults and other boys responded. Only when trust had developed did conversations begin to reach grief, shame, family relationships or the absence of a father.

This gradual disclosure strongly reinforced what I had already seen through Lads Need Dads. Boys may need months of consistent contact before they believe that a space, and the adults within it, are safe enough to trust. Support that expects immediate openness risks misreading silence as unwillingness, rather than uncertainty about whether it is safe to speak.

The wider Boys to Men approach is captured through two simple frameworks. Mentors are warned against FRAP: fixing, rescuing, advising or projecting. Instead, they are asked to LAMP: listen, accept, model and praise. “Praise” in this context means recognising and naming the honesty, courage or compassion shown by a boy, rather than offering empty praise.



The framework requires considerable restraint. A mentor may recognise a boy's situation and feel that he knows what the boy should do, but his role is not to take over the problem or impose his own answer. He listens, shares honestly where appropriate and helps the boy think for himself. This was one of the clearest explanations I encountered of the discipline required to mentor well.

In Virginia, I spent time with CEO Warren McCrickard and learned about the network of weekly school-based circles developed by Boys to Men Mentoring Network of Virginia. At the time of my visit, Warren described the organisation as operating in approximately thirty-five schools around Richmond and the surrounding area. Circles generally involved between six and twenty boys, supported by one or two paid facilitators and two or three volunteer mentors.

The scale was noticeably different from The Character Company's groups of up to five boys and from the smaller-group model used within some Lads Need Dads programmes, where four mentors support eight boys. Boys to Men circles could be considerably larger, with several adult men present. There were, however, some parallels with the Lads Need Dads Ambassadors programme, where the group can include up to twenty young men and adult mentors. In both settings, the larger group gave young people access to different ages, personalities and life experiences, while ensuring that responsibility for supporting the group did not rest with one mentor alone.

Boys chose whether to participate. The circles emphasised consistency, honesty, personal responsibility and reflection between peers. They were not presented as clinical therapy. Their value came from bringing boys together with men who returned consistently, listened without judgement and were willing to speak honestly about their own lives.

9.1.1 Virginia: truths, tears and brotherhood

One evening circle in Virginia showed me what the model looked like when boys had learned to trust it. The group began by reminding one another that personal stories shared in the room should be treated with respect and not repeated outside it, except where somebody's safety might be at risk. This did not feel like a rule being imposed by the adults. It was something the boys understood and took responsibility for themselves.



The “truths” then moved around the circle, each one revealing something of the life behind the boy. One had lost his father to cancer when he was ten. Another had a father who had been in and out of prison for most of his life. A third spoke about his father no longer recognising him because of dementia.

When my turn came, I shared something I had not planned to say: that I too had grown up without my father. It was not something I needed to explain in detail, but after listening to the boys speak so openly about their own lives, it felt important not to remain entirely behind my professional role. I wanted them to know that I understood something of what

they were describing, while recognising that each of our experiences was different.

Later, one boy broke down as he described how much he missed his father. Without being instructed by an adult, every boy and man in the room stood and gathered around him. Hands rested on his shoulders as the group held him in his grief. Nothing needed to be said. For that moment, he did not have to carry it alone.

What struck me was that the response came from the boys themselves. The adults had helped create and protect the space, but the boys had learned how to support one another within it. Emotional literacy was not being taught as an abstract lesson. It was visible in their ability to recognise another boy's pain, remain present with it and respond without embarrassment or ridicule.

It reinforced why the emotional vocabulary work we use in Lads Need Dads including emotion wheels and consistent check-ins, is not a soft addition to mentoring. Boys need language to understand what they are feeling, but they also need relationships in which those feelings can be expressed safely. Before I left, I gave the group a large floor-based emotion wheel, like the one we use in our own work, as a parting gift for them to use in future circles. It felt like a small but meaningful exchange of practice: I had learned from what I had witnessed in their circle, while leaving behind something from our own approach that might support their work with boys.

9.1.2 Carver Middle School: belonging and attendance



At Carver Middle School in Chesterfield County, I joined Rebecca Hayes, the school's Communities 'In Schools Site Coordinator', to observe a Boys to Men mentoring circle. The session was also supported by Gabe, a mentor who helped facilitate the group, and gave me an opportunity to see how the model operated within a school setting.

Carver serves pupils across grades six to eight, many from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Rebecca told me that chronic absenteeism had stood at around 35 per cent when she began working there and had since fallen. It would not be possible to attribute that improvement to Boys to Men alone, but the boys I met were clear that the circle affected how they felt about attending school. Three boys spoke simply but powerfully about it giving them a reason to come in.

The circles worked through what facilitators called "truths". A boy might begin with something straightforward, such as "I like soccer". As trust accumulated, the truth might become more personal and eventually reach

loss, trauma or the absence of a father. It demonstrated that emotional honesty cannot be demanded from boys. It must be made safe and allowed to develop.

This also raised an important point about how impact is measured. In some settings, the first visible effect of relational mentoring may not be a change in a wellbeing score or an immediate improvement in behaviour. It may simply be that a boy starts coming to school more regularly because there is now somewhere, and someone, he wants to return to.

There was also a caution. Rebecca explained that selection at Carver had moved from being led mainly by behavioural referrals towards chronic absenteeism. Boys to Men more widely had also broadened from an explicit focus on boys without fathers to boys considered at risk.

Both approaches identify boys whose difficulties have become visible. However, they may still miss the boy who attends regularly, behaves well and says very little. This reinforced the importance of identifying underlying circumstances as well as presenting behaviour. Lads Need Dads remains distinctive because it begins with boys growing up without a consistent father figure, including those who may not yet be showing obvious signs of difficulty. This is also why we ask schools delivering LadPods to identify boys growing up without a consistent father figure as they enter Year 7. Identification must lead to appropriate support, but waiting for poor behaviour, falling attendance or disengagement risks missing the opportunity to intervene earlier.

9.1.3 San Diego: experience, strength and hope

My visit to San Diego took me to the original Boys to Men Mentoring Network. It was founded in 1996 by Joe Sigurdson, his father Herb and Craig McClain. Herb had previously served as Executive Director of Father Flanagan's Boys Town, while Joe's own experiences helped shape an approach based on men sharing their lives honestly rather than presenting themselves as flawless examples.

Joe described a model in which men do not tell boys how to live. They share their own experience, strength and hope, including the mistakes they have made and what they have learned from them. This was not authority based on professional status. It came from honesty, consistency and a willingness to be known by the boys.

I also spoke with Bruce Crenshaw, a retired school counsellor who had held a senior role within Boys to Men in San Diego. Bruce described how the organisation's school-based work had developed from a small after-school club into circles delivered within the school day.

Bruce used the phrase "man deserts" to describe the lives of boys who had no consistent male presence at home, at school or within their wider community. The phrase broadened the father-absence question rather than replacing it. The absence of a consistent father relationship may be an important reason to identify a boy, while the presence or absence of other dependable men helps determine what protection he has around him.

Bruce also spoke about the value of "grandfather figures". Older men could bring calmness, patience and steadiness to boys who may never have experienced those qualities from an older man. This resonated strongly with the Lads Need Dads model, where male mentors range in age from their twenties to their mid-seventies. That intergenerational mix is intentional, giving boys access to men with different personalities, perspectives and life experiences. It reinforced something I had already seen in our own practice: boys do not all need exactly the same kind of male relationship, and a group containing men from different generations may offer something that one individual mentor cannot provide alone.

Bruce shared figures from one group of forty boys in which only two were living with both biological parents and 70 per cent lived in a single-parent household, usually with their mother. This was local information rather than a representative study, but it showed that even after Boys to Men widened its focus to boys considered at risk, it continued to reach a substantial number growing up without consistent father involvement.

The strongest independent evidence I found relating to the model came from a 2013 exploratory case study conducted by researchers affiliated with the University of San Diego. The research examined the partnership between Boys to Men San Diego and one middle school. It involved 23 boys alongside parents, mentors and school staff.

Among the participating boys, 78 per cent said Boys to Men helped them attend school more often, 90 per cent said it helped them do better at school, 100 per cent said they felt accepted by the group and 86 per cent said it helped them feel safe. Boys also reported that the programme helped them build friendships, communicate with adults and think more positively about their futures (Martin, Cameron, & Wolford, 2013).

These findings were encouraging, but the researchers were clear about the study's limitations. It involved a small convenience sample, and the available achievement, attendance and disciplinary data were not strong enough to demonstrate causation or generalise the results. The evaluation recommended longer-term tracking of grades, attendance, behavioural referrals and later outcomes.



The study therefore offered evidence that boys valued the model and experienced greater acceptance, safety and engagement. It did not prove that Boys to Men caused a particular percentage improvement in grades or reduction in disciplinary incidents. That distinction matters. Personal testimony can show why boys value these spaces, but stronger and longer-term evidence is still needed to establish what changes, for whom and over what period.

This echoed a point Dr Warren Farrell later made to me: if mentoring for boys is to influence national policy, conviction and powerful stories must be accompanied by credible evidence.

Taken together, Richmond and San Diego showed both the consistency and adaptability of the Boys to Men approach. The circle, honest male presence and gradual building of trust remained central in both places. What differed was how each organisation had developed within its own schools and communities. The lesson for the UK is not to reproduce either organisation exactly, but to understand what the circle makes possible: boys seeing that they are not alone, men modelling honesty without taking over, and trust being built slowly enough for boys to speak when they are ready.

9.2 Ritual, threshold and the key under the mother's pillow



My conversations with Jordan Bowman of Journeymen Triangle in North Carolina and Nicky Wilks, co-founder and former leader of Journeymen Institute in Washington State, near Seattle, gave me a clearer understanding of what a deliberately structured rite of passage can offer boys.

Journeymen Triangle is a North Carolina organisation founded by Jordan and his father, Jeff, after Jordan took part in a rite-of-passage experience at the age of fourteen. Operating since 2009, it supports teenage boys through intergenerational group mentoring circles, individual mentoring, school-based work, outdoor programmes, leadership opportunities and community service. Jordan

became its Executive Director in 2019.

The organisation places particular emphasis on emotional vocabulary, helping boys identify what they are feeling, put it into words and share it within a trusted group. Its mentoring circles provide the ongoing relationships around the boys, while its Rites of Passage Adventure Weekends deliberately mark a transition towards greater independence, responsibility and emotional maturity. Boys who have progressed through the programme can later return as young mentors, supporting those coming behind them.

This wider structure matters. The rite of passage is not expected to transform a boy over one weekend and then send him home unsupported. It sits within continuing relationships with mentors, peers and family. The weekend marks a threshold, but the mentoring community helps the boy make sense of it and live out what follows.

Jordan described taking part in his own initiation when he was fourteen. At the camp, masked men approached the boys but removed their own masks before inviting the boys to do the same. The men modelled the honesty they were asking of the boys.

Jordan also described an activity known as the “truth ball”. Boys selected a ball, ranging from a small golf ball to a large yoga ball, to represent how much of their truth they felt ready to share. Jordan chose a tennis ball and pretended that everything was fine. By the end of the weekend, the assembled men lifted him into the air with the yoga ball raised above him. He was shown that his pain mattered and that the men would remain alongside him. They were not promising to fix it for him.

Jordan now helps create similar experiences for other boys. His groups deliberately include boys with absent or inconsistently involved fathers alongside boys from more stable family backgrounds. He believed that this

mixture benefited both groups. Boys facing adversity were not separated out and defined solely by what was missing, while boys with greater stability learned from experiences beyond their own. This was inclusion with a clear purpose rather than a loss of focus.

In an online meeting with Nicky Wilks, drawing on his previous work with the Journeyman Institute, he shared an image from Robert Bly's interpretation of the traditional story *Iron John*: the key to the wild man's cage lying beneath the mother's pillow. In the original story, the boy must take the key to release the wild man and begin his journey away from childhood.

Taken literally, the story could sound as though the mother is an obstacle from whom a boy must escape. That was not how Nicky used it. In Journeymen's work, the story became a way of opening a conversation with parents about what a boy might need in order to take greater responsibility and move towards adulthood.

Nicky described the story being shared with parents present, followed by a direct question: what is the key your son now needs from you? That key might be greater responsibility, more freedom to make decisions, permission to take managed risks or the opportunity to experience failure without immediately being rescued.

He told me that mothers often became emotional when asked the question. This was not because they were being blamed. It was because the story gave language to something many already understood. They had held their sons close through love, protection and sometimes fear, but there came a point when encouraging greater independence was also an expression of that love.

This connected strongly with my experience at Lads Need Dads. For more than a decade, we have worked alongside mothers as their sons begin taking greater responsibility and spending more time with trusted men. I had not previously seen that transition named so explicitly or marked in a structured space involving both the mother and son.

The purpose is not separation for its own sake, nor is it about removing mothers from boys' lives. It is about helping a boy move towards adulthood with his mother's support, rather than feeling that he must either remain dependent or break away through conflict. Fathers, mothers and other caregivers all have a part to play in helping young people become more independent.

The conversation with Nicky made me think more deeply about what may be missing as boys move towards adulthood. The Journeymen approach placed particular emphasis on initiation: not simply as an event, but as a process involving relationships, challenge, responsibility and the deliberate recognition of a boy's growing maturity.

A rite of passage can provide a powerful way of marking that transition, but it does not have to take the form of a wilderness experience or a single formal ritual. What matters is that boys are not simply expected to navigate the journey into adulthood alone. They need trusted adults who recognise that transition, provide appropriate challenge and increasing responsibility, and acknowledge their growth as they move from boyhood towards becoming young men.

The learning I took from Journeymen was not that the UK should import an American model of rites of passage, but that significant transitions should not be left entirely to chance. Creating intentional moments in which boys can reflect on who they are becoming, what they want to stand for and what greater responsibility means can help make the journey towards adulthood more visible and purposeful.

9.3 The wounded healer and the stable role model

One of the more unexpected themes from my time in the United States concerned the men who become mentors. Several of the men I met spoke openly about addiction, trauma, father absence, family disruption or other significant turning points in their lives. For some, those experiences had contributed to their decision to support boys and young men.



Joe Sigurdson, co-founder of Boys to Men Mentoring in San Diego, was one example. He came to the work through his own recovery and his experience of coaching Little League baseball, where he noticed boys without consistent fathers beginning to gravitate towards him. Long before he intended to establish an organisation, he had become a trusted man in their lives.

Joe recalled being told:

"God does not call the qualified. He qualifies the called."

The phrase reflected a wider theme I encountered in the United States. Formal qualifications were not the only source of credibility. Boys responded to men who understood adversity, spoke honestly and continued to show up. Lived experience gave some mentors an authenticity that could not be produced through training alone.

But lived experience can work in two directions. A man who recognises something of himself in a boy may understand him particularly well. He may also over-identify with him, become too emotionally involved or begin trying to resolve his own past through the mentoring relationship. This raised an important question: how far does a man need to have processed his own experiences before he can safely support a boy whose story may reflect them?

Boys to Men addresses this through a mentor-training weekend called Reclaiming Your Teenage Fire. Prospective mentors revisit their own adolescence, their relationships with their fathers and the experiences they may still carry. The purpose is not to require men to have perfect or uncomplicated histories. It is to help them understand what they may bring into the room before they begin working with boys.

The weekend appeared to serve as more than skills training. It gave men an opportunity to recognise where their own experiences might influence how they responded to a boy. It also gave the organisation an opportunity to get to know the men it was preparing for its mentoring circles.

A conversation with a senior leader from Boys to Men Virginia raised a related question about men with criminal histories. The organisation was open to considering men with past convictions where there was clear evidence of change and a belief that their lived experience could help them connect credibly with boys. Its approach placed considerable weight on community knowledge, personal reputation and evidence of rehabilitation alongside formal vetting. This differed from the context in which Lads Need Dads operates in the UK, particularly within schools, where safeguarding requirements and the legal framework governing work with children place different constraints on recruitment.

Lived experience can give a mentor insight and credibility, but it cannot take the place of safer recruitment, training, supervision and clear boundaries. Some histories will make mentoring inappropriate or legally impossible. In other cases, the nature and relevance of the offence, the time that has passed, evidence of change and the responsibilities of the role may all inform an assessment of suitability. The conversation did not persuade me that safeguarding standards should be relaxed. It made me consider how organisations can recognise the value of lived experience without compromising the safety of boys.

This resonated with aspects of our existing practice at Lads Need Dads, where mentor recruitment already involves in-depth exploration of a man's upbringing, his relationship with his own father, significant life experiences and, where relevant, experiences of mental health difficulties or drug and alcohol misuse. What the US conversations added was a stronger emphasis on continuing that reflection beyond recruitment: helping mentors consider how their own experiences might surface within the mentoring relationship and how these can be managed through training, self-awareness and reflective supervision.

The question is not whether a man has experienced adversity. Lived experience can be a considerable strength. What matters is whether he understands his own history well enough to recognise when it is being activated and to ensure that the mentoring relationship remains centred on the boy.

9.4 Illuman: supporting the men who support others



My meeting with Daniel Harris added another perspective. Daniel was a leader within Illuman and its Washington DC community. Illuman is primarily a movement for adult men rather than a boys' mentoring organisation, so it should not be directly compared with Boys to Men or Journeymen. Its relevance lay in what it revealed about the support men themselves may need before they can safely hold responsibility for others.

Illuman developed from the work of Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr. It uses rites of passage, council circles, nature and spiritual reflection to help men explore their experiences, relationships and sense of purpose. Its work has tradi-

tionally attracted men in midlife and later life, although younger men have also become involved.

Daniel spoke about pastors, therapists and men in other positions of responsibility attending Illuman because they had few places in which they could speak honestly about their own lives. These were men accustomed to supporting other people, but who also needed somewhere to reflect, be challenged and receive support themselves.

That connected directly with what I was learning about mentors. Training men to support boys should not focus only on what they do when they are with the boys. It must also consider what those men are carrying, how the work affects them and where they can speak honestly when something touches their own experience.

Illuman's work is intentionally spiritual, although it has sought to include men from different faiths and those with none. This created a tension that Daniel and I discussed openly. How does an organisation remain true to the beliefs and values from which it grew while remaining accessible to people who may be wary of religion or have been hurt by religious institutions?

That question had particular relevance for me. Some of the organisations I visited in South Africa spoke openly about their Christian foundations. In the UK, an explicitly religious identity can affect access to schools, referrals and funding. Lads Need Dads is values-led but works inclusively with families of all faiths and none.

Illuman's spiritual model could not simply be transferred into a secular UK school or mentoring programme. The transferable lesson was more straightforward: men who support others also need somewhere to reflect on their own lives. Supervision should not be limited to checking procedures or discussing the boys. It should give mentors space to consider how the work is affecting them and whether their own experiences are shaping the way they respond.

9.5 L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life: a familiar model in a different setting



L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life in Richmond, Virginia, held a different significance for me. Its founders had followed Lads Need Dads for some time and, several years before my Fellowship, approached me for advice as they developed their own organisation. We discussed what had contributed to the success of our model, the challenges involved in establishing and sustaining long-term mentoring, the value of practical life-skills work, and the importance of engaging mothers and carers alongside their sons.

Their model subsequently drew significantly on elements of the Lads Need Dads approach, adapted for their own community and context. While Lads Need Dads incorporates camps and outdoor experiences within a wider structured programme, L.A.U.N.C.H. developed its annual camp as a central point of engagement, with relationships and referrals growing from it. Alongside this, they incorporated workshops, practical life-skills development and ongoing relational support.

L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life is a free, group-based mentoring programme for boys and young men who would benefit from positive male role models. Its name reflects six values: Leadership, Accountability, Unity, Compassion, Community and Honor. The programme combines mentoring with adventure, practical activities, leadership opportunities, personal development and community involvement.

The model was closer to Lads Need Dads than many of the other American programmes I encountered. It was structured rather than entirely conversation-led and used activity as a way of building relationships. Boys learned alongside men through doing things together, rather than relying solely on formal discussion or emotional disclosure.

This mattered because not every boy engages most readily through a circle. Some build trust while making something, learning a practical skill, taking part in an outdoor challenge or working alongside an adult. Conversation can develop more naturally when it is not the sole purpose of the activity.

The mentors I encountered also presented a different emphasis from some of the men involved in the circle and rites-of-passage organisations. Their authority came less from disclosing personal trauma and more from showing boys what consistent, capable adult life looked like. They brought professional knowledge, practical skills, reliability and a willingness to invest their time.

This did not make them better mentors than men with lived experience. It demonstrated that mentors could offer boys different things. One man may help a boy feel understood because he has experienced something similar. Another may model a stable form of adulthood that a boy has rarely encountered. Both can be valuable.

The organisation's inclusion of mothers and guardians was particularly important. L.A.U.N.C.H. did not treat boys as though they existed separately from their families. Mothers and carers were included in the wider work around their sons, recognising that mentoring is more effective when the adults around a boy are connected rather than operating in separate worlds.

This aligned strongly with the approach we have taken at Lads Need Dads from the outset. Our family work is not an addition to the mentoring but part of the model itself. It helps mothers understand what their sons are learning, gives them somewhere to discuss concerns and strengthens the wider network of support around the boy.

For me, the visit demonstrated international learning working in both directions. I had travelled to the United States to learn from others, yet here I was seeing elements of a model developed in Essex taking a different form in Virginia. L.A.U.N.C.H. was not a copy of Lads Need Dads, but an example of how ideas can be shared, adapted

and developed around the needs and strengths of a different community. It was a powerful reminder that transferability does not have to mean replication.

9.6 Mothers, sons and the wider family

A conversation with mentor Attila Tota at Boys to Men San Diego reinforced the importance of looking beyond the individual boy to the relationships surrounding him. In some families, particularly following bereavement, separation, domestic abuse or prolonged conflict, a son may begin to feel responsible for protecting or emotionally supporting his mother. He may become the person she confides in, worry that he must remain strong for her or take on responsibilities beyond his age.

This is not an inevitable consequence of father absence, nor is it a criticism of mothers raising sons alone. Many are carrying an enormous level of responsibility with very little support. The concern is the pressure placed on a boy when the boundaries between being a son, a protector and an emotional confidant become unclear.

Attila described recognising similar patterns through his work in the United States. One conversation cannot establish how widespread the experience is, but the similarity with situations I have encountered in the UK was striking.

It reinforced why early intervention cannot focus only on placing a mentor alongside a boy. Practitioners also need to understand what is happening within the wider family and, where appropriate, work alongside the mother or carer. The purpose is not to judge the relationship, but to strengthen the support around both so that the boy is not carrying responsibilities that belong with adults. This is explored more fully in section 11.10.

9.7 Emotional literacy, activity and identity

The programmes I encountered in the United States showed that there is no single format through which boys develop emotional literacy. Boys to Men placed the circle at the centre of its work. Journeymen combined group mentoring with outdoor challenge and rites of passage. L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life used practical activities, new experiences and a staged progression towards leadership.

These approaches looked different, but they shared an important principle: boys were not expected to develop emotional awareness through instruction alone. They learned through relationships with men and other boys, through being listened to, through hearing other people speak honestly and through experiences that gave conversation a reason to emerge.

Circles can help normalise emotional honesty. When one boy speaks about grief, rejection or fear and is met with respect rather than ridicule, other boys see that it may be safe for them to speak too. The group becomes part of the intervention, with boys learning not only how to express their own emotions but how to remain present when somebody else expresses his.

Practical and outdoor activities can create the same opportunity differently. Some boys speak more easily while walking, cooking, repairing something, playing sport or completing a challenge alongside a trusted adult. Activity can reduce the pressure of direct questioning and allow trust to develop through shared experience.

These approaches should not be treated as opposites. Emotional conversation and practical activity can strengthen one another. The important question is not whether a programme uses circles or activities, but whether boys have sufficient time, consistency and safety to build relationships and whether adults recognise opportunities for deeper conversation when they arise.

Identity was also a much more explicit part of the US programmes than it is within many services designed primarily around behaviour, attainment or risk. Boys were asked what kind of men they wanted to become, what values they wanted to live by and what responsibility would look like in their relationships and communities.

Journeyman explored these questions through mentoring, challenge and recognised transition. Boys to Men used truthful storytelling, peer accountability and the example of adult men. L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life created a progression from participation into community service, leadership and peer mentoring. My conversation with Daniel Harris showed how Illuman used related ideas with adult men, although its spiritual and adult-focused work was not directly comparable with youth mentoring.

The transferable lesson for the UK is not that one of these approaches should be adopted in full. It is that emotional literacy, identity, practical experience and belonging should not be separated into unrelated interventions. Boys benefit when these elements are held together within consistent relationships and when support continues long enough for trust, responsibility and leadership to develop.

9.8 Different men, different strengths

Taken together, Boys to Men, Journeyman, Illuman and L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life challenged the idea that there is one ideal type of mentor.

Some men brought lived experience of father absence, addiction, trauma or rejection. When that experience had been understood and processed, it could help them connect with boys who felt that few adults understood their lives.

Other men brought stability, practical knowledge and an example of consistent adult life. They did not need to have shared a boy's adversity to offer him something valuable. Their reliability and ordinary competence could show him possibilities beyond what he had previously experienced.

Boys may benefit from both. They need men who can understand where they have come from and men who can help them imagine where they might go. Sometimes the same mentor can offer both, but a well-balanced team does not depend on finding one exceptional individual capable of meeting every need.

This has implications for recruitment. Relevant lived experience can be a strength, but experiencing adversity should neither qualify nor disqualify someone from becoming a mentor. Equally, a man does not need to have overcome significant trauma to make a meaningful contribution. Selection should consider what each person brings, how well he understands himself, his capacity to build safe and appropriate relationships with boys, and how his strengths complement those of the wider team.

Whatever their background, all mentors need careful selection, training, clear boundaries, reflective supervision and ongoing support. Lived experience may help a man connect with a boy, but it does not lessen the importance of safeguarding or self-awareness. Equally, stability and professional success can provide a powerful example without necessarily making someone an effective mentor. The strength lies not in choosing one type of man over another, but in building a team in which different men bring different qualities, perspectives and experiences while contributing safely and consistently.

9.9 Dr Warren Farrell: evidence, prevention and intergenerational change

I met Dr Warren Farrell at his home in Mill Valley, just north of San Francisco. Warren Farrell is an American political scientist and author who holds a PhD in political science from New York University. His early work examined gender roles within the women's movement, before his focus shifted towards the experiences of boys and men, father involvement and family relationships. His books include *Father and Child Reunion*, *The Myth of Male Power* and *The Boy Crisis*, co-authored with John Gray.

Our conversation focused on several questions at the heart of this Fellowship: how boys who may need support can be identified earlier, what evidence is required to influence policy and whether support during boyhood may affect the kind of fathers some boys later become.



We discussed the shortage of long-term research into mentoring specifically for boys growing up without a consistent father figure. Individual stories and frontline experience can show what the work means to boys and families, but they cannot establish on their own which changes resulted from mentoring or whether those changes continued into adulthood. If this field is to influence national policy, it needs research that follows boys over a much longer period.

Warren drew my attention to a questionnaire included in *The Boy Crisis*, covering a range of factors associated with depression and suicide risk, including father absence. He suggested that some of its questions might be adapted for use with younger boys.

However, the questionnaire has not been formally validated for that purpose. It should not be used to predict depression, suicide or any other outcome without expert input, ethical oversight and proper testing. What it offered was a starting point for thinking about the questions schools and services rarely ask before a boy's difficulties become visible.

Earlier identification is not the same as predicting that a boy will experience poor outcomes. It means recognising circumstances that may increase vulnerability and asking whether further conversation or support is needed.

Warren and I also discussed the difference between preventing father absence and supporting boys once it has occurred. He argued that better support for communication and conflict resolution between couples could help some families sustain healthier relationships and prevent avoidable breakdown.

That can only ever be one part of the picture. Boys may grow up without a consistent father relationship because of bereavement, domestic abuse, imprisonment, illness, migration, addiction and many other circumstances that cannot be addressed through couple support. In some families, continued contact with a father would not be safe or appropriate.

Mentoring cannot restore every lost or disrupted father relationship. What it can do is ensure that a boy does not have to navigate that experience without consistent adult support. Policy therefore needs to work at both levels: strengthening safe father involvement and family relationships where possible, while providing early support when a father relationship is absent, inconsistent or unsafe.

Our conversation also included stepfathers and other men who take on fathering responsibilities. Stepfathers can be overlooked when discussions focus only on biological fathers, despite the stability and guidance many provide. Their presence should not automatically be assumed to be either positive or negative. What matters is the quality, safety and consistency of the relationship they build with the child.

One example from *Lads Need Dads* made the intergenerational argument much more real. John, whose name has been changed, joined the organisation when he was eleven. Over the years, he received support to understand and work through many of the feelings and experiences connected with growing up without his father. He also developed confidence, responsibility and a clearer idea of the man he wanted to become.

When John became a young father, he made a deliberate decision to provide the consistent fatherhood he had not experienced himself. He chose to care for his child full time and has taken that responsibility extremely seriously. For him, becoming a father offered an opportunity to break a pattern that had affected his own childhood.

It would be wrong to claim that mentoring alone produced that decision. John deserves ownership of the choices he has made. But the support he received before becoming a father gave him somewhere to work through his experiences, develop healthier expectations of himself and consider what kind of man he wanted to be.

His story raises a question that long-term research should examine whether sustained support during boyhood can influence how men later approach relationships, responsibility and fatherhood.

Boys should not be supported only because of the men or fathers they may one day become. Their lives and wellbeing matter now. But John's story shows why the effect of supporting a boy may eventually reach beyond him and into the family he creates.

My conversation with Warren reinforced what this field now needs: earlier identification, properly tested assessment methods and research that follows boys into adulthood. Personal accounts show why the work matters. Long-term evidence is needed to tell us what changes, for whom and whether those changes last.

9.10 Closing reflection on the United States

I did not leave the United States with a single model to bring back to the UK. I left with a clearer understanding of how trust, brotherhood, emotional honesty and ritual can help boys feel that they belong.

The circles showed me that boys rarely disclose what matters most simply because an adult asks them to. They test the space first. Trust develops through consistency, seeing other boys speak honestly and discovering that what they share will be received without judgement or an immediate attempt to fix them. The activities, circles and rites of passage differed between organisations, but the strongest work gave boys time, emotional safety and adults who kept showing up.

The US visit also reinforced the importance of paying attention to the men doing the mentoring. Lived experience can help a mentor understand a boy, but only when he has reflected on his own history and can remain steady when a boy's experiences touch something personal. Mentor preparation must therefore go beyond practical training. It should help men understand their motivations, boundaries and emotional responses, alongside continuing supervision and support.

I also saw how ritual can give boys a clear sense of transition as they move towards adulthood. The lesson is not to reproduce American ceremonies in the UK, but to recognise boys' need for challenge, responsibility and acknowledgement. Any such experience must be safe, purposeful and supported by relationships that continue afterwards. A powerful weekend cannot replace consistent, long-term support.

My visits covered a small number of organisations and do not represent mentoring practice across the United States as a whole. Safeguarding arrangements varied, and independent long-term evidence remained limited for some of the approaches I encountered. Community credibility can strengthen mentoring, but it cannot replace formal accountability. Strong programmes need both.

The opportunity for the UK is to combine the relational depth I witnessed in the United States with the safeguarding standards expected here. Mentoring can be emotionally honest and deeply human while also being carefully structured, supervised and accountable. Boys need relationships that feel genuine, and systems strong enough to protect and sustain them.



10

CHAPTER 10

Australia: research, systems and the missing subgroup

Australia was the final stop of my Fellowship and, of the countries I visited, had the most developed body of research and national discussion on fatherhood. Yet I found far less attention being paid to boys who were already growing up without a safe and consistent father relationship. They appeared in individual programmes and conversations, but were not clearly recognised across research, policy and practice as a group with needs of their own.



10.1 The fathering summit: naming the missing generation

Sydney was my first stop in Australia, where I had been invited to speak and join a panel at The Fathering Summit, organised by The Fathering Project. The event brought together researchers, clinicians, policymakers and practitioners and included the presentation of findings from State of the World's Fathers: Australia 2026.

The Fathering Project is a national organisation that helps fathers and father figures become more confident, connected and positively involved in their children's lives. Its work includes school-based father-engagement programmes, Dads Groups, parenting education, practical resources and more targeted support for fathers and families experiencing additional difficulties. Through its school partnerships, it helps schools involve fathers more actively in their children's education and creates opportunities for fathers and children to spend purposeful time together. This practical work sits alongside its research, advocacy and national Fathering Summit.

Its focus on prevention was particularly relevant to my Fellowship. Rather than waiting until family relationships have broken down, The Fathering Project works to strengthen fathers' involvement while those relationships are still developing. It provided a strong example of what a national, father-inclusive organisation can achieve through schools and communities.

It was therefore the right place to begin my Australian visit. Australia was clearly taking fatherhood seriously, and the Summit gave me an opportunity to put the central question of this Fellowship directly to people working in the field: what happens to boys who are already growing up without a safe, consistent and positively engaged father relationship?

My presentation focused on a group that can be overlooked even within discussions about fatherhood: boys who have not experienced the relationship the field is working to strengthen. Boys matter in their own right, but their experiences of being fathered may also influence the men, partners and fathers some of them later become. The foundations of fatherhood do not suddenly appear when a man has a child. They begin much earlier, through what a boy experiences, observes and learns about relationships, responsibility, care and masculinity.

I used the story of Henry to make this argument concrete. Henry joined Lads Need Dads at thirteen after growing up with little involvement from his father. He remained with us throughout adolescence, later mentored younger boys, graduated with a first-class honours degree in music and returned to teach at the school where he first encountered our programme. His journey showed what can happen when a boy is surrounded by consistent relationships over time. It was not one intervention or one mentor that made the difference, but a sustained network of people who knew him, believed in him and gave him opportunities to grow.

Australian parenting author and boys' advocate Maggie Dent recognised a strong connection between my observations from the UK and her own work with boys. Her response reinforced the importance of supporting boys without framing them as deficient or setting their needs against those of girls. Boys thrive when the adults, families, schools and communities around them understand what they need and work together to provide it.

The findings presented from *State of the World's Fathers: Australia 2026* challenged the assumption that fathers are unwilling to engage in family life. Ninety-seven per cent of Australian fathers said they enjoyed caring for their children and felt confident doing so, yet only nineteen per cent of parents believed they had enough time for caregiving. The findings pointed to fathers who wanted to be involved but were constrained by work, financial pressure and systems that had not kept pace with changing expectations of fatherhood (Ewald et al., 2026).

The research also found that seventy-two per cent of Gen Z fathers believed a father's sole responsibility was to provide financially. Economic insecurity, traditional expectations of male responsibility and restrictive messages about masculinity may all contribute to this view. For younger fathers under pressure, working harder and earning more may feel like the clearest way to demonstrate that they are fulfilling their role, even when it leaves them with less time to build relationships with their children.

Only three per cent of fathers identified other fathers as their main source of parenting support. This suggested that many were trying to manage the demands of parenting without a strong network of other men around them. Fathers need more than encouragement to be involved. They also need relationships, communities and systems that make that involvement possible.

This has implications for mentoring as well. A single trusted man can make an enormous difference to a boy, but no child's support should depend entirely on one individual. Boys benefit from a wider network of healthy relationships, including family members, teachers, coaches, mentors and other dependable adults. That network offers greater continuity and reduces the risk that the loss of one relationship leaves a boy unsupported again.

A presentation on paternal mental health described how distress in men may appear through irritability, withdrawal, risk-taking, disengagement or substance misuse rather than through verbal expressions of sadness. Around one in ten fathers were reported to experience depression during the first year of fatherhood, with many delaying help-seeking until their difficulties had become more serious. Early fatherhood was compared to walking on ice while hearing pressure building underneath. The image captured how a man may appear to be coping while feeling increasingly unsafe beneath the surface.

The same theme arose during a panel on re-thinking boyhood, which I was invited to join, alongside Maggie Dent, Ben Vasiliou from The Man Cave and Zac Seidler from Movember. Boys may communicate distress through withdrawal, humour, anger, risk-taking or changes in behaviour before they are able or willing to explain what is happening. This does not mean boys lack emotional depth or are unwilling to talk. It means that trust and emotional safety often have to come first.

When adults focus only on the behaviour they can see, boys can quickly become viewed as problems to be managed. Their anger, disengagement or risk-taking may attract attention, while the loss, rejection, fear or confusion underneath remains unexplored.

This reinforced one of the central findings of the Fellowship: boys are often noticed for their behaviour before anyone asks what may be happening beneath it.

These discussions also raised a wider question: how do we make the case for supporting boys without defining that support primarily by the problems we hope to prevent later? Violence prevention, offending and future risk are important concerns, but early intervention is also about boys' lives, experiences and wellbeing in the here and now. Supporting boys early matters in its own right, as well as for the difficulties it may help prevent later.

Across much of the day, the emphasis remained on engaging fathers, removing barriers and strengthening father-child relationships. I used the panel to raise the question of boys for whom that relationship was already absent, unsafe or severely disrupted. Within Lads Need Dads, approximately 30 per cent of the boys we support have experienced the death of their father. Others have fathers who are absent through separation, imprisonment, addiction, abuse, conflict or long-term disengagement. These boys cannot be reached solely through policies designed to increase fathers' involvement.

Supporting fathers and supporting boys growing up without them are not opposing agendas. Wherever a father can be safely helped to remain positively involved, that relationship should be supported. Where this is not possible, the boy still needs access to consistent adults and long-term relational support.

Another panel examined fatherhood under constraint and provided an important reminder that absence does not have a single meaning. Every father has a story. Not every involved father is a safe or positive father, and not every absent father is uncaring. Family law, poverty, insecure housing, imprisonment, migration and working conditions can all restrict a father's involvement, even where he wants to remain connected to his child.

The example was given of a father working three jobs who rarely saw his child. It raised an important question about how involvement is measured. The amount of time a father spends with his child matters but contact hours alone cannot tell us about the quality or meaning of the relationship. A father living elsewhere may remain reliable, loving and emotionally available, while a father living in the home may be distant or inconsistent. Physical presence matters, but it is the relationship experienced by the child that matters most.

A closing discussion suggested that the fatherhood field was moving beyond asking whether fathers matter and towards the more detailed question of how fathers' matter. This is an important shift because it creates space to examine the particular qualities healthy father involvement can bring, the barriers that prevent it and what children may need when it is missing.



I also raised the difficulty frontline organisations face when attempting to bring practice-based evidence into research and policy. Organisations may hold years of experience and detailed knowledge of the children and families they support, yet their findings can carry less influence unless they are attached to a university. At the same time, relatively small academic studies may be given considerable weight even when their relevance to frontline delivery is limited. Stronger partnerships are needed so that academic research and practice-based evidence can challenge, test and strengthen one another.

Clinical psychologist Dr James Brown challenged the familiar claim that boys and men do not talk about their feelings. Drawing on a decade of clinical work, much of it with boys and men, he argued that when trust and safety are established, the problem is often not an absence of disclosure. He described how creating that emotional safety could lead not to silence, but to an outpouring of what had been held back. This closely matched what I had seen in mentoring circles throughout the Fellowship. Boys do talk, but they need to trust the people, setting and process first.

Maggie Dent described boys as needing at least one safe person, a “lighthouse” figure who remains steady and visible when other parts of life feel uncertain. It was a simple image, but one that reflected much of what I had seen. Good mentoring is not about making a big impression on a boy. It is about being someone he can rely on to keep showing up.

The Summit’s communiqué called for greater investment in early intervention, evidence-based community programmes, father-inclusive policy, positive male role models and stronger evaluation. These priorities reflected many of the themes emerging from my own research. The Summit also gave me the opportunity to bring boys growing up without a consistent father figure into a conversation that had understandably focused largely on fathers themselves.



Australia showed me how far the fatherhood field has developed. Researchers, practitioners and policymakers were asking increasingly detailed questions about how fathers contribute, what prevents their involvement and how systems can support them more effectively. What remained less developed was a response for boys who had already lost that relationship, had never experienced it or could not safely continue it.

That was the missing group at the centre of my Australian visit. The field had established that fathers matter. The question that remained was what happens to the boy when the father relationship that matters is not there.

10.2 The Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium



I attended the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium’s annual symposium in Melbourne, convened by Associate Professor Jacqui Macdonald and Dr Karen Wynter of Deakin University. I also presented a poster showing how the Lads Need Dads Reading Mentors and LadPods programmes form an early-intervention pathway from primary to secondary school.

The symposium approached the lack of support available to fathers as a public health issue. The problem was not framed as fatherhood itself, or as fathers simply failing to engage. Instead, researchers repeatedly asked why services intended to support families still so often fail to include fathers. This matters because recognising an issue as a public health concern opens routes into policy, research and funding that community work with boys rarely reaches.

Associate Professor Zac Seidler, Global Director of Men’s Health Research at Movember, gave the keynote address. He argued that fathers are not necessarily avoiding care. Many are responding to environments that signal, through the layout of the room, the language used and the questions asked, that appointments are about the mother and baby rather than about them.

Research presented by Seidler found that 59 per cent of Australian fathers had not been asked by a health professional about their mental health or how they were coping, either during pregnancy or in the first year following the birth of their first child. Fathers experiencing financial strain were almost twice as likely not to have been asked at all (Wilson et al., 2026). The period in which services have greatest contact with new fathers may therefore also be one of the clearest missed opportunities to identify difficulties early.

His presentation reframed a familiar question. Instead of asking why men do not engage with services, we should first ask whether those services were designed to recognise how men experience distress, how they communicate it and what might help them feel included.

Associate Professor Jacqui Macdonald presented findings from a systematic review of 37 randomised controlled trials involving nearly 5,000 fathers. Many of the interventions had little or no measurable effect, and a number had not been designed specifically for fathers. The findings raised an important question about whether fathers are genuinely being offered support that reflects their experiences, needs and ways of engaging.

The interventions showing the most promise tended to be practical, relational and designed with fathers in mind. Some used group or peer support, while others combined mental health care with parenting, relationships and practical help. This did not point towards one ideal programme. It showed the importance of understanding the people an intervention is intended to reach rather than expecting generic provision to work equally well for everyone.

Ebony Biden of Deakin University presented work from the 1 in 10 Men project, which has led to the development of the world's first Preconception Paternal Mental Healthcare Guidelines. The guidelines look beyond pregnancy and early fatherhood to consider how the health and wellbeing of boys and men before they become fathers may influence their later mental health and wellbeing.

As part of this work, Biden presented data on Adverse Childhood Experiences. More than 60 per cent of first-time fathers reported at least one adverse childhood experience, while 22.1 per cent reported four or more. Having four or more ACEs was associated with approximately twice the risk of depression and anxiety during early fatherhood. Among the strongest predictors were feeling unloved, verbal abuse and sexual abuse during childhood.

These findings brought boyhood directly into a discussion about fathers' mental health. Difficulties that become visible when a man enters fatherhood may have begun many years earlier, through his childhood experiences, relationships and sense of himself. By the time maternity or family services ask how he is coping, he may already have been carrying those experiences for decades.

The draft guidelines bring adolescence into the preconception picture, recognising that supporting future fathers cannot begin only when a pregnancy occurs. This was a clear example of a clinical and public health framework recognising the developmental journey from boyhood to fatherhood.

This does not mean that boys should be supported principally because some of them will become fathers. Their experiences and wellbeing matter now. It does show that support provided during boyhood may have lasting effects on men's later mental health, relationships and family lives.

Evidence from Ten to Men, Australia's longitudinal study of male health, also pointed towards connections between experiences earlier in life and later mental health. Analysis of father-son data within the wider study, presented at the symposium, showed how the wellbeing of fathers and sons can be shaped across generations, including through parental behaviour and family relationships. For those who later become fathers, adolescent mental health can form part of the much longer developmental journey into fatherhood.

Jennifer Ericksen, Senior Clinical Psychologist at the Parent-Infant Research Institute, presented DadBooster, a specialised online intervention for fathers experiencing postnatal depression and anxiety. The programme uses cognitive behavioural therapy and was developed specifically around the experiences and needs of new fathers.

DadBooster provides structured online sessions covering mood, unhelpful patterns of thinking, stress, problem-solving, relationships and adjustment to fatherhood. It also includes supporting resources and contact with a coach. Its online format allows fathers to access treatment privately and flexibly, helping to overcome some of the practical and psychological barriers that can prevent men from using traditional services.

The evidence presented at the symposium suggested that DadBooster could provide an effective response for fathers experiencing clinically significant depression and anxiety. Its importance lay not only in being available online, but in being designed specifically for fathers. It recognised how paternal depression may present, the pressures attached to men's identities as providers and protectors, and the difficulty some fathers experience in acknowledging that they need support.

DadBooster offered an example of what can happen when services stop asking why men fail to engage and begin designing support that men can recognise as relevant to their lives. It also supported a wider conclusion from the symposium: generic provision is not always enough.

Professor Rebecca Giallo presented findings from Working Out Dads, a group-based peer-support programme for fathers experiencing, or at risk of, mental health difficulties during early fatherhood. The programme was compared with a brief, 30-minute telephone consultation with a health professional focused on mental health and available services.

The brief telephone call produced improvements comparable with the much larger intervention. This was not evidence that structured programmes were unnecessary. It showed how significant it could be for a father simply to be noticed and asked directly how he was coping. For some participants, it was the first time anyone had asked about their mental health.

The contrast between DadBooster and the brief telephone consultation was useful. One demonstrated the value of a structured, father-specific clinical intervention. The other showed what a well-timed human conversation could achieve. Together, they reinforced that relationships and programme design should not be treated as alternatives. Strong interventions need both human connection and a clear understanding of the people they are intended to support.

The symposium showed how sophisticated Australian research into paternal mental health had become. It examined pregnancy, birth and the postnatal period in considerable depth, while the emerging preconception work was beginning to trace risk and protection back through adolescence and childhood.

However, practical intervention with boys between the ages of ten and eighteen remained far less visible across the programme. There was growing evidence that adolescent experiences influence later fatherhood, but much less discussion about what schools and community organisations should do with that knowledge. Long-term mentoring, identity development and sustained relational support during boyhood had little presence within the presentations I attended.

This was the gap that concerned me most. The research was showing that the mental health and relationships of new fathers often have roots in boyhood. Yet the practical response still concentrated largely on men approaching or entering fatherhood. If we wait until that point, we may be responding years after some of the underlying difficulties first developed.

There was a clear parallel with what I had observed in UK schools. Fathers were physically present in maternity and health settings but often remained unrecognised by the systems around them. In schools, boys growing up without a consistent father figure may also be present and known to individual members of staff, while the significance of that experience remains largely unrecorded and unexplored. In both cases, the person is visible, but the underlying need is not.

After the symposium, I wrote up my reflections and shared them directly with several of the researchers. I set out why I believed the evidence presented pointed towards the need for earlier work with boys, particularly those growing up without a consistent father figure. My purpose was not to suggest that the research was looking

in the wrong place. It was to ask whether the fatherhood research presented at the symposium might also benefit from extending further back into boys' developmental years.

The symposium strengthened one of the central conclusions of this Fellowship. Supporting fathers during pregnancy and early parenthood is essential, but it is not the beginning of the story. If we want healthier and more confident fathers in the future, we must also pay attention to the boys they were and to the relationships, losses and experiences that shaped them long before their children were born.

10.3 Menslink: prevention built around relationships



I spent a week with Menslink in Canberra, which gave me time to understand the organisation beyond a single visit or interview. I met with its leadership, mentoring and counselling teams, observed delivery in schools, explored its mentor recruitment and matching process and discussed its relationships with families, police and the wider community.

Founded in 2001 in response to concerns about male suicide, Menslink has spent twenty-five years developing an early-intervention pathway for boys and young men.

Its work combines school-based education, long-term one-to-one mentoring and professional counselling. In 2024, Menslink reported reaching approximately 13,500 boys across around eighty schools in the Canberra region.

Menslink was particularly relevant to my Fellowship because it combines long-term mentoring for boys without a consistent male role model with professional counselling and wider school-based programmes. Its mentoring programme supports boys aged ten to sixteen, matching them with a mentor for two years, usually meeting about once a fortnight alongside opportunities to take part in group activities. Menslink also provides professional counselling for young men aged ten to twenty-five, giving boys access to therapeutic support where this is needed. Its school programmes extend that reach further, providing a route through which many more boys can encounter Menslink and seek support.

Spending a week there allowed me to see how these different parts connected. A boy might first encounter Menslink through a school session, then later receive counselling or apply for a mentor. The schoolwork reaches a large population; while mentoring and counselling provide greater depth for boys who need it. This combination of broad engagement and targeted support was one of the model's clearest strengths.

My initial meetings with Chief Executive Ben Gathercole and Chief Operating Officer Henry Goodwin established the organisation's structure and philosophy. A longer conversation with Ben became one of the most strategically useful exchanges of the Fellowship. Despite working in different countries, Menslink and Lads Need Dads had independently reached several similar conclusions through frontline practice.

We agreed that behaviour often has to be understood in the context of relationships rather than treated as an isolated problem. Mothers seeking support are usually overwhelmed rather than disengaged. Mentoring works best as early intervention, not as a correction imposed after difficulties have escalated. We had also both thought seriously about how organisations founded by individuals can develop leadership and structures capable of continuing without them.

Finding these similarities mattered. It did not prove that either organisation had found the only answer, but it strengthened my confidence that the principles were not simply products of one programme or one national culture. Two organisations working independently on opposite sides of the world had reached many of the same conclusions by listening to boys, families and practitioners over time.

There were also important differences between the models. Menslink operates at considerable scale through its school presentations, creating a broad pathway into mentoring and counselling. Lads Need Dads works with fewer boys through smaller groups and a longer developmental pathway. I did not see these as competing approaches. Together, they illustrated how a prevention system might combine universal or large-scale engagement with more intensive support for boys who need greater depth.

Ben and I also discussed the importance of preserving the purpose of a programme as it develops. Attempts to make sessions constantly entertaining can weaken the very elements that give them value. As Ben put it, young people do not need adults to be entertaining; they need them to be predictable. Activities matter, particularly when they help boys relax and connect, but they cannot replace consistency, boundaries and adults who mean what they say.

David Parkes, Menslink's Mentoring Programme Manager, described a turning point in his own life when another man asked whether he was okay and offered to listen. That experience of being noticed by a safe man now influences how he approaches mentoring. It reflected a pattern I had also encountered in South Africa and the United States: many of the men drawn to mentoring remembered a time when they had needed, or benefited from, that kind of relationship themselves.

At the time of my visit, Menslink was supporting approximately thirty active mentor and mentee pairings. Mentors and boys generally met fortnightly, with additional group activities and wilderness experiences available. David explained that simple activities often created stronger connections than expensive or elaborate outings. The activity gave the boy and mentor something to do together, but the value came from the conversation and trust that developed around it.

David also took me into schools to observe work with Year 6 boys. Menslink begins its work at the end of primary school, as Lads Need Dads does. Both organisations had independently identified this transition point as an important time to begin supporting boys. Late primary school and the transition into secondary education offer an important opportunity to build trust, emotional language and help-seeking habits before difficulties become more firmly established.

Menslink's wilderness experiences added another dimension. Outdoor challenge can give boys opportunities to manage discomfort, rely on others and discover strengths that may not be visible in a classroom. However, as I had seen in South Africa and the United States, the power of these experiences depends on what surrounds them. A memorable trip may create an opening, but the continuing relationship is what helps a boy make sense of it and carry the learning back into everyday life.

Menslink's mentor selection process combines formal safeguarding checks with direct observation. Applicants complete a detailed application and interview before attending intensive training, including an overnight component. This allows staff to see how prospective mentors respond to boundaries, group dynamics, challenge and social pressure rather than relying on application form and police check alone.

I came away from our discussion thinking about a principle we apply at Lads Need Dads: you are only as good as your last recruit. A programme's reputation and past success cannot protect a boy from one unsuitable

appointment. Safeguarding depends on the decisions being made now, with every new person brought into the organisation.

One of Menslink's most distinctive practices is that boys have a direct say in choosing their mentor. Prospective mentors and boys rotate through a series of short, structured activities. Afterwards, each boy privately identifies the men with whom he felt safest and most comfortable. Staff retain responsibility for the final match, but the boy's response is central to the decision.

This gives the boy some ownership from the beginning and may strengthen his willingness to engage. It also supports a fair and transparent matching process, rather than leaving the decision solely to mentors or staff. Matching is therefore based on shared interests and professional judgement, while also taking account of the boy's own sense of comfort and trust.

Menslink was about to pilot a new programme called 'Side by Side' in response to a different need. The programme was designed for boys who had a father or another significant male carer in their lives, but whose relationship had become strained, distant or difficult. Rather than providing a separate mentor, Side by Side brought the boy and the man together through a ten-week programme focused on communication, listening, emotional honesty and rebuilding the relationship.

The idea reinforced something I already believed. Some boys do not need an alternative father figure; they may need support to rebuild the relationship with the father or male carer already in their lives. Within Lads Need Dads, boys may sometimes leave following reconciliation with their fathers, even though both may still need support to rebuild trust and learn how to communicate differently.

Although Side by Side was still at an early stage, the idea raised an important question for our own work: what happens between father absence and healthy reconnection? Mentoring should not compete with a safe and positively involved father. Where reconciliation is appropriate and wanted by the boy, there may be value in supporting that relationship to rebuild rather than simply ending support when contact resumes.



At Melba Copland Secondary School, I observed a Tribe session facilitated by Menslink Education Manager Graeme Hincksman. The session used strengths-based storytelling to help boys recognise courage, empathy and leadership in themselves and one another. Graeme's openness appeared to give the boys permission to respond with similar honesty.

What was important was that the school-based work did not sit in isolation. A session like Tribe can introduce language, open up conversations and make boys aware that support is available, while Menslink's wider model provides routes into professional counselling or longer-term mentoring where more sustained support is needed. Boys do not always disclose what matters most straight away; having somewhere for that relationship and trust to develop gives the schoolwork somewhere to lead.

Matthew Taylor, who manages Menslink's counselling team, described the work as walking alongside a young person rather than pushing him to disclose before he is ready. This connected strongly with a pattern we have seen repeatedly at Lads Need Dads. Boys may engage in activities and conversations for months before speaking directly about their fathers. In many cases, the deeper conversation does not emerge until around eight months into the relationship. The issue a boy first presents may not be the one affecting him most deeply. Trust must develop before some boys feel safe enough to speak about what is really happening.

Menslink does not promote its support to boys as a "fatherlessness group." Participation is framed around activity, belonging, connection and help with the issues the boy identifies. Emotional safety is allowed to develop before disclosure is expected. Some boys arriving at Menslink had said that they did not know there were good men in the world. For them, the first change was not produced by a curriculum. It came from experiencing men who were calm, reliable and interested in them without wanting anything in return.

Matthew's observations also reinforced the importance of giving boys several relational anchors rather than encouraging dependence on one replacement father figure. A mentor can be important, but he should strengthen the wider network around a boy, not become the only person holding it together.



My meeting with Chief Superintendent John Hawkins of ACT Policing added a wider systems perspective. We discussed how police often become involved when difficulties have already escalated and risk is visible, but also how they can help connect boys and families with support earlier. ACT Policing had developed a long-standing relationship with Menslink, creating referral pathways into mentoring and counselling and supporting wider work around education, suicide prevention and help-seeking.

What particularly stood out was that this relationship was embedded across ACT Policing rather than depending on one enthusiastic officer. Senior leaders were involved, but the relationship also extended to local station level. Individual champions can start important work, but partnerships are more likely to last when they become part of how an organisation works. This reduces the risk of the relationship disappearing when one person changes role or leaves.

My week with Menslink concluded with an interview alongside Ben Gathercole on ABC Radio Canberra about father absence, early intervention and positive male role models. The willingness of mainstream media to engage seriously with these issues reflected the growing Australian conversation about fatherhood and boys' wellbeing.

My time with Menslink reinforced something I had been seeing throughout the Fellowship: boys rarely open up because they are instructed to. They open up when they feel safe, when relationships are genuine and when trust is given time to develop. Programme structure matters because it creates and protects those conditions. Without the relationship, however, the programme has very little to build upon.

The week also showed what a connected prevention pathway can look like. School education creates reach. Mentoring provides consistent male relationships. Counselling offers professional support. Family programmes can help repair existing relationships, and partnerships with police and the wider community connect the work to systems that might otherwise meet boys only after difficulties escalate.

No single element provides the whole answer. Menslink's strength lies in how those elements work together around a simple promise to boys and young men: support is available before crisis, and someone will take the time to listen.



10.4 Boys to the Bush: when need becomes visible



Before travelling to Australia, I conducted an extended online interview with Boys to the Bush from the UK. I subsequently arranged to visit the organisation in person, intending to observe its work and continue the conversation on site. Unfortunately, the trains were cancelled the day before and there was no practical alternative way of reaching them. I have therefore drawn on the detailed interview conducted before my visit and the organisation's published information, while being clear that I was not able to observe its programmes directly.

Established in 2017 by three teachers, Boys to the Bush works with vulnerable and disconnected boys across regional communities in New South Wales and Victoria. The organisation describes its work as prevention and

early intervention, delivered through long-term mentoring, school groups, camps and community-based experiences.

Its model uses practical activities, time outdoors and relationships with trusted adults to reconnect boys with their communities. Boys may spend time on farms, work with animals, fish, learn practical and employment-related skills and meet local tradespeople, farmers, police officers and other community members. These activities provide more than recreation. They give boys opportunities to experience responsibility, achievement, belonging and positive relationships with adults.

There were considerable similarities between this approach and the wider Lads Need Dads model. Our longer-term programmes also use bushcraft, outdoor adventures, practical life skills and physical challenges to build independence, responsibility and confidence. In both models, activity is part of the relational work. It gives boys and mentors something purposeful to do together, allowing conversation and trust to develop more naturally than it might in a formal setting.

Both organisations had arrived at a similar understanding of what many boys need: consistent men, practical opportunities, appropriate challenge, belonging and the chance to experience themselves as capable. Neither approach expects boys to sit down and immediately explain how they feel. Emotional development takes place through shared activity and relationships built over time.

Boys to the Bush does not work exclusively with boys involved in statutory services. Its school and community programmes have a wider preventative reach. However, much of its more intensive work supports boys whose needs have already become visible through school disengagement, out-of-home care, disability services, youth justice or involvement with other community agencies. Many participants also lack a consistent adult man in their lives.

The organisation's long-term mentoring was particularly relevant. Rather than relying on a single camp or short experience, Boys to the Bush uses ongoing, individually tailored support to help boys reconnect with education, employment and their local communities. The outdoor and practical activities create opportunities for engagement, but the continuing relationship with a mentor gives those experiences meaning.

The most important point to emerge from our conversation concerned the relationship between recognised need and access to funding. Public systems often become able to fund support once a boy meets an established category or threshold. He may have entered care, become involved with youth justice, acquired a disability-service entitlement or reached a level of school disengagement that can be formally recorded.

This led to a simple but important observation: funding often follows recognition rather than the earliest opportunity to intervene. Once a boy's difficulties fit an established category, a service can identify the responsible budget and route of referral. Before that point, responsibility is less clear, even where families, schools and community organisations can already see that additional support may be needed.

This is one of the difficulties facing prevention. Its success is often measured through events that do not happen: the exclusion avoided, the offence not committed, the family relationship that did not completely break down or the care placement that was not required. These outcomes matter greatly, but they are harder to record and attribute than a service delivered after a formal threshold has been crossed.

Although the two models shared many practical and relational principles, boys reached them through different routes. Boys to the Bush had developed considerable expertise in reaching vulnerable boys through schools, regional communities and established service pathways. Lads Need Dads identifies boys specifically through father absence or a disrupted father relationship, often before exclusion, offending or another statutory threshold provides the reason to act.

During our conversation, I shared what we had learned about identifying boys through father absence or disrupted father relationships, understanding the wider family system and using schools to reach boys earlier. We

also discussed how relational disruption may sit underneath behaviour that later becomes visible through exclusion, disengagement or offending.

The exchange reinforced that the task is not to identify one model that should replace all others. Different organisations may meet boys at different points in their lives and with different levels of need. School programmes, community activities, mentoring, family support, counselling and statutory intervention can all form part of the same pathway. The challenge is ensuring that boys do not have to move further along that pathway before support becomes available.

Boys to the Bush demonstrated the strength of community-rooted mentoring for boys whose needs may already be visible, while also showing how schools and community programmes can reach boys earlier. Its work illustrated the importance of connecting young people not only with one mentor, but with the wider community around them.

The policy lesson was clear. We need effective support for boys who are already known to education, care, disability or justice services. But we also need a route to support boys whose vulnerability is visible to the people around them but has not yet produced a recognised statutory need. Earlier intervention should not depend on waiting for a boy to fail loudly enough to qualify for it.

The missing bridge is therefore not between two organisations. It is between the point at which a boy may benefit from support and the later point at which systems formally recognise and fund that need. Closing that gap would allow strong community mentoring to reach boys earlier, while still connecting them to more intensive or specialist services when those are required.

10.5 The Man Cave: scale and evaluation



The Man Cave offered a very different model from the long-term mentoring organisations I had visited. Founded in 2014, it works primarily through structured, school-based workshops designed to reach whole year groups rather than selected boys. By the time of my visit, the organisation had worked with more than 100,000 boys and had established a significant presence in secondary schools across Victoria.

The value of visiting The Man Cave was not to identify a model for direct replication. It was to understand how an organisation could reach boys at scale while trying to preserve the trust, emotional safety and human connection on which this work depends.

Its school workshops explore identity, relationships, emotional expression and what it means to become a healthy young man. The approach is strengths-based. Masculinity is not presented as something inherently harmful that boys must reject. Instead, boys are encouraged to examine the messages they receive about being male, broaden their understanding of masculinity and consider the values and responsibilities they want to carry into adulthood.

Some of The Man Cave's work sits within Australia's wider approach to preventing family and gender-based violence. However, this is not how the workshops are presented to boys. Boys encounter them as conversations about identity, belonging, relationships, emotional honesty and the kind of men they want to become. This distinction matters. Boys are more likely to engage when they feel that a programme is invested in their development, rather than viewing them primarily as a future risk to others.

The organisation's work with educators also offered a useful shift in emphasis. Instead of beginning with the question, "How do we manage difficult boys?", it asks what boys need in order to develop identity, belonging and healthy relationships. The first question locates the problem within the boy. The second asks adults to consider what may be missing around him.

The workshops draw on the broad structure of a rite of passage. Boys step away from their usual environment, enter a deliberately created space, share stories, experience challenge, consider the kind of man they want to become and return to their school community with a clearer sense of responsibility. I had encountered versions of this structure in South Africa and the United States through Boys to Men and Journeymen. The language and activities differed, but the underlying pattern was recognisable.

Alick Weber, Head of Partnerships and Innovation, used the changing traditions associated with Maasai rites of passage to illustrate why such processes must evolve with the world around them. In his example, a challenge once associated with killing a lion to protect the community has, in some places, become connected with protecting lions. The purpose of the transition remains, but the challenge changes in response to what the community now needs.

For boys today, Alick argued, the modern challenge may be developing the emotional literacy and courage to express need before pain emerges through withdrawal, anger or harm. When I described LadPods, he recognised elements of a psychosocial rite of passage within it, even though we had not previously used that language ourselves. This was his interpretation of the model rather than an independent assessment, but it gave me a useful way of thinking about some of our existing work.

A separate meeting with Lucy Barrat and Joshie Glover from the programme team helped me understand what sat behind the workshops. The Man Cave had grown from a grassroots facilitation model into a far more structured organisation. It used impact data, facilitator training and regular review to maintain consistency across a growing team.

Lucy described the balance as “guardrails, not railroad tracks.” Facilitators need to understand the purpose of each part of a workshop and the outcomes they are working towards, but they also need enough freedom to respond to the boys in the room. Too little structure can make delivery inconsistent. Too much can remove the warmth and spontaneity that allow boys to trust the process.

The team was open about a period when growth had made delivery feel too factory-like. As systems became more standardised, there was a risk that workshops would lose some of the human quality that had made them effective. Their willingness to acknowledge this was valuable. Scaling relational work is not simply a matter of training more facilitators and delivering the same material in more schools. The quality of the interaction must survive the process.

This has wider relevance for organisations seeking to expand. Funders often value reach, growth and the number of participants served. Those measures matter, but they do not show whether boys felt known, safe or able to speak honestly. Relational work can grow, but only if the systems used to support growth protect rather than flatten the qualities that made it work in the first place.

The Man Cave’s approach to evaluation was one of the strongest areas of learning from the visit. It gathered information before workshops, immediately afterwards and again three months later. This allowed the organisation to distinguish between how boys felt on the day and whether any change was still visible later.

The evaluation looked at attitudes, emotional expression, relationships and willingness to seek help rather than relying only on attendance or school behaviour. The Man Cave’s published findings show an immediate increase in boys’ confidence to seek help, with much of that improvement still evident three months later (Moriarty, 2025). Its team was also careful to distinguish between association and causation, rather than claiming that every positive change could be attributed solely to one workshop.

That restraint strengthened rather than weakened the organisation’s credibility. It also prompted me to think more carefully about how relational work is evaluated more widely. At Lads Need Dads, we measure change from the perspectives of the boy, his parent or carer, his school and practitioner observation, and continue to monitor progress throughout the years he remains with us. Longer-term work makes it possible to see whether changes in relationships, emotional literacy, behaviour and responses to difficulty are sustained over time. This is much

harder to establish through one-off workshops or short-term interventions, where evaluation may inevitably capture what changed immediately afterwards rather than what lasted.



greater willingness to seek help.

The figure should not be treated as proof of causation, but it supports a wider point. Emotional literacy is not developed through curriculum content alone. Boys are more likely to use that learning when there is an adult they trust enough to approach. A lesson may provide the language, but a relationship makes it possible to use it.

The team's principle that resistance may indicate an unmet need also connected with a central finding of this Fellowship. Curiosity should come before correction. When a boy withdraws, jokes, refuses to participate or becomes disruptive, the behaviour may be communicating something that he cannot yet explain directly. This does not mean that boundaries disappear. It means that adults respond to the behaviour while remaining curious about what may sit underneath it.

Several of The Man Cave's practical techniques could be used in UK schools without replicating the entire model. These included beginning with low-pressure conversation before expecting personal disclosure, treating the physical environment as part of the intervention, using side-by-side rather than confrontational seating and allowing play and friendly competition to reduce pressure. Boys often talk more naturally while doing something alongside an adult than when sitting opposite someone in a formal conversation.

The Man Cave demonstrated what large-scale, universal work can achieve. A whole-year workshop reaches boys who would never self-refer or meet the threshold for targeted support. It gives an entire peer group shared language and makes emotional conversation less unusual. It can also help schools identify boys who may need further support.

A single workshop cannot, however, provide everything. It cannot build the kind of relationship that develops over months or years, and it cannot meet the deeper needs of every boy who discloses distress or significant family disruption. The Man Cave does not claim to be a father-absence intervention, and its universal model is not designed to provide long-term mentoring to individual boys.

The policy implication is therefore not that universal workshops should be chosen instead of targeted mentoring, or vice versa. Schools need a layered pathway. Universal provision can introduce language, challenge unhelpful ideas and reach boys at scale. Targeted, long-term support can then provide greater depth for boys dealing with father absence, bereavement, disrupted relationships or other significant difficulties. The Man Cave showed what it is possible to do when boys' emotional development is taken seriously across whole school cohorts. The next question is what happens after the workshop, particularly for the boy who has begun to disclose something that cannot be resolved in a day. Reaching boys matters. Systems must also be ready to remain with those who need longer-term support.

10.6 Top Blokes: duration, delivery and evaluation



Before travelling to Australia, I held an extended online meeting with Dr Christina Jarron, Research and Evaluation Manager at the Top Blokes Foundation. Our conversation focused on programme duration, evaluation and how relational work can grow without losing its quality.

Top Blokes works with boys and young men aged ten to twenty-four through structured mentoring programmes delivered by qualified youth workers in schools and communities. Its programme for boys aged ten to thirteen runs for between eight and ten weeks, while its programme for those aged fourteen to seventeen is delivered over two school terms.

Top Blokes had deliberately retained its longer model because its experience and evaluation indicated that meaningful change develops over time and through consistent relationships. Rather than shortening the programme to reach greater numbers, it had chosen to protect the length and depth of the intervention. This reinforced an important distinction for me: shorter programmes and workshops can introduce language, open conversations and create opportunities for further support, while longer-term work provides more time for trust to develop, relationships to deepen and change to be observed over time.

Unlike Lads Need Dads, where paid facilitators are supported by trained volunteer mentors, Top Blokes' established programmes are delivered by qualified youth workers, although it was beginning to explore school-led and hybrid delivery models.

Top Blokes' evaluation system was particularly valuable. The organisation collects matched information before and after its programmes, using anonymous identifiers to track change in individual participants rather than relying only on group averages. Christina argued that organisations should establish robust internal evaluation before relying on a university or external research partner to validate their work.

Academic partnerships can provide independence and specialist expertise, but they cannot compensate for weak internal data. Equally, evaluation tools need to reflect boys' literacy, emotional development and willingness to disclose. The strongest evidence is likely to come from genuine partnership between researchers and practitioners, combining academic rigour with an understanding of what happens in the room.

Top Blokes reinforced three lessons: duration matters because trust takes time; programme fidelity matters because growth can weaken an intervention if its essential elements are not protected; and evaluation matters because organisations need to know what changed, for whom and whether that change lasted.

10.7 Why systems and research still miss boys

Four conversations in Australia brought the system-level questions of this Fellowship into sharper focus. They were with Gerry Banks of the ACT Government, Michael Wilson of Movember, Dr Karen Wynter of Deakin University and Dom Alford of The Men's Project. Each approached the issue from a different position, but all pointed towards the same gap: systems are becoming better at responding to fathers, male distress and harmful behaviour, but they still struggle to recognise boys who may need support much earlier.

Gerry Banks and the ACT Government



Gerry Banks, from the ACT Government's Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Office, gave me a clear account of why boys growing up without consistent fathers can remain unseen within policy. In his experience, systems are more likely to respond once a boy's behaviour becomes associated with risk, victimisation, violence or safeguarding. Vulnerability that has not yet produced a recognised problem is much harder to locate within existing policy and funding categories.

Within the policy area Gerry knew, father absence was not recognised as a distinct category of need. It might become relevant where a boy was experiencing abuse, presenting with behavioural concerns or already known to services, but it was not routinely used as a reason to consider earlier support.

Responsibility was also divided across education, health, family support and violence-prevention systems. Each department had its own responsibilities, language and funding criteria, but no single part of government held the whole question of early intervention for boys growing up without a consistent father figure. This made it possible for boys to sit between several systems without being clearly recognised by any of them.

Gerry also described the sensitivity surrounding discussions about fathers. The subject can quickly become associated with family-court disputes or more adversarial debates about men's rights, making it harder to discuss father absence as a developmental issue for children. This does not mean government cannot engage with it, but it helps explain why policy language may avoid naming fathers directly.

Our discussion of social identity theory also helped me understand the importance of group belonging. Boys develop part of their identity through the groups around them and the expectations those groups create. Positive groups can provide belonging, values and recognition, while harmful groups can offer the same things in more dangerous forms. This gave me another way of understanding why small-group programmes can be powerful: they do not simply teach content but give boys a different experience of who they are in relation to others.

The central lesson from the conversation was that boys are not necessarily missed because professionals do not care. They are missed because systems are organised around needs and risks that have already become formally recognisable.

Australia also offered examples of longer-term policy planning. The ACT's Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Strategy, for example, extends over ten years. Long-term strategies do not guarantee effective delivery, but they can give programmes and partnerships more time to develop than short funding cycles allow.

Compassionate accountability and earlier intervention: Movember



In my conversation with Michael Wilson, Research Fellow in Men's Health and Relationships at the Movember Institute of Men's Health, we discussed an issue I'd often encountered in my previous work in domestic abuse, substance misuse and homelessness: how harmful adult behaviour can have roots in childhood adversity without that history removing personal responsibility.

Michael described this as compassionate accountability. It is possible to state clearly that someone's behaviour is unacceptable while also asking what experiences, relationships and beliefs contributed to it. Understanding those influences is not the same as excusing harm. It is part of working out how change

becomes possible.

This matters because interventions that rely only on shame or condemnation may reinforce the very defensiveness and disconnection they are trying to address. As Michael observed, simply telling people that they are bad rarely creates meaningful change. Accountability must remain, but it can be combined with curiosity about what happened and what would need to change.

I asked Michael whether enough attention was being paid to boys before they became fathers. His answer was immediate: no. He described emerging work on preconception health for boys and men and the opportunity to intervene long before fatherhood begins.

Movember's Community Mental Health Grants programme begins at age twelve, reflecting the age categories through which the programme operates. This was another example of how provision can be shaped by established definitions and funding structures. A system may support earlier intervention in principle while still setting an age boundary that leaves younger boys outside its scope.

When I described the Lads Need Dads pathway, Michael recognised its potential to change the direction of boys' lives. Growing up without a consistent father figure may increase vulnerability, but it does not determine what happens next. His point was that timely, sustained support can help outcomes move in a very different direction. Risk is not destiny.

Michael also pointed me towards work by Professor Michael Salter and Jess Hill questioning whether universal programmes on gender equality and respectful relationships are sufficient for boys carrying significant trauma. Universal provision has value, but boys affected by abuse, loss, violence or severe relational disruption may require something more sustained and individualised.

Trauma does not remove a boy's responsibility for the choices he later makes. It may, however, affect his emotional regulation, trust, relationships and ability to use what a universal lesson is trying to teach. Prevention must therefore include both shared education for all boys and more intensive support for those carrying greater vulnerability.



A field still developing: Karen Wynter

During a Zoom interview, Dr Karen Wynter of Deakin University, co-convenor of the Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium and a researcher working with Associate Professor Jacqui Macdonald, explained how fatherhood research had developed and where the field currently sits.

Karen compared paternal mental health research with the earlier development of maternal perinatal mental health research. Recognition of mothers' needs took decades to become embedded in clinical practice, screening and policy. In her view, fatherhood research remained approximately a decade behind.

Even support for new fathers without identified additional risk was still underdeveloped. Boys growing up without consistent fathers sit further upstream again. The field is only beginning to connect men's experiences as fathers with the childhood and adolescent experiences that preceded them.

Karen and I discussed this through the image of a river. Crisis services wait near the bottom, responding once someone is already in difficulty. Fatherhood research and perinatal services are beginning to move further upstream by identifying risk during pregnancy, early parenthood and, increasingly, before conception. Work with boys attempts to move further upstream still, before some difficulties have developed.

We also discussed mother-son relationships where a father is absent. Mothers are often carrying enormous responsibility and may have experienced trauma themselves. How this affects trust, attachment, independence and later relationships for boys remains insufficiently explored. This should not be framed as a criticism of mothers. It is a reason to understand and support the whole family system rather than considering the father's absence in isolation.

Karen also identified the practical limits created by research funding. Grants may last three or four years, but ethics approval, recruitment and staffing can take a significant part of that period. This often leaves researchers with only a relatively short follow-up window, even when the intervention is intended to influence outcomes over many years.

As a result, funding decisions are frequently made without the long-term evidence everyone says they want. Frontline organisations may hold years of programme records and knowledge, but those records are not automatically equivalent to a longitudinal academic evaluation. Better partnerships are needed to turn sustained practice experience into robust long-term evidence.

Fathers, not feeds: the Adolescent Man Box



My meeting with Dom Alford of The Men's Project helped me think more deeply about the findings of the Adolescent Man Box research. The study surveyed 1,401 Australian young people aged fourteen to eighteen about masculinity, relationships, mental health and the influences shaping their ideas about how boys should behave (The Men's Project, 2025).

The findings challenged the assumption that online influencers are the main force shaping boys' ideas about

masculinity. Fifty-nine per cent of boys said their father or male parental figure had a big influence, compared with 48 per cent who identified their mother or female parental figure and 42 per cent who identified male friends. Twenty-two per cent identified social media and online influencers as having a big influence, while 14 per cent identified pornography.

These figures describe the influence boys believed different people and media had on them. They do not prove that fathers always exert a positive influence or that online content is unimportant. The research found that boys

who most strongly endorsed restrictive rules about masculinity were more likely than other boys to report a strong influence from online media.

Even with that qualification, the findings matter. Real relationships remain central to how boys understand masculinity. Public debate often concentrates on algorithms, pornography and online personalities, but boys are still looking most strongly towards parents, male friends and other people they know.

This does not mean that every father is present, safe or modelling healthy behaviour. It means that the presence, quality or absence of that relationship remains important. Where boys lack dependable relationships and a secure sense of belonging offline, harmful online communities may have more space to offer identity, certainty and recognition.

“Fathers, not feeds” should not be read as a choice between family relationships and online safety. Boys need both. But the findings are a reminder that responses to online influence cannot rely only on restricting content or teaching digital literacy. They must also strengthen the real-world relationships and communities surrounding boys.

Taken together, these four conversations showed why systems often arrive late. Government responds most readily to recognised categories of risk. Funding follows established age groups and service thresholds. Research focuses where evidence and clinical structures already exist, and public debate can become absorbed by visible threats rather than the relational conditions underneath them.

The answer is not to value boys mainly as future fathers or to support them only because of the harm they might otherwise cause. Their lives and wellbeing matter now. But if experiences during boyhood also shape later fatherhood, relationships and family life, then earlier support carries benefits across generations. The future-fathers question therefore strengthens the case for intervention, but it should never replace the more immediate reason to act: boys deserve support while they are still boys.



10.7a Engagement before attainment

As I was writing this report, the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education launched an inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment. Its terms of reference included differences in outcomes between boys and girls throughout education. Submission 30, from Tanya Grambower, an Australian teacher with more than twenty years’ experience and founder of Literacy for Boys, focused particularly on boys’ literacy and engagement (Grambower, 2026).

Grambower argued that boys need to be engaged before they can be expected to achieve academically. She also highlighted the importance of connection between boys and their teachers and the need to measure engagement alongside conventional attainment outcomes.

This reflected much of what I had observed across South Africa, the United States and Australia, but my fieldwork suggested a further step. Engagement often begins with a trusted relationship. Relevant materials and effective teaching matter, but for some vulnerable boys, it is the presence of a consistent adult that creates the confidence, safety and motivation to participate.

Lads Need Dads [Reading Mentors programme](#), provides one example of this principle in practice. Literacy provides the shared activity, but the weekly sessions also allow trust, confidence and communication to develop. The programme is targeted specifically at boys growing up without a consistent father figure, for whom a trusted relationship may help strengthen their engagement with reading and with school more widely.

The Centre for Social Justice's Lost Boys: [Boyhood report](#) subsequently highlighted Reading Mentors and recommended that government support its implementation in Primary schools for children with absent fathers, measure its outcomes and, if successful, scale it nationally.

The wider implication is that literacy interventions for vulnerable boys should not be judged by improvements in reading alone. Evaluation should also examine whether boys become more engaged, confident and connected to school. These are not secondary benefits. They may be part of what makes educational progress possible.

Engagement precedes attainment, but trusted relationships often precede engagement. For boys growing up without a consistent father figure, those relationships may provide the foundation on which meaningful participation becomes possible.

10.8 A note from Melbourne: Ned Kelly, father loss and the question of prevention

Early in the Australian leg of the Fellowship, I joined a walking tour of Melbourne. It was partly a way of finding my feet in a new city and partly an opportunity to understand something of its history before my meetings began.

During the tour, I found myself standing in front of Ned Kelly's armour.

I had travelled to Australia to study how boys growing up without a consistent father figure were recognised and supported, yet here was one of the country's most recognisable historical figures, a boy who had experienced father loss, poverty and family instability.



Ned Kelly was born into poverty to Irish immigrant parents. His father, John "Red" Kelly, had been transported to Australia for stealing two pigs and died when Ned was around twelve. His death left the family in severe financial difficulty.

Standing in front of the armour, I found myself asking a different question from the one usually associated with Kelly. Before asking what he did, what had happened to him?

Nothing about his childhood excuses the violence that followed, and understanding someone's history does not remove responsibility for his actions. But years of working with boys have taught me that behaviour rarely tells the whole story. Before deciding what should happen to a boy, we need to understand what has happened around him.

There is no way of knowing whether a different response to his bereavement, greater family stability or the presence of trusted adults would have changed Ned Kelly's life. That is not the claim I am making. What his story raised for me was the question at the heart of prevention: how early are we prepared to notice loss, instability and unmet need, before they become visible through behaviour?

The armour itself became difficult to ignore. It was a hard, literal shell built to protect the person inside. It reminded me of boys whose anger, withdrawal, humour or apparent indifference can become a form of armour of their own. Beneath it may sit grief, fear, shame or a need that nobody has yet asked about.

The lesson I took from that afternoon was simple. Prevention requires us to look beneath the armour. It means asking not only what behaviour we can see, but what may be happening underneath it, while there is still time to respond.

10.9 Dr Arne Rubinstein: experiencing a rite of passage



One of the most significant experiences of my time in Australia was taking part in a three-day Rite of Passage Leadership programme led by Dr Arne Rubinstein, founder of the Rites of Passage Institute. A former family and emergency medicine doctor, Arne has spent almost thirty years developing contemporary rites-of-passage programmes for young people, families, schools and communities.

I had already begun to wonder whether a more intentional transition into adulthood was missing from the support available to boys in the UK. Across South Africa and the United States, I had seen boys respond to challenge, ritual, recognition and increased responsibility. I joined Arne's training because I wanted to understand this work from the inside, rather than simply observing it or hearing other people describe it.

Choosing to participate changed my understanding of what a rite of passage can do.

The training required us to step away from our usual routines and enter a deliberately created space built around reflection, challenge and connection. Its power did not come from any one activity. It came from being witnessed, recognised and challenged safely, while feeling part of something larger than myself.



Arne's framework followed three broad stages: separation, transition and return. Separation involves stepping away from an existing role or way of life. Transition creates a space in which identity, assumptions and responsibilities can be examined through challenge, story, reflection and connection. Return brings the person back into ordinary life with a clearer understanding of what has changed and what may now be expected of them.

The return is particularly important. A powerful experience on its own is not enough. Unless a young person returns to relationships and a community capable of recognising and supporting that change, its effect may quickly fade. A rite of

passage is therefore not simply a ceremony, a physical challenge or a weekend away. It is one part of a longer developmental journey.

One moment during the training moved me so much. A young man, then around eighteen, read a poem addressed to his father, who had died. He had written it from the perspective of his thirteen-year-old self, looking back at the point when he felt that his childhood and responsibilities had changed. With his permission, I include part of it here. His wording has been retained, with spelling and punctuation lightly corrected.

"I'm 13 now, time just flies by.

You won't believe it,

but Mum taught me how to tie a tie.

I'm taking care of my mum and twin.

*These men in my life are teaching me lessons
in the time you couldn't give.*

But I still love you,

still feel the flame that you left inside.

But it's difficult now

because that boy has died."

It was difficult to hear without thinking about the boys we support through Lads Need Dads, approximately 30 per cent of whom have lost their fathers through death. His words captured something I have seen often in our own work: the loss of a father is not only a bereavement. It can also mean the loss of guidance, affirmation, shared identity and all the ordinary moments through which a boy expected to learn from his dad.

The reference to his mother teaching him to tie a tie was especially moving. It showed both the care she was giving him and the role she was trying to fill. His words about taking care of his mother and twin also revealed how quickly he had felt expected to become older, stronger and more responsible. Looking back, the line "because that boy has died" appeared to describe not only the death of his father, but also the part of his own childhood he felt he had left behind.

Father absence takes many forms. A father may never have been known, may be inconsistently involved, may live elsewhere, may be emotionally unavailable or unsafe, or may have died. These experiences are not the same and should not be treated as though they are. Bereavement is recognised as a loss, but the specific loss of the father relationship and what that may mean for a boy's development is still too easily overlooked.

That was why the poem affected me so deeply. I could hear in it the experiences of boys I already knew, boys who loved and missed their fathers while also trying to understand what their absence now meant for them. Some felt pressure to protect their mothers, support younger siblings or work out for themselves what becoming a man was supposed to involve.

Yet the poem also contained hope. “These men in my life” were teaching him some of the lessons his father had not had time to give. They were not replacing his father or erasing his grief. They were ensuring that he did not have to navigate bereavement, adolescence and increasing responsibility alone.

A conversation in the taxi journey back added another perspective. I spoke with Benny, a twenty-year-old returning participant who had previously completed the programme. He described the most important change as a shift in his relationship with his father. It had moved from one in which his father was primarily a superior telling him what to do towards a more adult relationship in which they were growing through life alongside one another.

Benny also explained what happened after the initial rite. Former participants could return as “Returning Young Men”, first observing, then participating, contributing and eventually taking on leadership. As he put it, “the seed gets planted and then it takes years to grow.” The three-day rite was therefore not an end point. It marked a transition, with development continuing through relationships, increasing responsibility and repeated opportunities to contribute.

His experience echoed what Sinola Lakana had described in South Africa after completing The Character Company’s four-day rite of passage. Sinola had learned that manhood was not about overpowering others, but about controlling himself, particularly when nobody was watching. Afterwards, he was trusted with greater responsibility and expected to support younger boys. In two very different settings, the transition was marked not by increased status, but by increased responsibility.

Together, these experiences helped me distinguish between an outdoor challenge and a genuine rite of passage. Adventure can build confidence, resilience and practical ability, but challenge alone does not mark a developmental transition. A rite of passage requires preparation, meaning, reflection, recognition and a community to which the young person returns. Without those elements, an experience may be memorable, but it does not necessarily change how a young person understands himself or his responsibilities.

For boys growing up without a consistent father figure, this may be especially important. Adolescence still brings questions about identity, masculinity, belonging and adulthood, whether or not a trusted father is present to help a boy navigate them. Boys benefit when important transitions are named, witnessed and supported by adults who know them. They need opportunities to experience appropriate challenge, reflect on who they are becoming, have their strengths recognised and understand that growing older brings responsibility towards other people.

The lesson is not that the UK should reproduce Arne’s programme or borrow ceremonies from another setting. It is that rites of passage can offer a deliberate and carefully supported transition into greater maturity. They should not force boys to grow up prematurely, replace their fathers or suggest that grief can be resolved through ceremony. They should help boys understand what they have experienced, recognise the qualities they already possess and know that they do not have to move towards adulthood alone.

The experience made me look again at our own programmes and consider where elements of rites of passage could be incorporated in ways that were appropriate for different ages and stages. While in Melbourne, I had already begun designing ‘[Becoming: the man you choose to be](#)’, the next step on from LadPods, exploring emotional intelligence, healthy relationships, digital resilience, purpose, and a positive vision for adulthood and future fatherhood.

The training helped me think more intentionally about how challenge, affirmation, reflection and recognition could form part of Becoming and our wider programme pathway. What I took from the experience was not the

idea of replicating a three-day rite, but the value of marking growth and transition within relationships that continue afterwards.

A rite of passage should not tell a boy that he has finished becoming a man. It should help him understand that the journey has begun, and that there are people prepared to walk it with him.

10.10 Closing reflection on Australia

Australia offered the broadest range of fatherhood research and practice I encountered during this Fellowship. Menslink provides mentoring, counselling and school-based education for boys and young men. Boys to the Bush combines mentoring with practical activity and community connection. The Man Cave demonstrates what universal provision can achieve at scale, while The Fathering Project shows how fathers can be engaged nationally through schools and communities.

Taking part in Dr Arne Rubinstein's Rite of Passage Leadership programme added another important element. Boys do not only need support when something has gone wrong. They also need opportunities to make sense of identity, change and increasing responsibility. Carefully prepared rites of passage, followed by continuing relationships, can help boys feel recognised and supported as they move towards adulthood.

One of the clearest gaps I identified was not an absence of support. Australia has many strong organisations working with boys. Menslink's mentoring programme has particular relevance for those who are socially isolated or lack a consistent positive male role model. However, these boys are generally included within broader categories such as vulnerability, disengagement, mental health difficulty or risk. Their experience of father absence or a disrupted father relationship can therefore be absorbed within the wider system rather than recognised as a developmental consideration in its own right. I did not encounter a specialist Australian provision focused solely on this group.

What I took from Australia was not one programme or a blueprint for reform. It was the value of different forms of support being available: work to strengthen father involvement, universal school-based provision, sustained mentoring, practical community programmes, counselling, research and evaluation, and carefully designed rites of passage. No single intervention can meet every boy's needs.

This learning was reinforced after I left Australia. Mike Kelly, who had spent more than forty years developing and managing programmes across Victorian youth justice, youth homelessness and child protection, told me that he could not recall encountering a young person moving through those systems who had an engaged and positive relationship with a father. He later wrote:

"The fatherless issues with disadvantaged kids within our welfare and justice systems, and disadvantaged fatherless kids more generally in the 10-to-18-year-old cohort, are not on the research, policy and program agenda."

This was a reflection drawn from frontline experience, not a representative study, but it spoke directly to the gap I had been exploring. Boys growing up without a consistent father figure matter in their own right, but many will also become fathers. Their understanding of masculinity, relationships, responsibility and care develops throughout boyhood; it does not begin when their first child is born.

The lesson for the UK is not to search for one programme that can do everything. It is to recognise these boys within wider systems and ensure that different forms of support are available before disengagement, distress or crisis becomes the reason for acting.

11

CHAPTER 11

The UK policy landscape: architecture, not willingness

Alongside the international travel, an equally important part of this Fellowship involved testing what I was learning against UK policy, research and practice. What emerged was a consistent conclusion: the main barrier to supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure is not a lack of concern or commitment among the people working with them. It is the way responsibility, data, funding and services are organised.

Father absence and disrupted father relationships cut across education, health, family support, safeguarding and youth justice, but no part of the system holds clear responsibility for recognising these boys early. Schools and services may know a boy's family circumstances, but that information is rarely treated as a reason to consider whether he may need additional support or protective relationships. Responsibility is spread across different departments and services, while funding is more readily available once difficulties have become visible through behaviour, disengagement or crisis.

This problem is not new. Ball and Moselle's research on fathers' contributions to children's wellbeing argued that policy needed to look beyond fathers' direct contact with children and recognise their wider influence on the environments in which children develop, including family stability, education, social support and community life (Ball & Moselle, 2007). Although written in a Canadian context, their argument raises a question that remains highly relevant to the UK: if fathers influence so many aspects of children's development, why are father absence and disrupted father relationships still rarely considered within early identification and intervention?

Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys

In the UK, Nick Isles, Director of the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys (CPRMB), described the relationship between research, policy and practice particularly clearly:

"Research tells us what has happened, policy tries to shape what comes next, and practice shows us what is actually working now."

Each is essential, but they too often operate alongside one another rather than informing and strengthening one another. Research findings do not always reach frontline services. Policy can be developed without enough understanding of what is happening in families, schools and communities. Practitioners build up years of valuable knowledge but often lack the academic validation or influence needed for that learning to shape national policy.

While this Fellowship was underway, New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) and Movember published *The Invisible Field*, research to which I had contributed through a practitioner interview. The report reached a similar conclusion from the perspective of funding and philanthropy: support for boys and young men exists across many parts of the youth sector but is rarely recognised, coordinated or funded as a coherent field. Its analysis found that only 1.09 per cent of the youth funding examined went to organisations specifically focused on boys and young men.

The fact that these conclusions emerged independently strengthened what I was finding through the Fellowship. The UK does not lack committed people, promising practice or growing evidence. It lacks the structure needed to connect, sustain and build upon that work.

Australia provided a useful comparison. During my time there, I encountered more regular contact between researchers, practitioners and policymakers working on fatherhood and boys' wellbeing. The system was not fully connected, and boys growing up without a consistent father figure were still rarely treated as a distinct group, but the national conversation was more developed. The UK does not need to copy Australia's programmes or policy structures. The lesson is that research, policy and practice become more useful when they are brought into the same conversation.

11.1 Family Hubs: structural invisibility at the point of referral

During the Fellowship, Professor Anna Tarrant of the University of Lincoln gave me permission to draw on material she had presented during a Family Hubs partnership training session. Delivered to practitioners from Family Hubs the training examined how services could become more father inclusive.

One of the clearest problems identified was how easily fathers become invisible from the moment a family first makes contact with services. Referral forms may treat information about a second parent as optional, and referrals frequently arrive without the father's contact details. Services then rely heavily on whichever parent first presents, most often the mother, without necessarily establishing whether the father is involved, absent, prevented from participating or in need of support himself.

This has consequences. If fathers' details are not consistently captured, services cannot build an accurate picture of their involvement in children's lives. They also cannot know how many children are growing up without a safe and consistent father relationship. What is not recorded remains difficult to measure, plan for or fund.

The training material also highlighted difficulties within referral and consent processes. In practice, services may treat the parent who first makes contact as the gateway to the whole family. This can make it difficult to involve a father or even establish his circumstances, regardless of whether there is any reason why contact would be unsafe or inappropriate. The system may therefore lose sight of a father before anyone has considered what his presence, absence or disrupted relationship means for the child.

Another important issue was the tendency to treat father absence as background family information rather than as an emotional and developmental experience. A father may be absent because he has disengaged, but he may also have died, be in prison, live elsewhere, have unsafe contact or remain involved inconsistently. These are very different experiences and may require very different responses.

Within Lads Need Dads, 30 per cent of the boys we support have experienced the death of their father. For these boys, father absence is also bereavement. Yet unless somebody asks what has happened and how the boy is managing that loss, it can remain little more than a detail on a form. Other boys may have a father who is physically present but emotionally unavailable, or contact that is so inconsistent that it creates continuing uncertainty and rejection. Recording only whether a father exists or lives at the same address will not capture these differences.

The problem therefore begins before an intervention is even considered. Fathers' details are not consistently captured, services often depend on information supplied by the parent who presents first, and the meaning of a father's absence or disrupted relationship may never be explored. Improving father inclusion requires more than asking individual practitioners to make a greater effort. Referral forms, recording systems, consent processes and service pathways must make it possible for them to work differently.

This was reinforced in a separate conversation with Karla Allen, National Adviser and East of England Regional Adviser for the National Centre for Family Hubs. Karla recognised the limited availability of preventative services specifically supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure and saw opportunities for relationship-based mentoring to complement the emerging Families First reforms. Her perspective supported the same conclusion: practitioners may recognise the need, but there is no consistent pathway for identifying these boys and connecting them with appropriate support.

It is not an assumption that every absent father should be brought back into a child's life. In some circumstances, contact will be unsafe or inappropriate. Rather, it is a prompt to understand the child's relationships properly, including significant loss, absence or disruption, rather than allowing that part of his life to disappear from view. Boys cannot be recognised and supported earlier if nobody first asks what has happened around them.

11.2 The Centre for Social Justice: no clear policy home



My conversation with Ed Davies, Research Director at the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ), helped me make sense of much of what I had been finding in the UK. Families and fathers have no clear policy home. Education and health have clearly defined departmental responsibilities, but family stability, father involvement and father absence cut across education, health, justice and social policy without being fully owned by any one of them.

Ed offered a historical explanation. His view was that much of the public system had developed during a period when family stability and a father's presence in the home were more readily assumed. It was therefore not designed around the realities of many children now growing up without a consistent father relationship, or the different forms that absence and disruption can take.

This helped clarify an important distinction. Support for boys is often present, but it is fragmented across services, policy areas and funding streams. Different parts of the system see different parts of a boy's life, collect different information and often become involved only once difficulties are visible. The result is that no one holds the complete picture or has clear responsibility for responding early to relational need, loss or hidden distress.

Ed also spoke about the political sensitivity surrounding fathers and family life. These conversations touch people personally and can quickly become entangled with debates about separation, family courts and gender. As a result, policy often falls back on broader language such as "trusted adults" and "positive role models". Those relationships are important, but using only general language can make it harder to name the specific contribution of fathers or understand what their absence may mean for a child.

He recalled asking, during his time in government, whether a risk register existed to consider the possible effects of childcare policy on infant attachment. He was surprised to find that the people he was speaking with did not have a shared understanding of what attachment meant. The exchange exposed a wider problem. Knowledge exists within research, policy and frontline practice, but it does not always travel between them. Researchers may understand attachment and child development, practitioners see their effects in children and families, and policymakers shape the systems around them, yet these different forms of knowledge are not consistently brought together.

[The CSJ's Lost Boys series](#) subsequently provided further evidence that awareness of these issues is growing. Its reports *Boyhood* and *From Boy to Man* featured *Lads Need Dads'* [Reading Mentors](#) and [LadPods](#) as examples of structured, relationship-based early intervention. *Boyhood* highlighted the way Reading Mentors uses a shared activity to build trust, emotional literacy, confidence and self-esteem through a consistent male mentor, and recommended that government support and monitor its implementation in schools, measure outcomes and, if successful, consider national expansion. *LadPods* was also highlighted as an example of small-group, school-based support for boys growing up without a father or consistent male role model.

The CSJ reached these conclusions through its own research across the boys' and young men's sector. Its findings add to a growing policy case for earlier, relationship-based support and show that the specific needs of boys growing up without a consistent father figure are beginning to receive greater recognition. The remaining question is whether that recognition will lead to clearer responsibility, sustained investment and support before boys reach crisis.

11.3 Luke Taylor: Beyond whether a father is present

A further conversation with Luke Taylor, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Social Justice, helped sharpen a distinction that had been forming throughout this Fellowship: the UK is becoming more willing to talk about fathers, but still struggles to talk clearly about children who do not have one.

Luke felt that father absence had become easier to discuss nationally than it once was. The wider conversation about boys, mental health, education and masculinity had shifted considerably. Yet greater willingness to discuss the problem had not produced a consistent way of identifying and supporting boys growing up without a father or with a severely disrupted father relationship.

One of Luke's most useful distinctions was between the quality of a father-child relationship and the amount of time available for that relationship to develop. Much current activity focuses on improving quality through father-child activities, dads-and-lads groups, co-parenting support and better father engagement. These are positive developments, but they generally assume that a relationship already exists to be strengthened.

For some boys, the problem is more fundamental. Their contact with their father may be absent, extremely limited or so inconsistent that there is little opportunity to build an ordinary relationship. Where contact is safe and appropriate, time together matters because boys often open up during everyday, low-pressure moments: cooking, travelling in the car, walking to the shop or simply being alongside someone without being expected to talk.

These ordinary moments can appear unimportant, but they create the conditions in which more significant conversations emerge. Boys rarely disclose what is troubling them simply because an adult asks. If contact is brief, infrequent or emotionally pressured, the relationship may have little space for the unplanned moment when a boy says, "By the way, I've been thinking about something."

The point is not that contact should be increased regardless of a family's circumstances. In some cases, contact will be unsafe or unwanted by the boy. It is that policy must look beyond whether a father is technically present and consider whether the child has access to a safe, consistent relationship with him. A father may remain named on a record while having almost no meaningful place in his son's daily life.

Luke also reflected on the difficulty of offering boys a positive vision of masculinity. Public messages tend to concentrate on what boys and young men should avoid: violence, misogyny, emotional withdrawal and harmful online influences. These warnings have a place, but they do not tell boys what they should be moving towards.

When the conversation turns to positive masculinity, the language often becomes vague. Boys need more than instructions to be kind or to be themselves. They need opportunities to explore responsibility, courage, self-control, healthy relationships, service, purpose and what it means to use their strengths well. These qualities are most effectively developed through relationships and experience, not slogans.

Luke's perspective reinforced the wider UK finding. Growing recognition of fathers has not yet produced clear responsibility for boys growing up without a consistent father figure. Family Hubs illustrated how fathers can disappear at the point of referral. Ed Davies described the absence of a clear policy home. Luke identified a further gap between encouraging better father involvement and recognising boys who have little or no father relationship available to strengthen.

Together, these conversations showed that the UK policy gap is not simply about funding. It begins with what systems record, which relationships they notice and whether they act before a boy's difficulties become visible through behaviour, disengagement or crisis.

11.4 Save the Children: naming father absence without blaming mothers



Save the Children®

My conversation with Ruth Talbot, who works in policy and research at Save the Children and founded the campaign group Single Parent Rights, helped me understand another barrier to recognising father absence more openly. Discussions about father absence can easily be heard as criticism of single mothers. This can make organisations and policymakers reluctant to name the issue directly, even when they recognise that it may matter to a child.

Ruth brought an important perspective because her work combines child poverty policy with campaigning for the rights of single-parent families. Recognising what a father's absence may mean for a child is not a criticism of the mother raising that child. In fact, mothers are often left managing both the practical consequences of raising children alone and the emotional impact of the father's absence on their children.

Children may need help to understand the story behind an absence, whether it results from bereavement, separation, imprisonment, conflict, abandonment or another circumstance. It should not be treated simply as a missing parent noted on a file. Boys may be left with unanswered questions about why their father is absent, whether they were responsible, whether he loved them and what that absence says about their own identity.

This closely reflects what I see in practice. Many of the boys supported by Lads Need Dads are not only dealing with the absence of a father. They are trying to make sense of an unresolved story. Grief, rejection, uncertainty and divided loyalties can contribute to behaviour, withdrawal or disengagement, particularly when a boy has no safe opportunity to talk about what has happened.

Ruth also drew attention to the way the social security system responds to separated families. The system generally assumes that there is one main carer and one non-resident parent, even where care is shared. Only one parent can usually receive child-related benefits for a particular child, while the other is treated as a single adult for benefit purposes. This can make it more difficult for separated parents to maintain two homes in which a child can be cared for and can create practical barriers to continued involvement (Social Security Advisory Committee, 2020).

This does not mean that the social security system causes father absence, or that financial arrangements explain every disrupted father relationship. It shows that some parents who want to remain involved may encounter systems built around a simpler model of family life than the one they are actually living.

Language adds another difficulty. The word “fatherlessness” can make people defensive or close down the conversation. Far fewer people object to helping a child understand loss, build resilience and develop safe relationships with trusted adults. The challenge is to speak clearly about fathers without implying that every father should be involved, that every absence could have been prevented or that mothers raising children alone have failed.

A 2026 survey conducted by Lads Need Dads with 69 mothers raising sons without a consistent father figure reinforced this point. Many respondents were not offended by the suggestion that safe and consistent men could make a valuable contribution to their sons' lives. They were often the people asking most directly for that support. Their concern was not that fathers or male role models were being valued, but that they and their sons were too often expected to manage the consequences of father absence without enough recognition or help.

The task is therefore not to avoid talking about father absence. It is to talk about it accurately, recognising the different reasons fathers may be absent, the pressures placed on mothers and the child's need to understand his own experience. Naming what is missing from a boy's life should open the door to support, not judgement.

If cultural and political discomfort helps explain why this issue is difficult to name, the funding landscape helps explain why, even when it is recognised, appropriate support remains difficult to sustain.

11.5 New Philanthropy Capital and Movember: mapping the funding landscape

The funding landscape reflects the same fragmentation found elsewhere in this chapter. During the Fellowship, I took part in a scoping conversation with an NPC consultant working with Movember to map UK organisations and funding focused on boys and young men.

Our conversation explored a field in which organisations were often unaware of one another's work, used little shared language and did not necessarily see themselves as part of a wider boys' and young men's sector. Support existed across youth work, education, mental health, violence prevention and employment, but it was rarely connected or funded as a coherent field.

The conversation also allowed me to raise an issue that was becoming increasingly important through my Fellowship: the disconnect between those making decisions and those delivering work directly with boys. A reflection I shared during the scoping work was subsequently included in NPC and Movember's published report:

"Policy makers, researchers, funders, and practitioners are not integrated enough. Too often, decisions are made without frontline experience, which leaves gaps in early intervention and prevention for boys."

This was more than a concern about communication between different parts of the sector. Frontline organisations can see emerging needs, gaps in provision and the practical consequences of policy and funding decisions as they unfold. When that knowledge is not routinely connected to research, funding and policymaking, opportunities for earlier intervention can be missed.

The conversation also helped clarify another distinction that became important through the Fellowship. Considerable attention is rightly given to supporting men once they become fathers and improving their involvement in their children's lives. Far less attention is paid to how boys' own experiences of being fathered, or growing up without that relationship, may shape the men and fathers they later become. Supporting future fathers does not begin at the maternity ward. For many, it begins during boyhood.

The scoping work subsequently contributed to NPC and Movember's report, *The Invisible Field: Why We Need to Have a Conversation About Funding for Boys and Young Men*, published while this Fellowship was being completed. Its national mapping examined 71,812 youth-focused organisations and £2.62 billion of funding awarded between 2020 and 2025 (New Philanthropy Capital & Movember, 2026).

Of the organisations examined, 1,426, or 1.99 per cent, explicitly focused on boys and young men. These organisations received £28.5 million, equivalent to 1.09 per cent of the youth funding analysed. These figures do not mean that boys benefited from only 1.09 per cent of all youth spending. Boys are included within universal and mixed-gender provision. The finding is that very little funding was directed towards organisations explicitly designed around the particular needs, experiences and barriers faced by boys and young men.

NPC and Movember concluded that valuable work already exists but is difficult to see, connect and strengthen because it is not recognised as a coherent field. They called for clearer recognition, stronger coordination, improved funding classification and more intentional investment in organisations supporting boys and young men.

There was a striking convergence between those findings and what was emerging through my Fellowship. The Invisible Field reached its conclusions through national organisational and funding data, while my Fellowship approached many of the same questions through international fieldwork, UK interviews and frontline experience. The two pieces of work were undertaken independently, but my contribution to NPC's scoping process provided an opportunity for some of the emerging Fellowship learning to feed into that wider conversation before either report had been published.

My Fellowship then takes the question one step further by focusing on an even less visible group within that landscape: boys growing up without a consistent father figure. NPC's research does not examine father absence as a distinct category, but its findings help explain why provision for these boys can be particularly difficult to identify and sustain. If boys and young men are not clearly recognised within funding systems, a smaller group within that population is even more likely to remain unseen.

This invisibility can continue even within programmes that are already supporting these boys. If a service does not record whether a boy is growing up without a consistent father figure, it cannot know how many boys in this group it is reaching, whether their needs differ, or what outcomes they experience. They remain absorbed within broader categories of children and young people, making it harder to build an evidence base about what support this particular group may need.

11.5a Future Men: the missing link between boys and fathers



I interviewed Chris Stein, Director of Operations at Future Men, as part of my UK Fellowship research. Our conversation was particularly useful because Future Men works across two closely related areas: boys in schools and fathers. Its work includes school-based boys' development programmes, support for young fathers, antenatal preparation through its Future Dads programme and more intensive casework with fathers experiencing multiple needs.

What struck me was how closely these two strands related to the central question of this Fellowship. Chris described supporting young fathers with issues including housing, employment, relationships, finances, substance misuse and access to their children. When I asked whether Future Men knew how many of those young fathers had themselves grown up without a consistent father figure, this was not information routinely collected. Chris felt, anecdotally, that the number was likely to be significant.

This exposed an important missing link. We often invest in helping men become better or more engaged fathers once they have children, while paying much less attention to how their own understanding of fatherhood was formed during boyhood. Boys growing up without a consistent father figure do not suddenly begin thinking about fatherhood when they become parents. Their understanding of masculinity, relationships, responsibility, care and what it means to be a father develops throughout childhood and adolescence.

Chris also described Future Men's work with boys aged 14 to 16 who had already accumulated identifiable risk factors, many of whom were already known to statutory services. This is important work, but it raised a question that recurred throughout my Fellowship: why does substantial support so often become available only once difficulties are visible?

Future Men's work demonstrated the importance of sustained support for boys once risks have begun to emerge. It also highlighted the need for provision at an earlier stage, before those risks have accumulated and before a boy has reached the threshold for statutory attention. Both forms of support are necessary, but the balance of funding and provision remains weighted towards responding once difficulties are already apparent.

The issue, then, is not necessarily a lack of good programmes or committed organisations. It is the lack of connection between them, with prevention, boys' development and fatherhood still largely treated as separate areas rather than as part of the same life course.

11.6 The Turnaround Programme: a policy blind spot made visible



That same pattern was visible within the Ministry of Justice's Turnaround Programme. A conversation with its policy lead confirmed that the programme does not currently record father involvement or father absence as a distinct risk factor.

This is consistent with its published evaluation, which does not mention fathers or father absence (Turner et al., 2026). The gap may therefore be visible in frontline practice while remaining invisible within routine policy data.

Turnaround is a national early intervention programme delivered through all 157 Youth Justice Services in England and Wales. It was funded to support up to 20,500 children aged 10 to 17 by March 2026, with further funding now committed until 2029. It illustrates how early intervention can remain siloed across education, youth justice and the voluntary sector, with different services supporting overlapping groups of children without seeing the whole picture.

Turnaround supports children once they have come to the attention of the police or another agency with enforcement powers, although they may not yet be on a statutory youth justice caseload. By contrast, Lads Need Dads is designed to intervene following family breakdown and around the transition to secondary school, before many of the thresholds that trigger youth justice involvement have been reached.

The policy lead was receptive to incorporating father-related measures into future evaluation and raised the possibility of introductions to colleagues working on violence against women and girls, as well as an opportunity to present to the Youth Justice Policy Unit. This suggests the barrier may not be active resistance, but that father absence has simply not previously been raised in the right room. The policy question is whether the upstream factors shaping children's vulnerability are being measured at all - and whether openings such as this are followed through rather than remaining a single positive conversation.

Turnaround's evaluation also raised a broader problem, one Karen Wynter had identified from a different perspective in Australia: relationship-based change and political evaluation cycles rarely move at the same speed.

11.7 Evidence takes longer than political cycles allow

Karen Wynter, in a conversation following the Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium, made the point directly: with complex family interventions, real impact is often not visible immediately. Some changes become apparent only six to twelve months later, and sometimes considerably later. Short evaluation windows, she suggested, may therefore fail to capture longer-term relational change.

My conversation with the Turnaround Programme lead provided a concrete UK example. The programme reported that 7% of children who completed an intervention had subsequently received a judicial decision or caution (Turner et al., 2026).

However, not every participant had reached a full twelve-month follow-up period when the data were analysed. I raise this not to question the figure, but because it illustrates precisely the challenge Karen described: a statistic can be accurately reported while still representing an early and incomplete picture of longer-term outcomes.

Part of the explanation lies outside any single programme's control. Turnaround was introduced during a period of considerable political instability, with multiple changes in Prime Minister and pressure to roll out funding rapidly. Local services had only a short period to establish delivery, meaning data collection had to be pragmatic rather than comprehensive. Government programmes rarely begin under ideal research conditions. They operate within changing political priorities, shifting budgets, financial-year deadlines and compressed delivery timescales, all of which affect what can realistically be measured.

This is not a criticism of Turnaround or the people delivering it. If anything, it demonstrates how much can be achieved under difficult conditions. However, when relationship-based interventions are evaluated too early, changes that emerge only over time may be missed. The same challenge applies to Lads Need Dads' own model, and to any intervention seeking to achieve sustained relational change.

11.8 Commissioning timescales and the cost of moving fast

A related but distinct mismatch concerns not evaluation, but delivery itself. During an Essex County Council information session on the Department for Education-funded Families First Neighbourhood Grants Programme, officers explained that successful organisations would have only a matter of weeks between funding confirmation

and the expected start of delivery. Listening to the discussion, I recognised a wider implementation challenge.

Relationship-based early intervention cannot simply begin when funding arrives. In schools, September is a period of transition, with pupils settling into new year groups and pastoral teams identifying children who may require additional support. Voluntary organisations delivering mentoring programmes must recruit volunteers, complete interviews, obtain references, undertake DBS checks and establish school partnerships before delivery can begin safely. These processes are not administrative delays; they are integral to delivering safe, high-quality relational practice.

Just as meaningful outcomes often emerge over years rather than months, relational programmes need sufficient preparation time before delivery can begin. If commissioning timetables do not reflect that reality, programmes built on trust and sustained relationships risk being structurally disadvantaged against interventions that can mobilise more quickly, regardless of their comparative value.

11.9 Essex County Council: the manosphere lens



A different issue emerged during an exploratory conversation with a public health officer at Essex County Council, who was beginning to scope a needs assessment into misogyny, the manosphere and digital harm among boys in schools. The work had been prompted by legitimate safeguarding concerns about boys' treatment of female peers and teachers, but our conversation raised a broader question for me: when we respond to concerning behaviour in boys, how far upstream are we prepared to look?

There was genuine alignment in principle, but the starting point was understandably focused on the harm boys might cause or the attitudes they might develop, rather than on the experiences and relationships that may sit behind them. Relational factors, including father absence, were relevant to that wider picture but were not the primary focus of the work.

Across eleven years of Lads Need Dads' assessment work, a poor relationship with female teachers has repeatedly coincided with volatility, rupture or unresolved conflict in the boy's relationship with his mother. When a boy reports difficulties with female teachers, we do not look only at what is happening in school. We explore his relationships with the significant adults in his life and, time and again, difficulties in the mother-son relationship have emerged as part of the wider picture.

This is a consistent practice-based observation rather than proof of causation, but it raises an important question. If a strategy is seeking to understand a boy's attitudes towards women and girls, can it afford to overlook his earliest and often most significant relationship with a woman? Many mothers are themselves carrying trauma, adversity and the considerable pressure of raising sons with limited support. Conflict within that relationship may sit alongside father absence, rejection, disrupted attachment, peer culture and harmful online influences. None operates in isolation but leaving the mother-son relationship unexplored risks missing an important part of the boy's story.

Online influencers do not create every vulnerability they exploit. A boy who already feels rejected, unimportant or uncertain about who he is may be particularly receptive to someone offering confident and simplistic answers about masculinity, women and his place in the world. A secure and affirming relationship with a father or father figure cannot guarantee protection from those messages, just as father absence does not determine that a boy will be drawn towards them. However, boys who lack affirmation, belonging and trusted adults may have fewer resources with which to question what they encounter online.

Digital safety education has a role, but it cannot reach every underlying need. If the response focuses only on what boys are watching and saying, without exploring the relationships, experiences and unmet needs beneath it, services may address the visible behaviour while leaving its roots untouched.

11.10 The updated RSHE guidance: supporting boys without stigmatising them

The concerns raised in Essex also made me look more closely at the national approach to Relationships, Sex and Health Education (Department for Education, 2025c). In an email exchange, Dr Helena Wright of the Department for Education's RSHE, Citizenship and Equalities Unit said that the Department was "really keen" to ensure that boys felt supported and did not feel stigmatised, particularly given the focus on violence against women and girls.

Dr Wright directed me to the Department's *Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice: December 2025* research on boys' experiences of stereotypes. The findings help explain why this matters. Forty-two per cent of male pupils at Key Stage 3 and 51 per cent at Key Stage 4 agreed that boys often feel pressure not to cry, to "man up" or to misbehave. Around one-third said they sometimes made choices or acted differently to match what friends and other pupils expected from boys (Department for Education, 2026).

Dr Wright also said that schools felt they needed more support across a range of topics when implementing the new guidance, but that she had not heard supporting boys raised as a specific issue.

It made me wonder how this teaching is experienced by boys who may recognise their own family circumstances in what is being discussed. A boy may be taught what a safe and healthy relationship looks like while currently living with domestic abuse, coercive control, conflict, instability or damaging relationships. For another boy, those experiences may be in the past but continue to shape his understanding of love, trust, conflict and how adults treat one another. The unhealthy behaviour he experiences or witnesses may come from a father, mother, partner or another adult in his life.

There is a particular difficulty in being taught what a healthy relationship should look like and then returning to an unhealthy situation that, as a child, you have little or no power to change. The lesson may help a boy recognise that what he is experiencing is not healthy, but recognition alone does not give him a way out or someone who can help him make sense of it.

Nor can schools assume that the learning will be reinforced at home. If an RSHE lesson raises difficult memories, leads a boy to recognise something happening in his own family or prompts him to disclose what he is experiencing, what happens next? Who helps him make sense of it? What support is available if he does not meet the threshold for statutory intervention but clearly needs more than the lesson itself?

RSHE can give boys important knowledge and language, but that learning cannot be separated from the relationships and circumstances surrounding them. For some boys, the lesson may need to be the beginning of support rather than the end of it.

11.11 Mothers raising sons alone

These questions are closely connected to the experiences of the mothers raising these boys and the support available to them. What became increasingly apparent was how little attention is given to their experiences. This stood in sharp contrast to how Lads Need Dads has approached the work from the beginning. We have always supported mothers alongside their sons, recognising that the person holding much of the boy's world together needs support in her own right, not simply as a route to reaching him.

To understand these experiences more fully, I conducted an exploratory [survey](#) of 69 mothers raising sons alone. Forty-three had no previous involvement with Lads Need Dads, while 26 had sons who were currently

taking part or had participated previously. The survey was not intended to be representative of all mothers raising sons alone, but the responses revealed several recurring themes.

Mothers described carrying emotional, practical and financial responsibility while helping their sons navigate grief, anger, adolescence, identity and unanswered questions about fathers who were absent, inconsistent, deceased or emotionally unavailable. Many spoke of exhaustion, isolation and the pressure of being the parent, advocate, provider, disciplinarian and emotional anchor, often with little opportunity to switch off.

Underneath many of these responses was a deep concern about what the absence of a consistent father figure might mean for their sons as they moved through adolescence: who would guide them, how they would make sense of becoming young men, and whether difficulties that were still largely hidden might become more serious over time.

Experiences of schools and other services varied. Some mothers described individual teachers, mentors and schools that had supported their sons well. Others felt they had to fight repeatedly to have their sons understood, particularly when distress appeared through anger, withdrawal, school avoidance or challenging behaviour. Several felt that professionals responded to what their sons were doing without asking enough about what might be happening underneath it. As one mother put it, professionals saw the behaviour and attitude, but not “a boy crying out for help.”

Another recurring concern was that boys could appear to be coping while struggling internally. Mothers described sons who masked anxiety, low confidence, grief, loneliness and difficulty expressing emotions. Some said their sons were smiling, quiet or apparently confident, while concealing how much they were struggling. This reflected a pattern encountered throughout the Fellowship: boys’ distress is easily missed when it does not appear in a form adults immediately recognise.

Many mothers explicitly identified the value of safe and consistent male role models. They did not describe mentors as replacements for fathers or as a criticism of their own parenting. They spoke instead about forms of guidance, shared experience and conversation that they felt a trusted man might be better placed to offer, particularly as their sons moved through adolescence. Several said directly that, however hard they tried, they could not provide every form of male guidance their sons needed.

The responses also revealed an unmet need among mothers themselves. Of the 69 respondents, 58 had never attended a group for mothers in similar circumstances. Yet 45 said they would be interested in a future Mums Raising Sons space and another 19 said they might be. Mothers asked for practical guidance, emotional support, peer connection, confidentiality and flexible access, including online and evening provision. Many appeared to want somewhere they could speak honestly about the challenges of raising a son without a consistent father figure, without feeling judged or having to wait until their family had reached crisis.

What struck me was how closely these responses echoed what I had heard from practitioners in Australia, South Africa and the United States. Although the contexts were very different, similar needs kept surfacing: connection, belonging, trusted adults, emotional literacy and opportunities for boys to develop a healthy sense of identity and purpose. The mothers’ responses added another dimension to that picture. Supporting boys early also means recognising and supporting the adults carrying much of the responsibility for raising them.

Father absence should therefore not be treated simply as a fact about a family’s structure. It can be a relational and developmental experience affecting both the boy and the parent raising him. Supporting the boy while leaving his mother to carry the emotional and practical consequences alone addresses only part of the picture. Effective early intervention must recognise the needs of both.

Dr Anna Machin described an exchange that illustrated how policy assumptions can develop without speaking directly to the families concerned. During a discussion about fathers and social fathers, an MP asked, “What about

single mothers?” Machin asked whether she had spoken to single mothers about the issue, and the MP acknowledged that she had not. Machin’s point was that assumptions were being made on their behalf.

The survey responses support that point, although mothers did not all express it in the same way. Some were sensitive to language that appeared to suggest their family was deficient. Many others were actively seeking safe, consistent men who could contribute something valuable to their sons’ lives. Their voices show that recognising the value of fathers and male role models does not diminish the commitment, strength or importance of the mothers raising these boys.

Taken together, the conversations in this chapter reveal three overarching barriers:

- 1. Structural:** Fathers and father absence have no clear institutional home; referral and recording systems can make fathers invisible before a family is fully understood; and funding gravitates towards the most visible and measurable points in a child’s life rather than towards earlier relational work.
- 2. Political and cultural:** Discussions of father absence can be heard as criticism of mothers, making organisations reluctant to name the issue directly. At the same time, the language used to warn boys away from violence, misogyny and other harms remains far more developed than any positive vision of what they might move towards.
- 3. Implementation and commissioning:** Relationship-based change takes longer to emerge than many political and evaluation cycles allow, while public funding timetables rarely give relational programmes sufficient time to prepare, establish partnerships and build trust.

The people and organisations involved in these conversations shared a commitment to improving children’s lives. What was missing was a system designed to ask, when a family first encounters a service:

Who is missing from this child’s story, and why?

That question brings the UK findings back to what I encountered internationally. In South Africa, father absence was named clearly, but resources and reach were limited. In the United States, relational depth was often strong, but the structures required to assure quality and support wider implementation were less consistent. Australia had developed a substantial fatherhood field but had not yet directed the same attention upstream towards boys who may later become fathers.

The UK’s defining barrier is its architecture: systems that rarely see the whole of a boy’s relational world until difficulties have become visible somewhere else.

12 CHAPTER 12

From recognition to action: how four countries are responding to the needs of boys and young men

Across all four countries, I encountered signs that the conversation around boys and young men is beginning to change. Their educational, relational and emotional challenges are receiving greater attention, and the debate is increasingly moving from whether there is a problem to what governments, researchers and practitioners should do about it.

These challenges include educational disengagement, school exclusion, loneliness, poor mental health, exposure to harmful online influences, violence, uncertainty about identity and masculinity, and a lack of trusted adults. They are not confined to boys, but the patterns affecting boys and young men are becoming harder for governments to overlook.

There is also growing recognition that relationships matter. For boys growing up without a consistent father figure, a dependable teacher, mentor, coach, youth worker, family member or community leader can provide encouragement, guidance, boundaries, practical knowledge and an example of constructive adulthood. These adults do not replace fathers, and not every difficulty a boy experiences can be attributed to father absence. They can, however, provide an important protective relationship where a significant relationship has been missing, inconsistent, unsafe or lost.

12.1 Four countries at different stages

The four countries I explored are at different stages in how they recognise and respond to the needs of boys and young men. Each is taking a different route, and none yet offers a complete response.

United States: federal legislative proposals and state-level action to increase male participation in teaching, mentoring and community service, alongside emerging commissions and initiatives focused on boys, men and fathers. However, this does not yet provide a targeted pathway for boys growing up without a consistent father figure.

Australia: a federal Special Envoy for Men's Health, funded programmes, national community conversations and a parliamentary inquiry examining factors affecting educational attainment, including gender differences. However, responsibility remains divided across health, education, violence prevention and different levels of government.

South Africa: strong recognition of fathers, social fathers and shared community responsibility for boys, although delivery remains heavily dependent on charities and local organisations.

United Kingdom: England's first Men's Health Strategy, growing political attention to boys and men, cross-government work, a commitment to hold a national summit on men and boys, and greater emphasis on prevention and early intervention. However, there is still no integrated national framework or dedicated pathway for boys growing up without a consistent father figure.

None of the four countries has yet developed a fully coordinated response. The United States is beginning to build policy infrastructure through legislation and state-level commissions. Australia has established visible federal leadership and begun national engagement, although its response remains fragmented. Of the countries examined during this Fellowship, South Africa demonstrated the clearest recognition of social fatherhood and collective responsibility for boys. The United Kingdom has begun to give greater political and policy attention to boys and men but has not yet translated this into a clear, coordinated and accountable national response.

12.2 United States: using legislation to strengthen male participation

The United States is beginning to translate growing concern about boys and men into more formal political action. In July 2026, two federal bills were introduced aimed at increasing male participation in teaching, mentoring and community service.

The proposed Educators for America Act would require federally supported teacher residency programmes to prioritise the recruitment of groups underrepresented in teaching, explicitly including men. It would also strengthen paid residency routes, allowing aspiring teachers to earn while they train.

The proposed Building Community in America Act would similarly give priority to national service programmes that recruit and train underrepresented participants, including men. These programmes span youth mentoring, coaching, after-school provision, conservation, disaster response, violence interruption, public safety, skilled trades and support for people returning from prison.

These proposals begin to treat the presence of constructive and dependable men within schools and communities as a public policy concern rather than solely a private family matter. Importantly, they also recognise that increasing male participation requires viable routes into these roles. Calls for more men in teaching, mentoring and youth work will have limited effect if the routes into those professions are financially inaccessible.

The two bills sit within a wider shift taking place at state level. In 2026, Virginia established the country's first legislatively created Boys and Men Advisory Commission, with a remit spanning education, employment, health, family life and wider social challenges affecting boys and men. Louisiana established a Commission on Fatherhood Engagement, while Kentucky adopted a resolution encouraging the creation of a Fatherhood and Family Engagement Task Force. Elsewhere, governors and state legislatures have begun pursuing different approaches through executive action, education and workforce initiatives, mentoring and service programmes, and proposals for dedicated commissions. Legislation to establish a Boys and Men Commission has also been introduced in Washington State, although it has not yet become law (Williams & Knospe, 2026).

Taken together, these developments suggest that a more recognisable policy infrastructure around boys and men is beginning to emerge in parts of the United States. It remains uneven and at an early stage, but the significance lies in the movement beyond awareness towards legislation, commissions and mechanisms intended to influence what government and public institutions actually do.

There is also a potential benefit in both directions. Children may gain greater access to supportive adults, while men may gain purpose, connection, responsibility and opportunities to contribute through teaching, mentoring and community service.

There are, however, important limits to what these developments currently represent. The two federal bills remain legislative proposals, not established national policy, and their principal focus is increasing the number of male teachers, mentors and national service participants. They do not create a national system for identifying boys growing up without a consistent father figure or ensuring that those boys receive sustained, carefully matched and appropriately supervised support.

That distinction matters. Increasing male representation is valuable, but male presence alone is not an intervention. A boy may attend a school with male teachers, coaches or youth workers without developing a relationship with an adult who knows him, notices when something changes and remains involved over time.

The United States therefore offers an important example of recognition beginning to translate into political action. It also highlights the difference between bringing more men into the places where boys spend their lives and ensuring that boys who lack consistent male support develop the dependable relationships they need.

12.3 South Africa: fathers, social fathers and community responses

Of the countries examined during this Fellowship, South Africa demonstrated the clearest recognition of social fatherhood and collective responsibility for boys. It has developed a substantial public and academic conversation about the different forms' fatherhood can take and the structural conditions that shape fathers' involvement in children's lives.

The State of South Africa's Fathers report series has made an important contribution to that conversation. Published in 2018, 2021 and 2024, the reports bring together research, practice and advocacy relating to fathers and fatherhood. Rather than focusing simply on whether a biological father lives in the household, they examine father involvement, caregiving, non-resident fatherhood and social fatherhood.

The 2024 report found that only 35.6 per cent of South African children lived with their biological father, while 40.3 per cent lived with an adult man who was not their biological father (Ratele et al., 2024). Living in the same household does not automatically make a man a social father, but these figures demonstrate why biological connection and co-residence alone provide an incomplete picture of the male relationships surrounding children.

A social father is a man who is not a child's biological father but undertakes a meaningful fathering role. He may be a grandfather, uncle, stepfather, older brother or another trusted man who provides care, guidance, practical help, protection, emotional support and a sense of identity. Teachers, coaches, faith leaders and community members may also fulfil aspects of this role where a sustained and significant relationship develops.

Social fatherhood is particularly relevant to this Fellowship because it recognises the importance of fathering without suggesting that a boy's future is determined entirely by the presence or absence of his biological father. Father absence may involve grief, rejection, confusion, anger or the loss of guidance, and those experiences should not be minimised. But other safe, consistent and caring adults can also provide important relationships in a boy's life.

South Africa also challenged any simple interpretation of father absence as individual moral failure. Patterns of family separation and non-resident fatherhood have been shaped by poverty, labour migration, unemployment, apartheid-era disruption, housing conditions and expectations that fathers should primarily be financial providers. Men who cannot fulfil that provider role may withdraw through shame, feel excluded from family life or be geographically separated from their children because they have travelled to find work.

These structural conditions do not remove individual responsibility. They do, however, show why father involvement cannot be understood without considering both the choices individuals make and the social and economic conditions surrounding those choices.

The organisations I encountered in South Africa showed what community responses can look like in practice. Their work included mentoring, character development, rites of passage, emotional education, fatherhood support and programmes exploring positive masculinity. The strongest approaches did more than provide boys with information. They created community and belonging, offered consistent relationships and accountability, and involved adults who remained present beyond a short course or isolated workshop.

This relational and community-based approach was one of South Africa's greatest strengths. Its limitation was that much of the responsibility remained with charities, community leaders, faith organisations and individual practitioners. Provision could be innovative and deeply rooted in local communities while still being geographically uneven, dependent on uncertain funding and difficult to sustain at national scale.

South Africa offers two particularly relevant lessons for the United Kingdom. First, policy and services should recognise not only biological fathers but also social fathers and the wider networks of trusted men who may contribute to a child's development. Father involvement cannot be understood through a simple question about whether a biological father is present or absent.

Second, community action cannot substitute indefinitely for public infrastructure. Charities can innovate, build trust and demonstrate what is possible, but they cannot guarantee national access without sustained investment and institutional support. The challenge is not to replace community-led responses, but to create the conditions in which effective relational work can be sustained and reach more of the boys who need it.

12.4 Australia: emerging national leadership and funded action

Australia's response has moved beyond research into visible government action. It now includes federal political leadership, funded preventive programmes, national consultation and a parliamentary examination of differences in educational attainment. These developments are significant, although they remain spread across different policy areas and levels of government.

In May 2025, Dan Repacholi MP was appointed Australia's first Special Envoy for Men's Health, giving men's health and wellbeing dedicated political leadership at federal level. His work has included men's physical and mental health, suicide, social connection, help-seeking and the settings in which men and boys can be reached.

In May 2026, the Australian Government launched the National Healthy Men Community Conversations project, led jointly by Repacholi and Ged Kearney, Assistant Minister for Social Services and the Prevention of Family Violence. The project is bringing together communities, members of the public and organisations working across men's health, wellbeing and violence prevention.

The conversations aim to strengthen connections between men and support services, encourage help-seeking and explore what it means to be a healthy, supported man who forms respectful relationships. The learning is intended to inform future government policies and programmes. This represents genuine government-led activity, although it remains a consultation and engagement process rather than a national programme of mentoring or relational support.

Alongside this, the Australian Government has extended the Healthy Masculinities Trial and Evaluation Program (Healthy MaTE) until June 2027. The programme trials and evaluates approaches in schools and community settings that encourage healthy expressions of masculinity and respectful relationships among boys and young men. It forms part of Australia's wider work under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032.

This investment is relevant to my Fellowship because it takes support into places where boys and young men already spend their time. Boys who may be unlikely to approach a formal mental health service can still be reached through schools and familiar community settings.

Australia has also commenced a federal parliamentary inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment. Its terms of reference include variations between and among boys and girls, from early learning through school and into further and higher education. The inquiry provides a national mechanism through which differences in boys' educational engagement and outcomes can be examined. It has begun holding public hearings but has not yet reported, so no recommendations arising from it have been implemented.

Alongside these developments, Australia has continued to invest in respectful relationships education and state-level approaches to violence prevention, misogyny and harmful gender norms. This work is important. Boys need opportunities to discuss consent, relationships, respect, online influences and expectations surrounding masculinity.

There is a risk, however, that concern about boys becomes concentrated on preventing the harm they may cause. Boys also need to be understood as children with developmental, emotional, relational and educational needs of their own. Addressing harmful attitudes without exploring what may make some boys vulnerable to them risks responding to what is visible while overlooking what sits beneath it.

The unevenness of this political attention became particularly visible in Victoria in August 2026, when the state's standalone Men and Boys portfolio was removed only months after its creation. The portfolio had been

introduced in April amid concerns that included men's mental health, family violence and the influence of the manosphere.

Its short lifespan illustrates how different political recognition can be from sustained policy infrastructure. Creating a dedicated portfolio gave these issues visibility; its removal only months later showed how quickly that visibility can change. Importantly, the Victorian decision did not affect Repacholi's continuing federal role as Special Envoy for Men's Health.

Australia's response is therefore meaningful but remains fragmented. Men's health sits within one area of policy, respectful relationships and violence prevention within another, and educational attainment is being examined through a separate parliamentary process. Much of the country's fatherhood research and mentoring provision also remains within academic, community and voluntary-sector networks.

What is not yet visible is a national pathway connecting these areas: one that considers whether a boy has access to a consistent father or social father, identifies relational need early and connects him with sustained, appropriately supported mentoring. Nor has Australia introduced national legislation equivalent to the American proposals aimed at increasing men's participation in teaching, mentoring and community service.

Australia is no longer at the stage of research alone. It has moved into political leadership, consultation, funding and formal policy examination. The question now is whether these developments can become more connected and lead to a sustained national approach to boys and young men.

What the international comparison shows

Across all three countries, I found remarkable agreement about what boys need: trusted adults, stable relationships, belonging, emotional literacy and opportunities to develop a positive sense of identity. The differences lay not in the destination, but in the route each country had taken towards it.

The United States is exploring legislation to expand male participation. Australia has moved into political leadership, preventive funding and national consultation, although its response remains fragmented. South Africa offers a developed understanding of social fatherhood and community responsibility. Britain has begun constructing a more organised response around men and boys but has not yet connected its separate initiatives into a national framework.

These are significant developments. Recognition, political groups, commissions, consultations and summits, however, are not enough on their own. The test is whether they create lasting change in boys' lives.

For boys growing up without a consistent father figure, that means more than appearing within a general discussion about masculinity, mental health or violence prevention. It means being noticed early, having their experiences understood without stigma and gaining access to adults who are safe, dependable and appropriately supported. It also means ensuring that families can find help before difficulties become crises.

Britain now has the beginnings of a more organised policy response. Its next task is to turn that political recognition into a clear, funded and accountable system of early intervention.

The question is no longer whether positive adults matter. The question is whether Britain will build the relational infrastructure that enables boys to reach them before crisis does.

12.5 United Kingdom: significant political movement, but no coherent national framework

The position in the United Kingdom changed considerably during the course of this Fellowship. By August 2026, it was no longer accurate to say that government and policymakers had shown little organised interest in the challenges facing boys and men. Political attention had grown, new structures were emerging and prevention was becoming more prominent in several areas of policy.

Some of the most important developments apply specifically to England, including the Men's Health Strategy, while others form part of wider UK political discussion. This section distinguishes between them where relevant and reflects the position at the conclusion of the Fellowship in August 2026.

Taken together, these developments represent real movement. They do not yet, however, amount to a single, funded and accountable national approach connecting the different parts of boys' lives.

The Men's Health Strategy

England's first Men's Health Strategy was published in November 2025 (Department of Health and Social Care, 2025). It recognises inequalities affecting men and boys, including poorer health outcomes, suicide, barriers to seeking help and the importance of family, social and community connections.

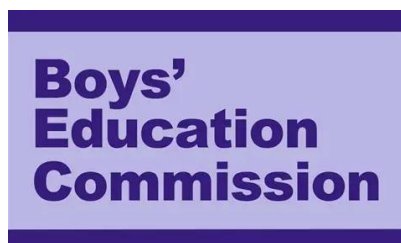
This is an important step, but it is principally a health strategy. It does not provide a wider framework connecting boys' education, father relationships, mentoring, school attendance, exclusion, family support and the transition into adulthood. Some boys' difficulties may therefore still become visible to services only when they present as a health problem, rather than when earlier relational or educational needs first emerge.

The Labour Group for Men and Boys

In early 2026, Labour MPs established the Labour Group for Men and Boys, with support from civil-society organisations working across fatherhood, men's health and gender equality. The group was founded on the principle that supporting men and boys should not be presented as being in opposition to supporting women and girls. Its members have raised issues including boys' educational outcomes, mental health, employment, loneliness, fatherhood, paternity leave, male role models and harmful online influences.

The group provides an organised parliamentary platform for these issues, but it is important to distinguish it from government machinery. It is a group of governing-party MPs rather than a government taskforce. It can advocate, convene and influence, but it does not control departmental budgets or commission national services.

The Boys' Education Commission



A further development came in May 2026 with the establishment of the independent Boys' Education Commission, hosted by the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys and chaired by former headteacher and government adviser Peter Hyman. The Commission was created to examine why boys are falling behind at different stages of education and what reforms might enable both boys and girls to thrive.

Lads Need Dads was subsequently invited to submit written evidence and give oral evidence to the Commission. This is expected to take place after the submission of this report, so neither our evidence nor the Commission's eventual conclusions can be reflected here. The invitation nevertheless provides an opportunity to bring front-line experience of father absence, relational need, school engagement and trusted adult support into a national examination of boys' education.

The Commission is independent rather than a government body and had not reported at the time of writing. Its creation is nevertheless important because it gives focused national attention to boys' educational outcomes and creates space to examine attainment, attendance, behaviour and exclusion alongside the wider circumstances of boys' lives.

Government leadership and the national conversation

Government-led work on men and boys also developed during 2026. Cross-government work associated with the Government's strategy on violence against women and girls included a commitment to a national conversation and summit on men and boys, intended to help develop a more positive and aspirational agenda alongside work to tackle violence and abuse.

This represents an important change in tone. Much of the public conversation involving boys has understandably focused on misogyny, violence, radicalisation and risk. These are serious issues that must be addressed. But an aspirational agenda also needs to ask what boys require in order to thrive: where they find belonging and purpose, who notices when they begin to withdraw, and what support is available before difficulties become entrenched.

There is a tension in the fact that some of this attention has emerged through concern about violence against women and girls. Boys can become politically visible because of the harm they may cause without equivalent attention being given to their own developmental, relational, emotional and educational needs. The proposed national conversation creates an opportunity to broaden that starting point, but a summit is a means of bringing people together, not a policy outcome in itself. Its value will depend on what follows.

Questions also remain about how government identifies and engages with specialist organisations working directly with vulnerable boys. During this Fellowship, Lads Need Dads was not involved in some of the emerging national discussions, including a related event at 10 Downing Street. I raise this not because any single organisation should expect a place at the table, but because it illustrates a wider challenge: how does government identify and draw on specialist frontline experience when developing policy on boys and young men?

This question extends beyond Lads Need Dads. If national policy is to reflect the realities facing vulnerable boys, there need to be transparent ways of bringing together academic evidence, lived experience, policy expertise and sustained frontline practice.

Social cohesion and loneliness

The Government's work on social cohesion has also brought greater attention to loneliness among boys and young men, with cross-departmental work intended to consider social connection and belonging.

This matters because loneliness in boys does not always look like loneliness. It may appear as anger, excessive gaming, disengagement, risk-taking, school refusal or withdrawal. For some boys, this may sit alongside the loss or absence of a dependable father relationship or other trusted adults. Social cohesion work therefore has potential relevance to the issues explored in this report, even though its remit extends considerably beyond father absence and boys' relational needs.

Youth justice and earlier intervention

The 2026 Youth Justice White Paper proposed a stronger emphasis on earlier and more targeted intervention, closer coordination around children at risk of repeated offending, greater support for families and stronger community alternatives to custody.

The direction towards earlier intervention is welcome, but youth justice remains, understandably, focused on children who have already offended or are considered at significant risk of doing so. A genuinely preventive approach needs to reach some boys earlier still, including those whose difficulties present as low self-worth, poor attendance, anxiety, emotional shutdown, isolation or a lack of trusted adults rather than offending.

Britain's remaining architecture gap

There has therefore been genuine progress. England has its first Men's Health Strategy; Labour MPs have established an organised parliamentary group focused on men and boys; an independent Commission is examining boys' educational outcomes; government has committed to national discussion about men and boys; social cohesion work is considering loneliness and belonging; and youth justice policy is moving towards earlier intervention.

What these developments do not yet amount to is a single framework connecting father involvement, social fatherhood, boys' educational outcomes, male participation in the children's workforce, mental health, school exclusion, youth services, family support and early intervention.

This is the architecture gap. The same boy can appear in several systems without any one of them seeing the whole of his life. A school may see disruptive behaviour. His mother may see grief or anger connected to an absent father. A mental health service may see anxiety. A youth worker may see isolation and a lack of purpose. Police may later see offending. Each interpretation may be valid, but if these systems do not connect what they know, the boy's relational history and unmet needs can remain hidden.

From male presence to relational infrastructure

British politicians and policymakers are also beginning to speak more openly about the value of positive male influences in boys' lives. Teachers, coaches, youth workers, community members and mentors can all contribute, particularly where boys lack dependable men around them.

But calls for "more male role models" are not enough. Not every man is automatically a positive influence, and simply placing more men in schools or youth services does not guarantee that meaningful relationships will develop.

What matters is the quality of the relationship: safety, consistency, warmth, appropriate boundaries, accountability, reliability, encouragement and time. Boys need adults who do more than deliver information. They need adults who remember what they said the previous week, notice when their behaviour changes, challenge them when necessary and remain present while trust develops.

A national response therefore needs to go beyond increasing the number of men around children. It needs to consider which boys may require additional relational support, how they can be identified without stigma, how mentors should be recruited and trained, what safeguarding and supervision are required, how relationships are matched, how families are involved, how long support should last and how outcomes are evaluated.

Britain also continues to have relatively few men in primary teaching and parts of the wider children's workforce. Increasing male participation in education and youth services could form part of the response, but male teachers should not automatically be expected to act as substitute fathers. The aim should be both to increase the range of safe adults surrounding children and to create specific, sustained mentoring pathways for boys with an identified relational need.

This is what I mean by relational infrastructure. It includes people, but also the structures that allow relationships to form and endure: recruitment, training, safeguarding, supervision, appropriate matching, family involvement, sufficient duration, stable funding and evaluation. Without that infrastructure, calls for men to volunteer or become role models risk remaining largely symbolic.

Alongside these political developments, a wider civil-society conversation about boys grew rapidly during the Fellowship, including through the Centre for Social Justice's Lost Boys work and the independent Boys' Education Commission. What this emerging activity suggests about closer collaboration between research, policy and front-line practice is explored in Chapter 14.

What the United Kingdom can learn

The United Kingdom does not need to copy any one of the countries I visited. Each offers something different.

From the United States, the UK can learn from the willingness to put male participation in teaching, mentoring and community service explicitly on the policy agenda.

From Australia, it can take the value of visible political leadership, national engagement and preventive programmes delivered through schools and community settings, while recognising how fragile dedicated political attention can be when it is not supported by enduring structures.

From South Africa, it can take a broader understanding of social fatherhood, recognising that grandfathers, uncles, stepfathers, coaches, teachers, youth workers and mentors may all form part of a child's network of care. South Africa also demonstrates the limits of relying on community organisations alone: they can innovate, build

trust and demonstrate what is possible, but cannot guarantee national access without sustained investment and institutional support.

The UK already has many of the pieces from which a more coherent response could be built. Men's health policy brings attention to wellbeing and suicide. The Boys' Education Commission creates an opportunity for focused evidence and recommendations. Social cohesion work brings attention to loneliness and belonging. Youth justice reform is moving towards earlier intervention. Parliamentary activity can maintain political attention, while a national conversation can help establish shared priorities.

The next step is to connect these pieces across education, health, justice, families and community policy, with clear leadership, measurable outcomes, stable funding and meaningful involvement from the organisations, practitioners and families closest to the issue.

The specific recommendations arising from this Fellowship are set out in Chapter 15.

13

CHAPTER 13

Listening to men who grew up without a consistent father figure.

Alongside the international fieldwork, I wanted to understand something the country visits alone could not show me: not how systems respond to boys, but how growing up without a consistent father figure can continue to shape a man's life decades later.

To explore this, I conducted an exploratory [survey](#) of adult men who had grown up without a consistent father figure. It was distributed openly through the Lads Need Dads website, LinkedIn and Facebook between March and June 2026. Fifty-nine men responded, ranging in age from eighteen to over fifty-five and living across seven countries, although the large majority were from the UK. Most had no previous connection to Lads Need Dads.

Respondents described experiences ranging from complete paternal absence to inconsistent or emotionally unavailable involvement. The chapter therefore encompasses different experiences rather than a single pathway into father absence.

This was an exploratory, self-selecting survey, not a nationally representative study, and it is important to be precise about what it can and cannot show. It cannot establish how common these experiences are among all men who grew up without a consistent father figure, nor can it prove that any one childhood circumstance caused a particular adult outcome. What it can offer is something the international fieldwork and organisational visits could not: first-person accounts of what these experiences felt like from the inside and what, looking back, these men believed might have helped.

The full methodology, respondent characteristics, statistics and thematic findings are set out in the accompanying report, *Understanding Men's Experiences of Growing Up Without a Consistent Father Figure* (Lads Need Dads CIC, 2026). This chapter does not reproduce that report. Instead, it draws together its principal findings and two more extended personal accounts to ask one question: what did listening to these men add to what I had already learned from the systems and organisations visited abroad?

The international fieldwork showed me how systems around boys are, or are not, designed to notice them. Listening to these men showed me something those systems rarely see: what happens to a boy who was never noticed once he grows up.

13.1 Hidden distress and masking

The consistency of what these men described was striking. Eighty-seven per cent rated the impact of their childhood experience at four or five out of five. The emotional experiences they named, particularly low self-worth, sadness and rejection, were remarkably similar across very different lives and countries.

What stood out was how rarely this distress had been visible from the outside.

"You wear a mask, you protect yourself. I still wear a mask outside of my family. My best friend is my wife."

Another man described the point at which a father's absence can stop feeling like an event and become a judgement a boy carries about himself:

“Having a dad choose to walk away sends you a message, whether you understand it at the time or not, that you are not worthy. You carry that belief everywhere you go.”

These accounts closely reflect a pattern encountered throughout the Fellowship: many boys do not announce their distress. Instead, they become skilled at performing its absence, and that performance may be more convincing than the feelings beneath it.

Seventy per cent of respondents said they had been unable to talk to anyone about their father’s absence as children. Their silence should not be interpreted as evidence that support was unnecessary. For some, it suggested that asking for help had already come to feel difficult or unsafe, the same dynamic encountered throughout the South African, American and Australian fieldwork.

13.2 Learning masculinity without a model

A further group of responses concerned identity and masculinity. They provided some of the clearest descriptions I encountered during the Fellowship of what it can mean for a boy to construct an understanding of manhood without a consistent model in front of him.

“We gap-fill to build a male identity in the absence of experiential exposure. That’s why it’s so important that we provide good examples.”

A second respondent put it more simply:

“I didn’t learn how to be a man. I defined it for myself.”

This aligns closely with Dr Anna Machin’s account of what boys may need developmentally: not only abstract messages about values and behaviour, but visible and credible examples of what constructive adulthood looks like, modelled repeatedly over time.

Where that modelling is absent, boys do not necessarily stop looking for it. Some may seek answers wherever they are most readily offered, including through online influencers presenting confident and simplified messages about identity, masculinity, status and purpose.

This reinforces the concerns explored in the Essex County Council section of Chapter 11. Digital content does not affect every boy in the same way, and father absence cannot explain all vulnerability to harmful online influences. These men’s accounts do, however, suggest that an unresolved search for identity, affirmation and direction may leave some boys more receptive to whoever appears willing to provide an answer.

13.3 School, work and overcompensation

Seventy-five per cent of respondents said their home life had affected their experience of school, and the same pattern of largely invisible distress appeared consistently.

“Just an anxious wreck. Dreaded going home when the school bell went. Get home and would never be asked about how my day was. Very, very lonely.”

Another wrote:

"Because I was an introvert who didn't cause trouble, I slipped through the net."

Their working lives revealed a related pattern in adulthood. Eighty-two per cent said their upbringing had influenced their experience of work. Several described using achievement to compensate for a lack of confidence or self-worth:

"Using work as a means to show my worth. Over-achievement. Sacrificing friends and family for work."

Taken together, these accounts reinforce a finding that recurred throughout the Fellowship: outward competence is not evidence of inward security. Systems designed primarily to respond to visible disruption will continue to miss boys, and later men, who have become highly skilled at concealing their distress.

13.4 Becoming fathers themselves

Sixty-nine per cent of those who answered this part of the survey were now fathers or stepfathers. Their responses challenge any simplistic assumption that growing up without a father inevitably leads a man to repeat the same pattern.

Seventy-one per cent identified a determination to parent differently as the principal way their upbringing had shaped their own fatherhood.

"I am determined to be present in a way he never was, but I sometimes feel like I am parenting blind, learning everything from scratch."

What struck me was how candid respondents were about the limits of that progress. They did not present becoming a father as a point at which the past was simply resolved. One man, aged forty-nine, described a need that had remained despite decades of adult life and achievement:

"Even at 49 years old, you want your dad to tell you he's proud... Even once in your life, you want that."

These accounts suggest something the international fieldwork could only indicate from the outside: becoming a father may be a particularly important developmental turning point for men who grew up without one. It can provide an opportunity to make conscious choices about the kind of father they want to become, while also bringing unresolved grief, fear and questions about identity back to the surface.

13.5 What these men believed would have helped

Two-thirds of respondents had received no formal support while growing up. Asked what they believed would have helped, their answers converged around a consistent group of needs: support to build confidence and self-worth, positive male mentors, practical life skills, a safe space in which to talk and a consistent adult relationship over time.

These closely resemble the principles around which Lads Need Dads has developed its own model. This does not, on its own, validate any particular programme. It does demonstrate convergence between what men looking

back on their childhoods believed they needed and the relational approaches encountered throughout the Fellowship.

Two former Lads Need Dads participants completed the survey, offering a limited but relevant point of comparison:

“It made a massive difference. It built my confidence and communication skills, and built trust.”

Two accounts cannot establish programme effectiveness, but they are consistent with what the wider group described as missing from their childhoods.

Asked what professionals should understand, respondents emphasised the importance of relationships and engagement. Their comments echoed what practitioners across South Africa, the United States and Australia had told me independently:

“Friendship and rapport will open more doors to meaningful work than qualifications and letters after your name ever could.”

Another respondent resisted an emotionally led, one-size-fits-all approach:

“Boys don’t need the same help as girls... Boys need fun, skills, practical action, role modelling.”

The point is not that boys are all the same, or that they do not need opportunities to talk about their emotions. It is that emotional work may need to be reached through relationships, shared activity and practical engagement rather than relying entirely on direct conversation.

Two individual accounts add greater depth to these findings. Thando’s story was gathered separately during the South African fieldwork. Ashley completed the survey and later spoke to me at greater length, allowing several of his responses to be explored beyond the limits of the questionnaire. These are presented as reflective case studies rather than as representative findings.

13.6 Thando: stability, forgiveness and future fatherhood



Thando Malepe's story, from South Africa, showed how father absence can reverberate across generations without determining a man's future.

He knew who his father was, but his father was not present in his life and had gone on to form another family. After years of deflected requests, a meeting was eventually arranged through Thando's now-deceased uncle. It lasted approximately an hour in a tavern and ended with promises of further contact that never materialised. His father later blocked his number.

Thando found the lack of honesty particularly difficult. He would have preferred his father to tell him directly that he did not want a relationship rather than make promises of further contact that were never kept. Over time, and alongside his growing involvement in mentoring, he made peace with what had happened. He described forgiveness not as forgetting or excusing his father's actions, but as releasing himself from bitterness.

Thando was raised primarily by his grandparents, a period he described as the most stable and grounding of his childhood. When they died, that stability was lost amid wider family difficulties, and he moved to an informal settlement with his mother and stepfather before attending university.

His story complicates any simple narrative. Father absence does not automatically determine poor outcomes, but stability has to come from somewhere. When it is missing, boys are left to find or construct it elsewhere, with varying degrees of success.

Now a father of two daughters, Thando spoke with resolve. He could not credibly speak to boys about responsibility, integrity or presence unless he practised those qualities at home. His credibility as a mentor was therefore inseparable from his conduct as a father. There was no dramatic language about breaking cycles, only the importance of showing up, being predictable and remaining present, particularly when it would be easier not to.

Thando also made me think differently about the men who become mentors. Some of those able to connect most deeply with boys have experienced absence, rejection or loss themselves. That experience does not automatically make someone an effective mentor, but when it has been reflected upon and processed, and is accompanied by appropriate training and support, it can bring particular empathy and credibility to the relationship.

13.7 Ashley: success without a blueprint

Ashley Mills is a Senior Executive Search and Leadership Advisor, originally from Leeds and now based in Switzerland, and the author of *Built Without a Blueprint*. He contacted me after coming across the work of Lads Need Dads, and our initial conversation developed into a much deeper discussion about his own experience of growing up without a father and how it had continued to shape his adult life.

Ashley grew up as the only child of a single mother, with his Jamaican father absent throughout his childhood. After receiving an assisted place at grammar school, he went on to build a highly successful international career and has written about his experiences in *Built Without a Blueprint*. His life illustrates an important point: the boy does not disappear; he becomes a man. Despite substantial and visible achievement, Ashley spoke candidly about the emotional work that came later, including therapy, questions about identity and the impact of becoming a father himself. He also spoke about how difficult the later breakdown of his own relationship was, having grown up without a father himself.

During our conversation, I used an analogy to describe what I had begun to see in some of the young men I had supported over time. I compared it to sieving stones from soil: the ground may appear clear at first, but when

the soil is passed through a sieve, more stones rise to the surface. In the same way, new issues can emerge as young men move into relationships, work and adulthood.

Ashley had completed the lived-experience survey before we spoke and described it as thorough, saying that it had really made him think. Our subsequent conversation allowed us to explore some of these issues in greater depth, particularly around becoming a father. This was also a theme that emerged from other respondents and became more significant than I had anticipated when the survey began.

Ashley's account, alongside those of other fathers in the survey, suggests that becoming a father may be a significant developmental turning point for men who grew up without one themselves. It can bring unresolved questions, grief, fear and issues of identity back to the surface, while also creating an opportunity for men to make conscious decisions about the fathers they want to become.

Ashley reflected that becoming a father had also been healing in some ways. As his own child grew, he found himself reconnecting with the child he had once been at different ages - the five-year-old, the ten-year-old and later the teenager. Earlier experiences and emotions could resurface at each stage, but he also described something profound in being able to give his own child the presence, reassurance and shared experiences he had once longed for. He was careful not to suggest that this would be every father's experience, but felt it added another dimension to understanding the relationship between father absence and later fatherhood.

This has opened up an important area for further exploration: how growing up without a consistent father figure shapes men when they become fathers themselves.

13.8 What listening to these men added

The survey and personal accounts provided something the international fieldwork alone could not. Visiting organisations abroad showed me how inconsistently systems notice boys growing up without a consistent father figure. Listening to adult men showed me what can happen when the boy who was not noticed grows up.

These accounts need to be interpreted cautiously. This was an exploratory, self-selecting survey of fifty-nine men, not a representative study, and it cannot establish that a particular intervention would have changed any individual life. Nevertheless, the consistency of what respondents described across seven countries and nearly four decades of age difference was striking. Experiences carried in silence during childhood continued to appear in accounts of education, work, relationships and, for many, their own fatherhood.

This takes the argument for early intervention beyond childhood outcomes. Growing up without a consistent father figure can be a developmental experience whose effects continue to surface in a man's confidence, relationships and parenting decades later.

The case for early intervention is therefore also about the adults these boys will become, the relationships they will build and the next generation of fathers now being shaped, largely unnoticed, in classrooms and homes today.

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CHAPTER 14

Cross-cutting findings: what the world is telling us about boys

Before travelling, I expected to find markedly different answers in each country. I had planned the Fellowship partly as an international comparison: what does South Africa do, what does the United States do, what does Australia do, and what might the UK learn from each?

Instead, I was struck by how often practitioners, researchers and policymakers working in very different settings described similar underlying principles. I heard them in a township in South Africa, a mentoring circle in California, a fatherhood symposium in Melbourne and policy discussions in Westminster. The language, funding models and national histories differed, as did the circumstances that led to fathers being absent or inconsistently involved. Yet many of the developmental needs being described were remarkably similar.

Across the international fieldwork, UK interviews, surveys and wider research undertaken for this Fellowship, several themes emerged with enough consistency to shape my conclusions. They do not amount to definitive or settled evidence, but it was striking to see similar themes emerge across research, policy, frontline practice and lived experience.

Four in particular stood out:

1. Relationships create the conditions for change. Programmes provide structure, but it is the quality and consistency of relationships that matter most.
2. Timing matters. The transition from primary to secondary school, particularly around the ages of ten and eleven, repeatedly emerged as an important opportunity to intervene before difficulties become more deeply established.
3. Distress is not always verbalised. Many boys communicate distress through behaviour, withdrawal or emotional shutdown rather than direct disclosure. Systems that rely on children verbalising their need may therefore fail to recognise them until difficulties have escalated.
4. Today's boys are tomorrow's fathers. If experiences connected to father absence can continue to shape adult relationships and parenting, an important opportunity to support the next generation of fathers may begin in boyhood.

The remainder of this chapter explores these four themes alongside the wider conditions that affect whether systems can act on them: how father absence is understood and recorded, the fragmentation between research, policy and practice, the importance of social fathering, and the need to build sustained relational pathways from childhood into adulthood.

14.1 Relationships are the mechanism, not the programme

During my international fieldwork, very different programmes repeatedly placed relationships at the heart of their work. Some interventions were brief and highly structured; others were designed to continue for months or years. I did not find evidence for a single ideal programme length. What mattered was whether the design matched the need it was intended to address.

Shorter interventions can create meaningful opportunities for reflection, emotional learning and connection. Longer-term mentoring serves a different purpose. Where a boy has experienced prolonged father absence, rejection, bereavement or instability, the consistency of the relationship may itself be part of the intervention.

The lesson is therefore not that longer is always better, but that relational need requires a relational response. Structure, safeguarding, training and purposeful activity create the framework, but trust develops through the quality and consistency of what happens within it.

14.2 Timing matters: the transition into secondary school

The transition from primary to secondary school, particularly around the ages of ten and eleven, emerged across otherwise unconnected settings as an important opportunity for intervention. South African mentors spoke about reaching boys before gang identity and loyalty become established. Australian practitioners emphasised intervening before peer pressures become more difficult to resist. In the UK, difficulties that may have been manageable or less visible in primary school can become more pronounced as boys move into secondary education.

This does not mean that older boys cannot be helped, or that the same age is right for every child. It suggests that late primary school and the beginning of secondary education offer an important opportunity to provide support before difficulties become more deeply embedded and, for some boys, before they become less receptive to adult involvement.

There are developmental reasons why this period may matter. Puberty and adolescence involve substantial neurological, psychological and social change, including heightened sensitivity to relationships, peers and the wider social environment (Goddings et al., 2019; Choudhury, Charman, & Blakemore, 2008). More recent research describes adolescence as a period of heightened plasticity, creating important opportunities for learning and adaptation (Baker, Galván, & Fuligni, 2025).

This does not diminish the importance of the early years. Rather, it suggests that adolescence provides another important period of developmental opportunity, when relationships, belonging and structured experiences may have particular influence.

Dr Anna Machin's reflections helped me consider this specifically in relation to boys. She identified approximately ten to thirteen as an important developmental period in which supportive relationships and experiences may have particular value, while emphasising that the capacity for change continues throughout adolescence and beyond.

This finding also has practical implications for the developing Lads Need Dads pathway: Reading Mentors in Year 6, LadPods in Year 7 and Becoming in Year 8. Each respond to a different stage of development, beginning around the transition to secondary school and continuing as boys encounter the changing expectations, relationships and pressures of adolescence.

The principle is not that there is a narrow window after which intervention is too late. It is that we should not wait for difficulties to become entrenched, or for a boy to reach crisis, before offering support.

14.3 Boys often communicate distress through behaviour

Practitioners in each country I visited described anger, withdrawal, risk-taking and emotional shutdown as possible expressions of distress rather than simply behavioural problems. Yet services that depend heavily on children explaining what is wrong may fail to recognise boys who cannot, or will not, express their need directly.

Research led by Associate Professor Zac Seidler provides a relevant, although primarily adult, comparison. His systematic review found that conformity to traditional masculine norms can influence how men experience depression and whether, when and how they seek help (Seidler et al., 2016). Although this evidence should not be applied directly to all boys, it helps make sense of something I encountered through both the Fellowship and

frontline practice: distress may be present long before a boy is able or willing to describe it in the language services expect.

Safeguarding guidance rightly requires professionals to identify harmful behaviour and protect those affected by it. But safeguarding and understanding should not be treated as alternatives. A response can address harmful behaviour while also asking what developmental, relational or traumatic experiences may sit beneath it.

Where risk management becomes the dominant lens, it can produce what I have come to call the safeguarding reflex: a tendency to monitor and contain a boy's behaviour without fully exploring what it may be communicating. A boy who lashes out following another disappointment involving an inconsistent father may be described as volatile without anyone asking whether he is also grieving. A teenager who withdraws after the loss of an important relationship may be labelled non-engaging without anyone recognising that he is heartbroken.

This is not about a lack of compassion among professionals. Systems are often under pressure to respond quickly to visible risk, without the time, information or framework needed to understand the relational history beneath it.

I see what can happen when boys are given that time through Lads Need Dads. Boys may arrive with hardened edges and defensive humour, their feelings concealed beneath bravado. With consistent relationships and permission to be vulnerable, those defences can begin to soften. I have watched boys who once punched walls build garden sheds, channelling the same energy into something constructive. I have watched boys who barely spoke in class stand in front of a group and lead a check-in. I have watched mothers who once feared their sons' anger cry with pride at their graduation.

These changes are difficult to capture through measures concerned only with whether an immediate risk or behaviour has reduced. Yet they matter because they show a boy developing different ways to manage emotion, relate to others and see himself.

The argument is not that safeguarding should be weakened or harmful behaviour excused. It is that protection and understanding need to operate together. Protecting women and girls and responding compassionately to boys are not competing priorities. Training teachers, social workers and health practitioners to look beyond presenting behaviour, and to consider disrupted or absent father relationships where relevant, could help identify need earlier rather than waiting until distress becomes more serious harm.

14.4 Father absence is often recorded, but rarely explored

Across the Fellowship, father absence was often recorded as part of a child's family circumstances but less often explored as a relational experience in its own right.

The reasons for absence varied considerably, including bereavement, separation, imprisonment, estrangement, migration, inconsistent involvement and circumstances in which contact would have been unsafe. Boys did not all respond in the same way. For some, however, the absence of a father involved grief, rejection, confusion or unanswered questions that were not necessarily recognised or supported.

Practitioners described few routine opportunities for boys to explore what their father's absence meant to them or how they had made sense of it. A record that says "father absent" tells us very little about the boy's experience. It does not tell us whether he is grieving, angry, relieved, confused, rejected, indifferent, hoping for contact or carrying questions he has never felt able to ask.

Father absence should not automatically be treated as evidence that a boy is struggling, but neither should it remain simply a piece of family information. The important question is not only whether a father is present or absent, but what that relationship, or its absence, means to this particular boy, and whether he needs support to make sense of it.

14.5 Fragmentation: everyone holds a piece of the puzzle

Chapter 11 showed how responsibility for boys can become divided across different systems. Fatherhood, mentoring, education, family policy, mental health and youth justice may each hold part of the picture, but no single area has clear responsibility for boys growing up without a consistent father figure.

The distinction between fatherhood work and work with boys growing up without a consistent father figure is particularly important. Many organisations I encountered support men to become more engaged fathers through parenting programmes, father-child relationships, co-parenting or work with separated and imprisoned fathers. That work asks an important question: how can we help fathers remain positively involved in their children's lives?

Lads Need Dads begins with a different question: what support does a boy need when a consistent father relationship is not available?

These are connected but distinct areas of prevention. Wherever possible and safe, supporting fathers to remain engaged may prevent relational loss. But there will always be boys whose fathers have died, are imprisoned, cannot be located, remain inconsistently involved, choose not to have a relationship, or where contact would not be safe. Those boys need a response too.

I found relatively few organisations specifically focused on the longer-term developmental experience of these boys. More commonly, parts of the need were addressed through broader work in mentoring, education, violence prevention, mental health or father engagement. The issue is not an absence of good work, but that the pieces sit in different places.

My discussion with Káti Gapailard, CEO of Australia's The Fathering Project, helped clarify how these approaches can complement one another. The Fathering Project primarily works to strengthen the involvement of fathers and father figures in children's lives through schools and communities. Lads Need Dads works with boys for whom that consistent father relationship is absent or unavailable.

Neither approach replaces the other. One seeks to strengthen or preserve the father relationship; the other responds when that relationship cannot provide what the boy needs.

The Fellowship has changed how I think about where Lads Need Dads sits. Rather than trying to locate the organisation neatly within an existing sector, I see a greater need to connect the sectors that already encounter these boys. Schools, Family Hubs, youth justice, alternative provision, public health, mentoring and fatherhood organisations, youth mental health services and researchers all hold different pieces of the picture. The opportunity is to bring those pieces together so that responsibility for understanding and supporting the whole boy does not disappear between them.

Supporting fathers and supporting boys without fathers are not the same intervention, but they belong in the same preventive landscape.

14.6 The data we collect – and the data we do not

Early identification depends partly on what systems are designed to notice. Schools in England routinely record attendance, attainment, suspensions, exclusions, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, eligibility for free school meals and safeguarding concerns. These indicators are important and can reveal a great deal about a child's education and circumstances. Yet we know far less about whether a child has access to a consistent and supportive father or father figure, and what that relationship means to him.

This question predates the Fellowship. In 2021–22, Lads Need Dads, working with Professor Ben Hine of the University of West London, surveyed 1,411 teaching, pastoral and leadership staff across primary, secondary and special-school settings about their experiences of boys with absent fathers or limited access to positive male role

models (Shaljean & Hine, 2022). Respondents reported perceived links with behaviour, attainment, attendance and exclusion, with concerns generally more pronounced in secondary and special-school settings.

One of the recommendations arising from that research was a flagging system that would enable schools to identify boys with absent fathers and consider whether additional support might be needed. The Fellowship has made me think more carefully about what that identification should involve. A simple ‘father absent’ marker would not be enough.

A father may be deceased, estranged, imprisoned, inconsistently involved or unsafe. He may live elsewhere but remain closely involved in his child’s life. A boy may live with his biological father but experience little emotional connection with him, while another may have no relationship with his biological father but have a dependable stepfather, grandfather, uncle or other social father.

The important information is therefore not simply whether a biological father lives in the household. It is whether the boy has access to a consistent and supportive father or father figure, the nature of that relationship and, crucially, what it means to the boy himself.

The same gap is visible within the wider educational evidence base. Socioeconomic disadvantage, commonly measured through eligibility for free school meals, is rightly recognised as a major influence on attainment. Boys are also overrepresented in exclusions and other indicators of educational disengagement. However, the possible relationship between these outcomes and absent, inconsistent or harmful father relationships remains comparatively underexplored.

Professor Becky Francis and Professor Christine Skelton have argued that boys are frequently understood through narratives about behaviour and attainment rather than through their wider developmental circumstances (Francis & Skelton, 2005). Research by Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, drawing on four national surveys in the United States, found that children who grew up apart from a parent, most commonly their father, experienced poorer average outcomes in areas including school completion and employment (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

This does not establish that father absence causes educational underachievement, nor that it operates independently of poverty, family conflict, trauma or other forms of disadvantage. These circumstances frequently overlap. It does suggest that family relationships may form part of the wider context through which educational outcomes should be understood.

Youth justice provides a particularly clear example of what we know and what remains unknown. A 2025 analysis by the Children’s Commissioner found that 77 per cent of children in youth custody had been persistently or severely absent during their most recent year in a state-funded school, while almost a quarter had previously been permanently excluded. These figures tell us a great deal about educational disengagement. They tell us nothing about the father relationships of those children because equivalent contemporary data is not routinely available.

Earlier research examined family circumstances more directly. A Prison Reform Trust study of 200 children sentenced to custody during the final six months of 2008 found that 76 per cent had experienced an “absent father”, defined as having lived apart from their father for a significant period of childhood for reasons other than bereavement (Jacobson et al., 2010). The study was small and cannot be treated as representative of every child in custody, but it remains one of the few attempts to measure this factor directly.

I have found no recent equivalent analysis establishing how many children in custody currently lack a consistent father relationship. That limits what can responsibly be concluded, but it also leaves an important gap. We have increasingly detailed information about what happens once a child is absent from school, excluded or enters the justice system, but much less about the relationships surrounding him before those outcomes emerge.

Across mentoring, education, family support, mental health and youth justice, I encountered services supporting children experiencing instability and reduced access to dependable adults. I did not encounter a system that

routinely identified whether a child had access to a consistent father or father figure and, importantly, what that relationship meant to him.

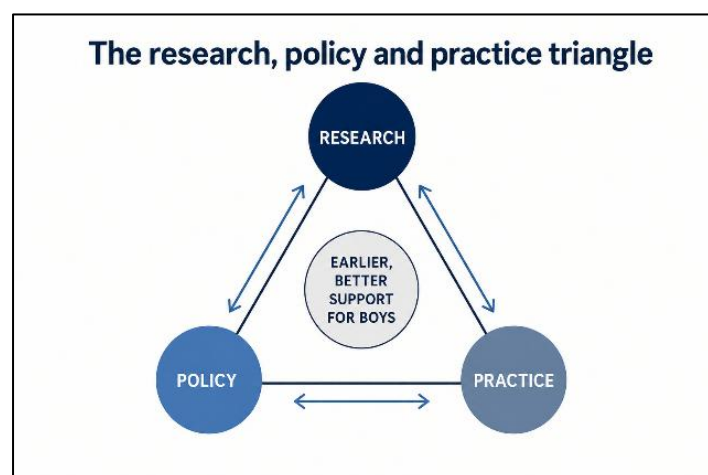
The argument is not that father absence alone explains poor outcomes. Human lives are far too complex for any one factor to do so. Nor is this simply an argument for adding another box to a form. Recording that a father is ‘absent’ without understanding the nature of that absence would tell us very little. Identification should create an opportunity for a sensitive conversation, not an assumption that every boy without a resident father has a problem.

The research Lads Need Dads conducted before the Fellowship pointed towards the need for earlier identification. The Fellowship has added an important qualification to that thinking: we need to identify relational need, not simply family structure.

Identification, however, is only useful if there is something schools can do with that information. This was part of the thinking behind the development of LadPods. Rather than relying solely on referral to an external service, LadPods was designed to give schools a structured intervention they could deliver within their own setting, while equipping staff who would continue to see and support those boys in everyday school life. The aim was not simply to identify boys earlier, but to strengthen the support around them through adults who would remain part of their school lives after the intervention had ended.

We routinely measure what has happened to a child’s attendance, attainment and behaviour. We know far less about who is, or is not, present in his relational world. Until we understand that more consistently, we risk recognising some forms of vulnerability only after their consequences have become visible.

14.7 The research, policy and practice triangle



Research, policy and frontline practice each provide a different kind of knowledge, but they do not always connect well enough. Researchers can identify patterns and test evidence. Policymakers shape systems and priorities. Frontline practitioners see how those systems work in the lives of children and families.

My conversations with Nick Isles and Dr Joshua Fullard helped sharpen this distinction. Nick described frontline practice as a kind of “big experiment”, with organisations innovating, learning through delivery and wrestling with issues in real time. He argued that policymakers cannot shape what comes next effectively without listening to the people doing the work now.

Joshua added another perspective. Drawing on his experience of education research and engagement with government, he explained that policy rarely changes because of a single study. Evidence tends to build over time, and several consistent pieces of research may be needed before established thinking begins to shift.

Neither point diminishes the importance of rigorous research. It shows why different forms of knowledge need to be connected. Practice can identify questions that research has not yet asked. Research can test whether patterns seen in practice hold more widely. Lived experience can show what those patterns mean in people’s lives. Policy can then draw on all three when deciding what should change.

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A response I received from Mike Kelly, an Australian social worker with more than forty years' experience across youth justice, youth homelessness and child protection, brought the practitioner perspective into particularly sharp focus. Reflecting on his career, he wrote:

"During my social work career of over 40 years developing and managing programs in the Victorian youth justice, youth homelessness, and child protection systems, I never came across a young person with an engaged and positive relationship with a father."

Kelly was clear that this was his professional observation rather than the finding of a systematic study. His concern was that, despite considerable progress in Australian fatherhood work, father absence among disadvantaged adolescents remained largely absent from what he described as the "research, policy, and program agenda."

His account shows why practitioner knowledge matters. It cannot establish prevalence or causation, but it can identify questions that formal research and data systems may not yet be asking. Where experienced practitioners consistently notice something that is not being captured elsewhere, that observation warrants further investigation.

This is particularly relevant to boys growing up without a consistent father figure because knowledge about their lives currently sits in different places. Academic research examines family structure, child development, education and fatherhood. Schools and public services collect data about behaviour, attendance, attainment and safeguarding. Frontline organisations accumulate knowledge through delivery, while boys, mothers and adult men hold lived experience that may never enter research or policy.

The challenge is not simply to produce more evidence. It is to connect what is already being learned, identify what we still do not know, and create better routes for research, practice, lived experience and policy to inform one another.

14.7a A national early identification system



This Fellowship strengthened my belief that England should develop a more consistent way for schools and children's services to understand whether a child has access to a safe, supportive and dependable father or father figure. Although this proposal is my own, what I encountered across South Africa, the United States, Australia and the UK reinforced the importance of recognising relational need early, rather than waiting until difficulties become visible through behaviour, attendance, exclusion or crisis.

Schools already collect extensive information about pupils' educational, social and economic circumstances, including eligibility for free school meals, special educational needs, attendance, attainment and safeguarding concerns. Yet they rarely ask whether a child has access to a consistent father or father figure, or what that relationship is actually like. Potentially important information about a boy's relational world may therefore be missing when professionals are trying to understand his circumstances or decide what support might help.

I want to be clear about the purpose of collecting this information. It should not be used to label children, predict offending, lower expectations or assume that every boy growing up without a consistent father figure will experience difficulties. Many will thrive, supported by their mothers, wider families and communities. Equally, having a father present does not necessarily mean that the relationship is safe, supportive or emotionally available. The relevant question is not simply whether a father is recorded on a form, but what relationship the child actually experiences.

Any approach would therefore need to recognise the very different circumstances that can sit behind father absence or inconsistency. A father may have died, be separated from the family, imprisoned, estranged or intermittently involved. In some families contact may be unsafe. In others, a father may live in the home but be

emotionally unavailable. A child may also have a stepfather, grandfather, uncle or another social father who already provides a dependable male relationship. Understanding those differences is far more useful than simply recording family structure.

The information would need to be gathered sensitively, with families understanding why the question was being asked, how the information would be used and who would have access to it. It should form part of a wider understanding of the child rather than become another stand-alone risk marker. Identifying that a father is absent should not automatically lead to a referral. It should create an opportunity to ask what that absence or relationship means to the child, what support already exists around him and whether he or his family would welcome anything further.

The survey of education professionals conducted by Lads Need Dads before the Fellowship, discussed in Section 14.6, had already captured what teachers, pastoral staff and school leaders were seeing in their day-to-day work with boys growing up without a consistent father figure. They reported concerns across behaviour, attainment, attendance, exclusion and mental health. The survey did not establish that father absence caused those difficulties, but it showed that professionals working directly with boys were already observing patterns that warranted greater attention.

The challenge, therefore, is not simply getting schools to notice these boys. Many already do. The challenge is what happens next. If a school recognises that a boy is struggling and that the absence, loss or inconsistency of a father relationship may be relevant to his experience, what can it actually offer him?

That question has also shaped the development of Lads Need Dads' work. LadPods was created to give schools a structured intervention they could use within their own setting, involving and equipping staff who would continue to see those boys throughout everyday school life. It was an attempt to move beyond identification alone and strengthen the relationships and capacity already surrounding the boy. Not every child will need that level or type of intervention, but identification has little preventive value unless there are appropriate responses available when a need is found.

The Fellowship has also changed my thinking about what should be identified. Earlier in my work, I was more inclined to think in terms of identifying boys with an 'absent father'. I now believe that is too crude. A simple present-or-absent marker cannot capture bereavement, inconsistent contact, emotional unavailability, unsafe relationships or the presence of a significant social father. What needs to be identified is relational need, not simply family structure.

One question I would now like to see tested is whether anonymised information about access to a consistent father or father figure would reveal anything useful when considered alongside existing indicators such as persistent absence, exclusion, deprivation and youth violence. This is a hypothesis arising from the Fellowship, not a conclusion it can establish. A carefully designed pilot across a small number of local authorities could test whether collecting this information adds anything useful to existing measures of vulnerability, whether children and families consider the questions appropriate, and whether it helps services respond earlier.

This would not require a national register of fatherless boys or the addition of a crude 'father absent' box to school records. It would mean testing whether a carefully designed relational question adds something to the information professionals already use to understand a child. It could also help explore how father relationships interact with poverty, trauma, family conflict and educational disadvantage, as well as the protective influence of mothers, extended families and other trusted adults.

Where a need was identified, the response should be proportionate to the individual child. Some boys may require no additional intervention. Some may benefit from a trusted adult, group work, emotional-literacy or bereavement support. Others may need family support, mentoring or sustained specialist relational provision. The purpose is not to create another pathway into services unnecessarily, but to ensure that professionals have the opportunity to ask an important question and somewhere useful to go when the answer indicates that support may be needed.

The proposal is therefore not to identify father absence as a risk category. It is to test whether understanding a boy's relational world more fully can help schools and children's services recognise unmet need earlier and respond appropriately. We already collect considerable information once difficulties appear through attendance, attainment, behaviour, safeguarding or contact with other services. Understanding the relationships surrounding the child may help us see part of the picture sooner.

The aim is prevention rather than prediction: to notice when an important relationship may be missing, disrupted or unsafe, understand what that means to the individual child, and ensure that recognition can lead to meaningful support before difficulties have to become more deeply established.

14.7b Asking why: understanding the story behind father absence

For many years, one question has sat at the centre of my practice at Lads Need Dads: why is this father absent? I ask it when speaking with mothers and carers at referral, when trying to understand what support a boy may need and when training teachers, mentors and other professionals. The Fellowship did not introduce this question to me, but it reinforced how important it is.

The purpose is not to judge either parent or to assume that every father should be involved. It is to understand the circumstances before deciding what, if anything, a child or family needs. Bereavement, imprisonment, separation, estrangement, unsafe contact and inconsistent involvement can create very different experiences for a boy. So too can having a father who is physically present but emotionally unavailable. Using one description for all these circumstances can obscure differences that matter.

Asking why can also prevent professionals from filling gaps in information with assumptions. It may reveal whether a father could be safely engaged, whether another significant man is already providing support, or whether a boy is dealing with grief, rejection, uncertainty, divided loyalties or repeated disappointment. Sometimes it can help a boy understand something more fundamental: that an adult's absence or inability to remain involved was not necessarily caused by him.

There is another reason this matters. The account available to a child or professional may come primarily from one parent and may not contain the whole story. Family breakdown can involve conflict, abuse, infidelity, addiction, mental ill health, prevented contact, new relationships and circumstances that adults find painful or difficult to explain. In some cases, the circumstances surrounding conception or the parents' relationship may never have been fully discussed with the child. Mothers and fathers can both provide partial accounts, whether through hurt, shame, fear, anger, self-protection or simply because they understand events differently.

This does not mean professionals should attempt to determine which parent is "right" or treat one account with automatic suspicion. Nor should seeking a fuller picture ever override safeguarding. It means recognising that family relationships can be complicated and resisting the temptation to turn incomplete information into a settled explanation. The story a boy comes to believe about why his father is absent can become part of how he understands himself, particularly if he concludes that he was unwanted, unimportant or somehow responsible.

This is why the question I have used throughout my practice and training remains so important:

Who is missing from this child's story, and why?

The question is deliberately broader than father absence. It does not presume who should be present, that every missing relationship can or should be restored, or that absence automatically creates a problem. It simply creates the opportunity to understand what has happened and what it means to that particular child.

The early-identification approach proposed in the preceding section therefore depends on more than identifying family structure. Identification should open a conversation, not close one. The important question is not simply whether a father is absent, but why, how the boy understands that absence, what relationships he already has around him and whether there is anything he needs that is currently missing.

That is the distinction I believe services need to make. Before deciding what father absence means, we need to understand the story behind it.

14.7c The wider civil-society conversation

Alongside the government developments described in Chapter 12, a wider civil-society conversation about boys and young men has been gathering momentum. Think tanks, charities, researchers, educationalists, youth organisations and figures from sport and business are increasingly drawing attention to issues that have often been considered separately.

The Centre for Social Justice has contributed significantly through its Lost Boys programme of work: *Lost Boys: State of the Nation*, published in March 2025; *Lost Boys: Boyhood*, published in December 2025; *Lost Boys: Mentors and Role Models*, published in April 2026; and *Lost Boys: From Boy to Man*, published in July 2026 (Centre for Social Justice, 2025a, 2025b, 2026a, 2026b).

Taken together, the reports move from documenting where boys and young men are falling behind towards considering what might help, including stronger family relationships, positive male role models, mentoring, youth provision, outdoor activity and longer-term support.

Lads Need Dads contributed practice evidence to three of the four reports: *State of the Nation*, *Boyhood* and *From Boy to Man*. The latter two also featured Reading Mentors and LadPods as examples of structured early intervention and relationship-based support. This is relevant to the Fellowship because it demonstrates that evidence and learning from frontline organisations are beginning to find their way into national policy discussion. The reports are also notable for acknowledging father absence and limited access to positive male role models among the circumstances affecting some boys.

Another development has been the Lost Boys Task Force, formed by Football Beyond Borders and chaired by Paul Barber, Chief Executive of Brighton & Hove Albion Football Club. Its Trusted Adult Guarantee campaign proposes training 10,000 trusted adults across schools and football by 2029, with an initial focus on boys growing up in poverty.

The Government's National Youth Strategy, published in December 2025, committed to helping 500,000 more young people access a trusted adult outside their home over the following decade, alongside £15 million over three years to recruit, train and retain youth workers, volunteers and other trusted adults (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025). While this is not the same as the Task Force proposal, it reflects a growing recognition of the importance of dependable adult relationships in young people's lives.

During the closing stages of this Fellowship, the Boys' Education Commission was also established by the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys. Chaired by former headteacher and political adviser Peter Hyman, it is examining why boys are falling behind at different stages of education and what changes might help them become capable, confident, kind and purposeful young men. Its remit extends beyond attainment to curriculum, school culture, relationships, identity, non-formal education and preparation for adulthood.

The Commission has invited evidence from educators, practitioners, parents, young people, charities and researchers. Lads Need Dads has been invited to contribute written and oral evidence, although this is expected to take place after submission of this report. I therefore include the Commission not for conclusions it has yet to reach, but as another indication of how quickly the national conversation has developed during the course of the Fellowship.

These developments are encouraging, but they remain distinct initiatives approaching boys through different starting points, including education, poverty, mentoring, social isolation and youth provision. The significance is not that a coherent national response has already emerged, but that there is now considerably more space in which one could be built.

For this Fellowship, that creates an important opening. Boys growing up without a consistent father figure need not become a separate policy silo, but their experiences should not disappear within broader categories of disadvantage either. As national attention to boys grows, relational need, father absence and access to sustained supportive relationships should form part of that developing conversation.

14.8 Today's boys are tomorrow's fathers

One conviction has shaped my work and the development of Lads Need Dads from the beginning: today's boys are tomorrow's fathers. Boys growing up without a consistent father figure are not only children who may need support now. They are also the potential fathers, partners and community members of the next generation. The Fellowship did not introduce that understanding to me, but it strengthened it by showing how often the connection between boyhood and later fatherhood emerged across different countries, disciplines and areas of practice.

Professor Paul Ramchandani's research helps establish why this matters developmentally. His longitudinal study found that the quality of early father–infant interaction was associated with children's later emotional and behavioural outcomes, with disengaged or remote interaction predicting a greater likelihood of externalising behaviour in early childhood (Ramchandani et al., 2013). This should not be interpreted as evidence that father absence alone causes later difficulties, but it demonstrates that the quality of a father's relationship with his child can have measurable developmental significance.

Dr Anna Machin's work similarly describes fathers and father figures as developmental guides who combine nurture with appropriate challenge. In our conversation, she explained that good fathering, whether provided by a biological or social father, can support resilience, emotional regulation, empathy, social skills and the confidence to move into the world beyond the family. Where no co-resident father is present, she suggested that a network of consistent social fathers may be particularly valuable.

Despite this evidence, relatively little policy or early intervention considers what happens when boys grow up without access to these relationships, or how their experiences of being fathered may influence the men and fathers they later become. Australia showed me how far a country can progress in recognising fathers as a population worthy of research, policy attention and clinical engagement. Yet even there, the conversation had rarely moved one stage further upstream, towards the boy who has never experienced consistent fathering, but who may one day become a father himself.

Longitudinal evidence suggests that this deserves greater attention. A twenty-year study of socioeconomically disadvantaged families found that children who grew up without a resident father were more likely to experience father absence within the next generation. The pattern remained after several socioeconomic and family factors were considered, although the pathways included educational disadvantage, neighbourhood risk, aggression and substance misuse (Pougnnet et al., 2012). These findings do not suggest that intergenerational repetition is inevitable. They indicate that father absence can form part of a wider developmental pathway that may continue across generations, alongside other social and family circumstances.

The responses to my survey of adult men reinforced both the difficulty and the possibility of changing that pattern. Among respondents who had become fathers or stepfathers, 71 per cent described being determined to remain present, parent differently or provide what they themselves had lacked. Many had thought deeply about the kind of father they wanted to become. Their accounts also showed that this was not always an easy or automatic transition. Some described the importance of supportive partners, counselling, trusted role models or considerable personal reflection in helping them parent differently.

There has also been a gradual widening of the wider conversation. Boys have often become visible through behaviour, violence, disengagement or risk; more recently, attention has expanded towards boys' wellbeing, men's health and the importance of fathers and fatherhood. What remains much less developed is the connection between these areas: the boy growing up without consistent fathering may himself become a father in the future.

I put this proposition directly to Dr Anna Machin, asking whether the evidence supported moving beyond helping boys cope with father absence towards preparing today's boys to become tomorrow's involved fathers. Her answer was clear: "Absolutely." She described preparing boys for fatherhood as "an excellent piece of work" and emphasised that wider cultural and policy change is also needed so that fathers are recognised as important rather than dispensable. She also observed that fathers who had grown up without positive fathering often put considerable thought into what they wanted to repeat, reject or change in their own parenting.

One practical outcome of the Fellowship has been the development of Becoming, the next school-based programme from Lads Need Dads. Initially designed for boys in Year 8, the idea developed further during the Australian leg of the Fellowship as I became increasingly aware of the gap between supporting boys through adolescence and preparing them for the relationships and responsibilities of adulthood. I do not set out its full design here because it is still being developed and tested, but its purpose is broader than future fatherhood alone. It is intended to help boys think about identity, relationships, responsibility and the men they want to become, including, for those who later have children, the fathers they may one day be.

This is not to assume that every boy will become a father, or to suggest that fatherhood determines his value. It is to recognise that a man's approach to fatherhood can be shaped by what he received, witnessed, lost or never experienced as a boy. Preparation for future fatherhood therefore need not begin only when a baby is born. For some boys, there is value in beginning that thinking much earlier.

Supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure is therefore not only an intervention in the present. It is also an investment in the relationships, families and fathers of the next generation.

14.9 The father wound: support not replacement

A further theme, strengthened by the men's lived-experience survey and conversations throughout this Fellowship, is the need to distinguish between support and replacement. Positive male role models can provide steadiness, guidance, affirmation, practical knowledge and a constructive example of manhood. For boys without a consistent father figure, those relationships may be particularly valuable. But even an exceptional mentor does not erase the experience of a father who was absent, inconsistent, harmful or lost.

The term father wound is sometimes used to describe the emotional impact associated with a difficult, disrupted or absent father relationship. I do not use it here as a clinical diagnosis, or to suggest that every boy growing up without a consistent father figure will experience lasting harm. It provides a useful description, however, for some of what men in the lived-experience survey described: unresolved grief, rejection, anger, confusion and longing that had continued beyond childhood. Some still wanted their father's pride or approval in adulthood. Others described how becoming fathers themselves brought earlier experiences and unanswered questions back to the surface.

This matters because mentoring and positive male role models are sometimes discussed as though the presence of another good man fills the space left by an absent father. The reality is more complicated. A mentor can offer a boy a dependable relationship, broaden his experience of men and manhood, help him develop confidence and belonging, and give him someone with whom difficult experiences can safely be explored. What that relationship cannot do is change what happened.

For some boys, therefore, the work is not simply about adding a positive male role model. It is also about having an opportunity to understand the relationship that was missing or disrupted: what happened, what they believe about it, how they have interpreted it and whether they have come to see themselves as somehow responsible. A boy may need help to separate the choices or circumstances of the adults around him from his own sense of worth.

This distinction matters for policy as well as practice. If father absence is understood only as a shortage of male role models, the response can become simply finding a positive man and placing him alongside the boy. That

relationship may be enormously valuable, but it does not necessarily address grief, rejection, uncertainty or repeated disappointment connected to the original father relationship.

The adult men who contributed to this Fellowship showed why that distinction matters. Their accounts suggested that questions originating in childhood can continue into adult relationships and, for some, re-emerge particularly strongly when they become fathers themselves. They also demonstrated that those experiences do not have to determine what happens next.

Positive male role models cannot rewrite a boy's past or replace the father he did not have. What they can do is help him understand his experience, widen his sense of what is possible and ensure that he does not have to make sense of it alone.

14.9a Social fathering: naming what already works

The previous section makes the case that positive male role models cannot replace a boy's father or remove the impact of his absence. But that does not mean fathering can only ever come from a biological father. During my international visits, I met boys who had little or no relationship with their biological father but were being supported by male mentors who played important and sometimes long-standing roles in their lives. More widely, conversations throughout the Fellowship highlighted the part that grandfathers, uncles, teachers, coaches, faith leaders and other trusted men can also play in boys' lives. In some programmes, older boys and young men also returned to support those coming behind them. One respondent to the men's lived-experience survey described different men stepping into his life at different stages as he grew up.

Recognising these relationships does not minimise what a boy may have lost or never had with his own father. It does, however, give us a better way of thinking about what can be put around a boy when that relationship is not available. Rather than assuming that one male role model can somehow replace a father, we should be looking at the range of safe and consistent men already in a boy's life, and where those relationships could be strengthened.

My conversation with Dr Anna Machin helped me think more carefully about what we mean by a social father. She explained that it is not simply any trusted man who spends time with a child. The quality of the relationship matters. A social father can provide warmth, empathy, consistency and sensitive care, but also appropriate challenge. He can encourage a child through setbacks, allow him to take manageable risks and help prepare him for greater independence.

Machin described fathers and father figures as helping children move out into the wider world. The combination of care and challenge can contribute to confidence, resilience, emotional regulation, empathy and social skills. That distinction matters. Simply putting more men around boys is not enough. What matters is what those men bring to the relationship, how consistently they show up and whether the relationship is safe and supportive.

She also emphasised that children develop through multiple attachments. This is particularly relevant for boys who do not have a co-resident father or another man consistently fulfilling that role. One mentor may make an enormous difference, but he cannot be expected to meet every need. Different men may bring different things at different stages of a boy's life.

This is one reason I have increasingly used the phrase "boys growing up without a consistent father figure" throughout this report rather than relying on the term father absence. A father may live elsewhere but remain closely involved in his son's life. Another may live in the same home but be emotionally unavailable. Fathers may also be absent because of bereavement, imprisonment, estrangement, addiction, migration, family breakdown or circumstances in which contact would not be safe. Simply recording a father as present or absent tells us very little about the relationship the boy actually experiences.

My conversation with Nick Isles added another dimension to this. We discussed whether one trusted adult was enough, and he strongly agreed with the importance of building a wider network around boys. Relationships with adults and peers through sport, youth activities and community organisations can give boys connections beyond

any single mentor or programme. Nick described this as building “social network capital”: giving young people the relationships and connections that eventually help them find their own place within wider communities.

That is close to what we have tried to do at Lads Need Dads. We have never assumed that our organisation should become a boy’s entire support system. As boys progress, we encourage them to build connections beyond us through school, sport, cadets, volunteering, community activities and other organisations. The aim is that, over time, they have more people and places they can turn to and are less dependent on any one relationship or service.

For me, this is where social fathering becomes particularly useful. It is not about finding a replacement dad. It is about recognising that other men can play meaningful fathering roles in a boy’s life, and that several good relationships may be stronger and more sustainable than expecting one mentor to carry everything.

14.10 The transition into adulthood requires different forms of support

Growing up without a consistent father figure does not stop having an impact when a boy turns eighteen. Much of the support available to boys understandably focuses on school, behaviour, emotional wellbeing and keeping them engaged during adolescence. But becoming a young adult brings a different set of pressures.

This became clearer to me through the Fellowship and through the young men we have supported at Lads Need Dads. Leaving school or college, finding work, managing money, living independently, forming relationships and working out what you want to do with your life all require skills and confidence that young people develop at different rates. Having someone to turn to when things go wrong still matters.

For young men who have experienced bereavement, care, family instability or inconsistent adult support, this transition can be particularly difficult. School may have provided routine and familiar adults for years. A mentoring programme may also have provided structure, relationships and somewhere to belong. Those things can disappear quite quickly as a young person moves into adulthood, even though his need for guidance has not necessarily disappeared with them.

I have seen this with boys who came to Lads Need Dads when they were much younger and are now moving into work and adult life. The conversations change. At thirteen, we might have been helping a boy understand his emotions, manage conflict or build his confidence. At eighteen or twenty, he may want help finding a job, understanding a tenancy, managing money, dealing with a relationship, learning to drive or simply working out what comes next. He does not need the same programme he needed at thirteen, but he may still value people around him who know him well enough to offer guidance when he asks for it.

This is one reason we have not always ended support at an arbitrary age or when a particular programme finishes. At the same time, the aim is not for young men to remain dependent on Lads Need Dads. Part of our work is helping them build relationships and connections beyond us through employment, education, sport, volunteering and their wider communities, so that their support network grows as they do.

It has made me think differently about what successful early intervention looks like. Getting a boy through school matters, but it cannot be the only measure. We also need to think about whether he is developing the confidence, practical skills, relationships and sense of direction he will need when the structures of school and childhood are no longer around him.

Throughout this Fellowship I have asked what boys growing up without a consistent father figure need while they are still boys. There is another question that follows naturally from it: what do they need from us to make the transition into adulthood well?

That includes much more than preventing exclusion, poor mental health, offending or other negative outcomes. It means helping boys become young men who can manage adult life, build healthy relationships, find purpose and increasingly make their own way in the world.

14.10a ABandOfBrothers: preparation, facilitation and what comes after



My conversation with Peter Barden of ABandOfBrothers helped me think further about what support can look like as young men move into adulthood. Band of Brothers is a UK charity that began in East Sussex and works with young men aged 18–25, many of whom have experienced significant adversity and some of

whom are on the edges of the criminal justice system. Its approach combines mentoring, rites of passage and an ongoing community of older men who provide support and guidance.

Peter was clear that the rite of passage should not be viewed as a standalone event. The central weekend sits within a much longer process: six weeks of individual preparation beforehand, carefully facilitated experiences during the weekend, a ten-week integration programme afterwards and access to weekly community circles for as long as young men want to remain involved.

I was particularly interested in what happens before and after the weekend. Peter explained that preparation gives the young men time to understand what they are entering into and begin building relationships before the experience itself. The integration period afterwards gives them time to reflect on what they have experienced and take that learning back into everyday life. The weekly circles mean those relationships can continue beyond the formal programme. Some young men remain involved for years and later return as mentors or take on other roles within the community.

Peter used the phrase “brotherhood and belonging” when describing what some of these young men are missing. This connected closely with what I had seen elsewhere during the Fellowship. One trusted adult can make an enormous difference, but there is also value in being part of a wider group of adults and peers where a young man feels known, accepted and able to contribute.

This is an important part of the Band of Brothers approach. The rite of passage may mark an important transition, but it is not expected to do all the work. Mentoring and community sit around it. Young men are prepared beforehand, supported through the experience and have somewhere to return afterwards.

The conversation did not leave me thinking that Lads Need Dads should become a rites-of-passage organisation. It did make me think more carefully about how support may need to change as boys get older. Band of Brothers generally reaches young men at a later stage than Lads Need Dads, including some who are already carrying significant adversity and difficult experiences from childhood. Our work begins earlier, during childhood and adolescence. The approaches are different, but there is a connection between the stages.

Peter and I discussed whether earlier work with boys could help prepare them for some of the transitions that come later. A boy who has already developed relationships with good men, learned to talk about what is happening in his life, experienced appropriate challenge and responsibility, and found places where he belongs may have a stronger base as he moves into adulthood. He may still need support at eighteen, twenty or beyond, but that support will not necessarily look the same as it did when he was eleven or thirteen.

We also discussed what we mean by father absence. Peter made the point that fatherlessness can be emotional as well as geographical. A father may live in the same household but be distant or unavailable to his son, while a father living elsewhere may remain closely and positively involved. This reflects an important distinction throughout this report: knowing whether a father lives in the home tells us very little on its own. We also need to understand the quality and consistency of the relationship the boy actually has with him.

What I took from Band of Brothers was not simply the value of rites of passage, but the importance of what surrounds them. Preparation matters, the experience itself matters, and what happens afterwards matters. For young men who may have grown up with fewer dependable relationships around them, knowing that those relationships and that community remain available can be just as important as the intervention itself.

14.11 What changed my thinking

Before this Fellowship, I believed that father absence was the central issue. I still do. Nothing I encountered across four countries weakened my conviction that growing up without a consistent father figure can have a profound and lasting impact on a boy. Nor did the Fellowship introduce me to the importance of long-term relationships, group work or community. Those principles have shaped Lads Need Dads from the beginning.

The role of Lads Need Dads has never been to find a substitute father or to suggest that a mentor can replace the relationship a boy has lost. We cannot replace a father, and we do not try to. The work is about helping boys understand and work through some of the impact that an absent, inconsistent, emotionally unavailable or harmful father relationship may have had on their self-worth, confidence, resilience, sense of belonging, purpose and developing identity. It is about equipping, engaging and inspiring them to become the best they can be, while building a dependable network of support around them.

That network includes consistent relationships with trusted adult men, but it is not limited to them. One of the distinctive features of Lads Need Dads is its group-based approach. Boys build relationships not only with mentors and facilitators, but with one another. They discover that other boys carry similar questions, losses and experiences. They learn to encourage, challenge and support each other and, over time, a sense of brotherhood develops. This peer support can offer something different from a one-to-one mentoring relationship: the experience of belonging to a group in which a boy can feel understood without having to explain every part of his story.

Over time, this approach has developed into a wider pathway of support. Reading Mentors, LadPods, Becoming, Equip, Engage, Inspire and Ambassadors reach boys at different stages, from the transition into secondary school through adolescence and towards adulthood. They were not all designed at the same time; they have developed in response to what we have learned from boys, families, schools and frontline delivery. Together, they reflect an approach that does not expect one intervention, one programme or one trusted adult to meet every need. The aim is to build relationships, confidence, practical skills, belonging and wider community connections around a boy as he grows.

The Fellowship did not overturn my understanding of what boys need. In many respects, it confirmed what eleven years of frontline practice had already taught me, while giving me a much wider context in which to understand it. Across South Africa, the United States and Australia, I encountered many of the same elements that underpin Lads Need Dads: consistent adults, peer connection, belonging, appropriate challenge, practical experiences, emotional development and relationships that continue over time. The organisations I visited used different language and different models, but there was considerable common ground in the principles behind their work.

What changed most was my understanding of the scale and structure of the problem. I began the Fellowship looking for mentoring models from which Britain might learn. I came back seeing more clearly that the challenge is much wider than the availability of good programmes. Boys can pass through schools, family services, mental health provision and other systems without anyone fully exploring what an absent, inconsistent or difficult father relationship means to them. Different services may each hold part of the picture, but those parts are not always brought together, and funding and commissioning arrangements can make sustained relational work difficult to provide.

The Fellowship also changed how I think about the future of Lads Need Dads and my own role within it. For eleven years, much of my focus has been on direct delivery: reaching individual boys, supporting their mothers and carers, developing programmes and refining our approach through practice. That remains important. But I now find myself asking a different question alongside it: how can we help schools, practitioners and organisations support boys who will never come through Lads Need Dads?

Some of that shift is already reflected in the development of LadPods. Rather than relying solely on Lads Need Dads staff to deliver support, LadPods equips school staff who already know the boys and will continue to see

them in everyday school life. It offers one way of taking what we have learned through direct practice and putting more of that knowledge into the hands of the people already around boys.

The next stage is therefore not simply about Lads Need Dads delivering more programmes. It is about translating more than a decade of frontline experience, now strengthened by what I have learned internationally, into practical approaches, training and support that others can use. In doing that, I do not want to lose the elements that have mattered most in our own work: consistency, safeguarding, sustained relationships, group belonging, peer support, practical experiences and strong connections with families and communities.

For me, that is perhaps the biggest change brought about by the Fellowship. I began as a practitioner looking outward for ideas that might strengthen the work of Lads Need Dads. I have returned thinking much more about how practice, research and policy can be brought together, and about the role I can play in helping that happen. I still want Lads Need Dads to be there for individual boys and families. But I also want what we have learned from them, and with them, to reach boys who may never come through our doors.

15

 CHAPTER 15

Conclusions

This Fellowship began as an international search for mentoring models that might improve support for boys growing up without a consistent father figure. It ended with a much wider conclusion. The central challenge is not simply a shortage of mentoring programmes. It is that father absence, disrupted father relationships and the needs that can arise from them remain insufficiently recognised within many of the systems responsible for supporting children.

Across South Africa, the United States, Australia and the UK, I found considerable agreement about what helps: relationships, consistency, belonging, practical experience, appropriate challenge and adults who remain involved long enough for trust to develop. Programmes give that structure a shape, but it is the relationships formed within and around them that give it value. Much of this confirmed what eleven years of frontline practice had already taught me. Lads Need Dads was built around early intervention, sustained relationships, group belonging and support that develops as boys grow; the Fellowship let me test those principles against different organisations, cultures and systems, and I found them expressed in different ways but with considerable common ground. Timing was one clear example: late primary school, the transition into secondary education and the early years of adolescence emerged repeatedly as a critical opportunity to offer support before difficulties become entrenched - not because older boys and young men cannot be helped, but because the case for beginning early is strong.

The Fellowship also reinforced something familiar from frontline practice: boys do not always tell us directly when something is wrong. Anger, withdrawal, risk-taking, bravado and emotional shutdown may communicate what a boy cannot yet put into words, and systems that depend on children identifying and verbalising their own need will continue to notice some boys only once their behaviour becomes difficult for somebody else.

This has particular relevance to father absence. Whether a father lives with a child tells us surprisingly little about the relationship itself: bereavement, imprisonment, estrangement, inconsistent contact, emotional unavailability and an unsafe father are very different experiences, and a boy without a resident biological father may still have a loving stepfather, grandfather, uncle, teacher, coach or mentor providing important elements of fathering. The Fellowship has made me more precise about this: we need to identify relational need, not simply father absence. Father absence is not a diagnosis, nor does it determine a boy's future - poverty, trauma, family relationships, education, neighbourhood conditions and individual differences all matter, and many boys growing up without a consistent father figure will thrive. The argument of this report is that where an important relationship is absent, disrupted or harmful, we should be willing to ask what that experience means to the individual child, rather than waiting to see whether difficulties emerge later.

Positive male role models form part of that response, but they are not replacement fathers, and no single trusted adult should be expected to carry the whole responsibility for a boy. What I encountered internationally strengthened my belief in building a wider network around him: dependable adults, supportive peers, family, school and community, with social fathers providing different forms of care, guidance and example at different stages of a boy's life, without pretending that the loss or absence of his own father does not matter. Mothers and carers must be part of this picture too: many are already carrying the emotional and practical responsibility of raising boys without consistent support from a father and supporting the boy while overlooking the family around him addresses only part of the need. Earlier identification should open the door to understanding and appropriate support, not judgement, and should strengthen the relationships surrounding a child rather than treating him as an isolated problem to be corrected.

Perhaps the most important change in my thinking concerns the system surrounding these boys. Before travelling, I was looking primarily at what organisations were doing and what Lads Need Dads might learn from them. As the Fellowship progressed, I became increasingly interested in what happened between organisations, services, researchers and policymakers. Schools see attendance, behaviour and attainment; mental health services see distress; youth justice sees offending; family services see family circumstances; fatherhood organisations work with fathers; mentoring organisations provide relationships; researchers examine particular parts of the picture - yet no part of the system consistently brings those pieces together around the boy.

None of the four countries examined had solved this, though each showed me something different, as set out earlier in this report: the strength of social fathering and community responses, examples of mentoring and emerging legislative attention, what becomes possible when fatherhood develops a stronger research, practice and policy presence, and the growing attention to boys and men now creating an opportunity to connect work that has developed largely across separate sectors. I therefore returned less interested in finding a single mentoring model that Britain should import. There is no single programme that can answer a problem which crosses family life, education, mental health, community, fatherhood and, for some boys, the justice system. What is needed is a more connected approach: recognising relational need earlier, giving schools and practitioners something useful to do once they identify it, supporting families, building sustained networks around boys, and creating stronger links between frontline practice, research and policy.

Prevention itself was not a new idea for me; it has been at the heart of Lads Need Dads from the beginning. What the Fellowship helped me understand more clearly was why systems can struggle to work in this way: relational need is not routinely identified, responsibility is spread across different services, and funding and commissioning do not always lend themselves to the sustained support that some boys need.

The Fellowship also widened my thinking about where prevention leads. Supporting boys cannot stop at avoiding exclusion, improving behaviour or getting them through school. They are growing towards adulthood, and many will eventually become fathers themselves. This matters because today's boys are tomorrow's men and, for many, tomorrow's fathers: what a boy receives, witnesses, loses or never experiences in his own relationships may influence the relationships he later creates. Supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure is therefore not only about responding to childhood need - it is also an opportunity to strengthen future relationships, families and communities.

The question I began with was how society could better support boys growing up without a consistent father figure. I finish with a more fundamental question: can we become better at recognising relational need before a boy has to demonstrate it through distress?

Doing so means asking who is present in his life, who is missing, what has happened, what that means to him and what support already surrounds him. It means refusing to assume that father absence determines his future, while being equally unwilling to assume that it does not matter.

The conclusions of this Fellowship do not point towards one programme or one government department as the solution. They point towards coordinated change in what systems notice, when support begins, how sustained relational work is supported and how knowledge moves between research, policy and frontline practice. The recommendations that follow are therefore organised across **policy, research and practice**, before considering how the learning from this Fellowship can be translated into action.

15.1 Recommendations for policy

The policy recommendations are organised into seven national priorities. Together, they address recognition, early identification, relational provision, father inclusion, government accountability, commissioning and the connection between research and practice. Each recommendation sets out the action required, the evidence supporting it, who should lead it, an initial practical step and any relevant safeguards.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Make father absence and disrupted father relationships visible

Government should recognise father absence and disrupted father relationships explicitly as relational and developmental circumstances within early-help, education, family-support and safeguarding frameworks, rather than leaving them hidden within broad categories such as disadvantage, adverse childhood experiences or behaviour.

This does not mean treating father absence as a diagnosis, safeguarding concern or predictor of poor outcomes. It means recognising that the loss, inconsistency or emotional unavailability of a significant relationship may affect a child and is therefore worth exploring alongside the factors systems already consider.

As the evidence set out earlier in this report shows, household composition tells us little on its own: a father may be physically present but emotionally unavailable, while another may live elsewhere and remain consistently involved. Systems should therefore ask about the quality, consistency and meaning of the relationship, not simply whether a father shares the child's address.

Policy should also recognise social fathers, including stepfathers, grandfathers, uncles and other men who may provide consistent care, guidance and support. It should distinguish clearly between:

- Strengthening an existing father–child relationship;
- Restoring contact where this is safe and in the child's interests;
- Supporting a child following bereavement, estrangement or inconsistent involvement;
- Protecting a child where father contact is unsafe; and
- Building a wider network of social fathers and trusted relationships where no consistent father figure is available.

These circumstances require different responses and should not be collapsed into a single category.

Evidence. Across UK policy discussions, Family Hubs practice, youth justice and funding systems, this Fellowship repeatedly found that father absence is rarely a factor services are designed to explore or understand. NPC and Movember's The Invisible Field found that only 1.99 per cent of youth organisations and 1.09 per cent of the youth funding analysed were explicitly focused on boys and young men. These figures do not relate specifically to father absence, but they reinforce the wider visibility and infrastructure gap affecting this group.

Who should lead. The Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, working with the Department of Health and Social Care, local authorities and emerging cross-government structures focused on men and boys.

Initial step. Review early-help, Family Hubs, school pastoral and family-support guidance so that practitioners routinely explore a child's father relationships and wider relational network. This should be introduced as a relational-assessment principle, not as an automatic risk flag.

Referral and consent processes should also be reviewed. Services need to distinguish between obtaining consent to provide an intervention and accurately recognising the significant people within a child's relational world.

Where safe and appropriate, fathers and significant male carers should be recorded and included rather than becoming invisible because the parent who initially presents is treated as representing the whole family.

Reflective supervision and assessment should include a simple practice question about who may be missing from a child's story and why.

This should prompt curiosity rather than assumption. It may reveal a father who has died, a relationship that is unsafe, a man being prevented from participating, a father who has withdrawn, or another significant male carer already providing support.

Family Hubs and equivalent services should also evidence how they support mothers and carers raising sons without a consistent father figure beyond the early years. Support should not fall away once a child starts school, particularly when adolescence may introduce new questions about identity, relationships, masculinity and the absent father.

The same principle should apply when boys enter higher-level or statutory services. Youth justice, alternative provision, children's social care, mental health and other specialist services should routinely establish the nature of a boy's father relationship and wider relational network as part of understanding his circumstances. This should not be used to attribute causation or predict risk, but to ensure that bereavement, loss, estrangement, unsafe relationships, inconsistent fathering or the absence of dependable adults are not overlooked once a boy has entered a system concerned primarily with his presenting difficulty.

Safeguard. Recognition must distinguish physical absence from safe, consistent and emotionally supportive involvement. Information about fathers should not be pursued or shared where doing so might place a child or another family member at risk. Father absence must never be treated as destiny or used to lower expectations of an individual child.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish and test an identification-to-support pathway at the Year 6–7 transition

Government should invest in and test an identification-to-support pathway for boys growing up without a consistent father figure at the transition from primary to secondary school.

This should combine a simple and proportionate method of identifying unmet relational need with an established support offer, rather than treating identification and intervention as separate policy questions. Identification without provision risks becoming labelling; provision without identification leaves the boys who need it dependent upon individual schools or practitioners happening to notice them. Access to support should not depend on a boy first reaching a statutory threshold; the purpose of early identification is to make proportionate support available when need is first recognised, rather than waiting until difficulties escalate enough to qualify for intervention.

This need for identification and provision to sit together has shaped Lads Need Dads' school-based work from the beginning and is why I developed Reading Mentors and LadPods. Reading Mentors provides early relational support during Year 6, while LadPods equips secondary schools with a structured, group-based approach through which trained staff can build trusted relationships and peer belonging that continue to influence a boy's experience after the initial programme ends. Both have now been piloted, internally evaluated and refined through five years of delivery, and recognised within the Centre for Social Justice's Lost Boys work as examples of structured, relationship-based early intervention. The next requirement is not necessarily another newly designed government programme; it is investment in the independent evaluation, quality assurance and responsible scaling of promising practice that already exists and Reading Mentors and LadPods provide one established pathway through which this could now be tested across a wider range of schools and communities.

Evidence. Fieldwork across South Africa, the United States, Australia and the UK repeatedly identified the transition into secondary school and early adolescence as a significant opportunity for prevention. This international finding aligns with more than a decade of Lads Need Dads' wider practice.

Who should lead. The Department for Education should work with Lads Need Dads, participating schools and academy trusts, and an independent university or research body to test the identification-to-support pathway developed through Reading Mentors and LadPods. The academic partner's role should be to evaluate and strengthen the existing model, not to replace the knowledge accumulated through frontline delivery.

Initial step. Fund a phased, multi-site expansion and independent evaluation of Reading Mentors and LadPods across a diverse range of schools and communities. This should include training, implementation support and quality assurance. The evaluation should examine outcomes, cost, safeguarding, school readiness, staff development and the conditions required to maintain relational quality at greater scale.

Alongside this expansion, the Department for Education should develop a proportionate process through which schools can establish whether a boy has access to a consistent and supportive father figure or social father and whether further relational support may be beneficial. This should be tested within the funded support pathway, so that identifying need always leads to a meaningful response.

Subject to appropriate consent, data protection and ethical approval, this work could begin building a robust UK evidence base examining how father-related and relational needs interact with attendance, attainment, exclusion, wellbeing and later outcomes.

Safeguard. Identification should not be based solely upon whether a biological father lives in the household. It must consider the quality and consistency of the relationship, emotional as well as physical absence, bereavement, unsafe contact and the presence of stepfathers, grandfathers or other social fathers. It should prompt a sensitive conversation and possible offer of support, not function as a prediction of poor outcomes or a permanent risk label.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Build sustained relational pathways rather than isolated interventions

Government and commissioners should prioritise investment in sustained, relationship-based support rather than relying predominantly upon short interventions. Where no consistent father figure is present, provision should help build a wider network of dependable relationships around a boy rather than expecting one occasional adult to meet every need.

This does not mean every programme must continue indefinitely; it means designing provision with continuity, transition and connection in mind, so that boys are not repeatedly required to begin again with new adults whenever a programme or funding period ends.

One trusted adult can be a powerful protective factor but should be considered the beginning of a relational response rather than its limit. Boys may also benefit from positive peers, trusted school staff, mentors, coaches, youth workers, extended family members and community organisations. The aim should be to develop a relational pathway that changes as the boy matures and helps him build connections that can remain after a specific intervention has ended.

Evidence. Long-term mentoring evidence, including evidence associated with Big Brothers Big Sisters (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2025), and the relational continuity observed across organisations in South Africa, the United States, Australia alongside Lads Need Dads in the UK, suggest that consistent relationships are more likely to influence wellbeing and longer-term outcomes than brief or intermittent contact. Chapter 14 also demonstrates the importance of peer belonging and wider relational networks alongside adult mentoring.

Who should lead. Commissioners across education, youth justice, health, local government and the voluntary sector, supported by clearer national guidance on the characteristics of effective relational provision.

Initial step. Review commissioning frameworks, contract lengths and funding requirements to identify where they currently work against preparation, relationship-building, continuity and longer-term follow-up.

Government and funders should also invest in the recruitment, development and retention of suitable adults, including male teachers, youth workers, mentors, volunteers and community role models. Schools and services cannot build relational networks without sufficient people available to sustain them.

Safeguard. One-off workshops and short interventions can retain value for awareness-raising, engagement or introducing a subject. This recommendation argues for connecting them to longer-term support where deeper relational needs are identified, not abandoning them altogether.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Strengthen father involvement and reduce avoidable father absence

Policy should distinguish between responding to boys who are already growing up without a consistent father figure, whether because of bereavement, estrangement, rejection, inconsistency, emotional unavailability or unsafe contact, and preventing avoidable father absence from developing in the first place. Preventing avoidable absence requires social, economic and service conditions that enable safe and committed fathers to remain involved. These aims are connected but require different interventions.

International evidence and conversations throughout this Fellowship point towards a connected policy package that includes:

- Father-inclusive maternity, health and family services;
- Father-specific mental health and parenting support;
- Parental leave that fathers can realistically afford to take;
- Flexible working that enables caregiving rather than reinforcing a provider-only role;
- Better information about fathers' responsibilities and routes to support;
- Support for separated fathers to remain safely involved;
- Earlier support for young fathers; and
- Recognition of social fathers and wider male kinship networks.

Financial insecurity can push fathers towards a narrow provider role even where they want to participate more fully in daily caregiving, so policy should support fathers to be emotionally and practically present, not measure their contribution only through financial provision. This does not mean encouraging contact in every case: where a father is abusive, unsafe or harmful, the child's safety must remain paramount, and policy should avoid systems that exclude safe fathers by default or make involvement dependent upon the mother carrying responsibility for including them.

Evidence. Australia demonstrated substantial policy and research attention to fathers during the perinatal and early-years period, while South Africa provided a broader understanding of social fatherhood and the structural pressures that can obstruct father involvement. Across the four countries, however, support became considerably thinner as children moved into later childhood and adolescence.

Who should lead. A cross-government approach led by The Department for Education, working with the Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Health and Social Care and the department responsible for employment rights, alongside fatherhood organisations, family services, employers and people with lived experience.

Initial step. Review existing family, parental-leave and Family Hubs policy to assess whether fathers are practically able and actively invited to participate, including beyond the early years and following family separation.

Safeguard. Father inclusion must never override safety, consent or the child's welfare. Policy should distinguish clearly between safe father involvement, harmful contact and circumstances in which another social father or relational network is the more appropriate source of support.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Establish clear cross-government leadership and accountability

Government should establish clear departmental ownership for father inclusion, family stability and the needs of boys growing up without a consistent father figure. Emerging cross-government work on men and boys should develop into a published and accountable strategy spanning education, health, work and pensions, justice, the Home Office, housing and the Treasury.

The strategy should contain shared objectives, measurable commitments, clear departmental responsibilities and a delivery timetable. It should not depend for its survival upon one minister, political party or parliamentary term.

Evidence. This Fellowship repeatedly found the same architectural gap: responsibility is divided across education, health, family policy, youth justice and the voluntary sector, while no part of government holds the complete picture. Nick Isles of the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys similarly emphasised the need for greater coherence across research, policy and practice.

Who should lead. The Cabinet Office, working with the emerging cross-government work on men and boys.

Initial step. Publish the terms of reference, participating departments and delivery timetable for the cross-government work, supported by a transparent advisory mechanism bringing together researchers, funders, frontline practitioners and people with lived experience.

Representation should reflect the diversity of boys' circumstances, including father absence, care experience, disability, poverty, bereavement, educational exclusion and contact with the criminal justice system. Specialist organisations should not be excluded simply because they are smaller or lack the profile of established national institutions.

Safeguard. A strategy for boys and men should complement rather than compete with the Government's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (HM Government, 2025). Supporting boys' emotional, relational and developmental needs can strengthen violence prevention and improve outcomes for everyone. The strategy should follow the life course rather than concentrating only on intervention once boys reach crisis.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Reform funding and commissioning to support prevention and responsible scaling

Government, commissioners and philanthropic funders should reform funding so that it supports prevention, relational continuity, organisational infrastructure, independent evaluation and the responsible scaling of promising practice, rather than funding short-term delivery alone.

Charities are frequently asked to deliver increasing numbers of interventions but are rarely funded to consolidate learning, strengthen internal systems, undertake longitudinal evaluation or support implementation elsewhere, and smaller organisations face a circular problem: commissioners require robust evidence before investing, but organisations require investment to generate that evidence. Without funding to break this cycle, promising approaches can remain unevaluated regardless of the experience accumulated by those delivering them.

Commissioning should reward relational effectiveness rather than administrative capacity. Procurement systems should not consistently favour organisations with dedicated bidding and evaluation teams over smaller specialist organisations with substantial frontline knowledge. Monitoring and evaluation requirements should be rigorous but proportionate to the size of the organisation, the funding awarded and the stage of the intervention's development.

Evidence. International conversations throughout this Fellowship reinforced that community organisations are frequently resourced for delivery but not for evaluation, codification or responsible scaling. NPC and Movember's The Invisible Field similarly identifies limited funding, recognition, coordination and infrastructure across the wider field supporting boys and young men.

Who should lead. The Department for Education, the Treasury, local and regional commissioners, philanthropic funders and organisations with expertise in voluntary-sector infrastructure, working with universities prepared to form equitable partnerships with frontline organisations.

Initial steps. Establish a funding stream for independent longitudinal, implementation and economic evaluation of relational interventions for boys growing up without a consistent father figure.

Develop proportionate procurement and evaluation requirements for smaller specialist organisations.

Fund organisational infrastructure, training, quality assurance and implementation support alongside programme delivery.

Support the codification and responsible transfer of promising frontline practice rather than repeatedly commissioning new programmes from scratch.

Lads Need Dads intends to translate more than a decade of frontline learning into a Blueprint and Toolkit for schools, academy trusts and organisations working with boys growing up without a consistent father figure. Investment in its development, independent evaluation and quality assurance would provide one immediate example of this recommendation in practice. The wider national principle, however, is that promising practice should be identified, tested and responsibly shared wherever it is found.

Early intervention should also be presented to the Treasury as an investment in human and social capital alongside the moral case. Economic evaluation may strengthen the argument for prevention, but it must establish what can genuinely be claimed rather than beginning with an assumption that any particular programme automatically produces a specific financial saving.

Safeguard. Investment in scaling should follow evidence and implementation learning rather than organisational profile alone. Adaptation must preserve safeguarding, relational quality and the core components that make an intervention effective. This Fellowship has not quantified any specific financial saving and does not make an unsupported economic claim.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Connect research, policy, practice, funding and lived experience

Government should establish permanent mechanisms through which researchers, policymakers, practitioners, funders and people with lived experience can work together. This should include a national cross-sector network focused on boys growing up without a consistent father figure, alongside periodic international knowledge exchange on fatherhood, mentoring and relational early intervention.

Frontline organisations should not be treated simply as recipients of research findings. They should be recognised as partners in generating evidence, identifying emerging issues, shaping research questions and testing how evidence works in practice. Equally, practice-based experience should remain open to independent testing rather than being treated as proof of effectiveness on its own.

Evidence. During the Fellowship, I became increasingly aware that research, policy and practice do not always operate in sustained conversation with one another. This was particularly evident in Australia and the UK. Discussions with Nick Isles, Dr Anna Machin and Dr Joshua Fullard approached this disconnection from different perspectives but pointed towards the same need: stronger mechanisms for accumulating, testing and applying knowledge across institutional boundaries.

Who should lead. The emerging cross-government work on men and boys, in partnership with universities, funders, schools, specialist frontline organisations and people with lived experience.

Initial step. Convene an initial cross-sector meeting to map existing research, provision, funding and policy activity, identify gaps and agree a small number of shared priorities. This should include consideration of a wider international summit or recurring knowledge-exchange forum through which countries can share evidence, implementation learning and emerging practice.

Safeguard. A network of this kind will only be valuable if it includes specialist frontline organisations and people directly affected by the issue, not only larger national charities, think tanks and academic institutions. Participation must lead to practical collaboration rather than becoming another discussion forum without authority, resources or follow-through.

15.2 Recommendations for research and evidence

This Fellowship found no complete absence of evidence. It found evidence that is fragmented across academic research, government data, frontline practice and lived experience, with significant gaps in how these different forms of knowledge connect.

The research priority should therefore not be to produce further descriptions of boys' difficulties in isolation. It should be to establish the scale and nature of unmet father-related need, test the effectiveness of existing responses, understand how promising practice can be implemented elsewhere and examine how any effects unfold across adolescence and into adulthood.

The recommendations below are organised into seven research priorities.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Independently evaluate existing relational interventions

Independent longitudinal and economic research should examine interventions designed specifically for boys growing up without a consistent father figure, rather than assuming that findings from general youth-mentoring research apply identically to this population.

Longer-term mentoring research, including studies associated with Big Brothers Big Sisters, demonstrates that rigorous evaluation of relational interventions is possible (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2025). However, these programmes serve a broader population and are not designed specifically around the developmental and emotional effects of absent, inconsistent or harmful father relationships.

Lads Need Dads has accumulated eleven years of frontline experience, programme learning and sustained relationships with boys and families. However, its existing information was primarily collected to support programme delivery, safeguarding and routine evaluation; it was not designed as a consistent longitudinal research dataset. It should therefore not be assumed that the organisation currently holds all the data or internal capacity required to undertake a retrospective longitudinal study.

Research priority. Undertake a funded, independently led feasibility study to examine how the Lads Need Dads pathway, and other comparable relational interventions, could be evaluated over time. This should assess

existing evidence and data readiness, identify gaps, agree appropriate outcomes and establish the ethical, practical and financial requirements for prospective longitudinal research.

If the feasibility work supports it, an independent university or research consortium could then develop a properly funded longitudinal study following boys through adolescence and, where possible, into adulthood. The study could examine both individual programme outcomes and the cumulative effect of progressing through a connected pathway of relational support.

Who should lead. An independent university or research consortium, working in an equitable partnership with participating organisations, schools, boys, families and funders.

Safeguard. Participation by frontline organisations should be fully funded and proportionate to their capacity. They should contribute practice expertise and support the design of the research but should not be expected to provide unfunded research infrastructure, retrospective data that does not exist or long-term participant tracking without appropriate resources and ethical arrangements.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish a national evidence baseline

The UK needs a reliable evidence baseline showing how many children have access to a consistent and supportive father figure, not simply how many live in a household containing an adult man.

Current family-structure data can identify whether a child lives in a lone-parent household, but it cannot reliably establish the quality or consistency of a non-resident father's involvement, the role of a stepfather or social father, emotional fatherlessness within the home, or the reason a father is absent. The same limitation appears within education, care and youth justice, where systems routinely collect attendance, exclusion, attainment and safeguarding data but rarely capture nuanced information about father relationships and significant male carers.

Research priority. Undertake nationally representative research examining children's access to consistent father figures and social fathers, including the quality, frequency and meaning of those relationships. This should include focused samples within:

- Mainstream and alternative education;
- Children's social care and care-experienced populations;
- Youth justice and custody;
- School exclusion and persistent absence;
- Mental health and early-help services; and
- Communities experiencing high levels of economic disadvantage.

A renewed representative study within the youth custody population would be particularly valuable. Existing evidence about father absence among young men in custody is dated and limited yet continues to be cited because so little subsequent research has measured the issue directly.

Subject to ethical and data-protection approval, the evidence generated through the proposed Year 6–7 identification-to-support pathway could contribute to a longer-term dataset examining relationships between father-related need, protective relationships and educational outcomes.

Who should lead. The Department for Education, the Ministry of Justice and an independent academic research body, with input from the Office for National Statistics and specialist frontline organisations.

Safeguard. Data should distinguish association from causation and should never be used to predict that an individual boy will experience poor outcomes. Questions must distinguish physical presence from relationship quality and recognise bereavement, unsafe fathers, non-resident involvement and social fathering.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Research social fathering and wider relational networks

Further research should examine what effective social fathering looks like and how wider networks of trusted adults and peers influence boys who do not have a consistent father figure.

Dr Anna Machin identified this as a significant unanswered question within a still-developing fatherhood evidence base. Current research cannot state precisely how many supportive relationships a boy needs, whether one consistent social father can fulfil most of that role, or how different adults may contribute at different stages of development.

Research should move beyond counting the number of adults present. It should examine:

- Relationship quality and consistency;
- Frequency and duration of contact;
- Emotional availability and trust;
- Nurture and appropriate challenge;
- The contribution of peers and group belonging;
- Differences between co-resident and non-resident social fathers;
- Whether networks provide greater continuity when one relationship ends; and
- How boys themselves understand and value these relationships.

Comparison between individual mentoring, group-based approaches and models combining both would help establish which forms of support are most useful for different boys and in different circumstances.

Who should lead. Fatherhood and developmental researchers working with mentoring organisations, schools and boys with lived experience.

Safeguard. Research should not assume that any male presence is automatically protective. The quality, safety, consistency and purpose of the relationship matter more than the adult's sex alone.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Examine the connection between boyhood and future fatherhood

Longitudinal research should investigate whether sustained relational support during boyhood influences later relationships, parenting intentions and experiences of fatherhood.

The survey of adult men conducted as part of this Fellowship found that many respondents who became fathers or stepfathers were determined to parent differently from their own fathers, though breaking an intergenerational pattern was not necessarily automatic; some described needing supportive partners, counselling, trusted role models or sustained personal reflection.

This creates an important research question: can support during childhood and adolescence help boys understand their experiences of being fathered, develop healthier relationships and become more emotionally available fathers if they later choose to have children?

Research priority. Establish a longitudinal study following boys receiving sustained relational support through adolescence and into adulthood. This should examine:

- Attitudes towards relationships and caregiving;

- Emotional availability and capacity for intimacy;
- Conflict resolution;
- Beliefs about masculinity and fatherhood;
- Parenting confidence and involvement;
- Relationships with partners and children; and
- Whether intergenerational patterns of absence, inconsistency or emotional unavailability are repeated or interrupted.

This would extend prevention further upstream. Instead of waiting until a man enters a parenting or perinatal service, research could examine how preparation for healthy relationships and possible future fatherhood begins during boyhood.

Who should lead. A multidisciplinary partnership involving developmental researchers, fatherhood specialists, longitudinal-study experts and organisations working directly with boys.

Safeguard. The research must not assume that every boy will become a father or suggest that fatherhood determines a man's value. Future fatherhood should be examined as one possible adult outcome within a broader study of relationships, wellbeing and social contribution.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Research why fathers become absent and what children are told

Research should examine the reasons fathers become absent, inconsistent or emotionally unavailable, and how those circumstances are understood and communicated within families.

The category of “father absence” currently combines fundamentally different experiences: bereavement, imprisonment, migration, addiction, mental ill health, domestic abuse, family-court restrictions, relationship breakdown, shame, parental conflict, withdrawal and prevented contact. These experiences cannot be expected to produce identical needs or require the same response.

Research should also examine the narratives children receive about why a father is absent. In some families, children may be protected from information considered too painful or shameful; in others, one parent's account may become the only explanation available, and a boy may grow up believing his father did not care about him when the full circumstances are more complicated.

This is a sensitive but important area. Research should be prepared to examine:

- Trauma experienced by mothers and fathers;
- Domestic abuse perpetrated by either parent;
- Parental gatekeeping and prevented contact;
- Paternal withdrawal and failure to maintain involvement;
- Shame surrounding conception or relationship breakdown;
- Family-court processes;
- Conflict, jealousy and new relationships;
- Children's self-blame and understanding of the separation; and
- Circumstances in which contact would be unsafe or harmful.

The purpose is not to presume that one parent is responsible. It is to replace a single, simplified story of father absence with a more accurate understanding of the family system and the child's experience within it.

Who should lead. Independent family, attachment and fatherhood researchers working with domestic-abuse specialists, family-court experts, mothers, fathers and adults who experienced father absence as children.

Safeguard. Research must be trauma-informed, avoid pressuring children or parents to disclose unsafe information and recognise that no entitlement to father involvement overrides the child's safety. It must also avoid presuming that mothers are always responsible for exclusion or that fathers are always unwilling victims of it.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Prioritise implementation and scaling research

Research should examine not only whether an intervention works, but how, for whom and under what conditions it can be delivered effectively elsewhere.

Promising grassroots practice is often highly dependent upon the knowledge, relationships and judgement of its original practitioners. Without implementation research, a programme may be copied mechanically while losing the relational qualities, safeguarding arrangements and organisational culture that made it effective.

Priority questions should include:

- Which programme components are essential, and which can be adapted;
- How mentors and facilitators should be recruited, assessed and supervised;
- How long relationships need to continue;
- How schools and organisations become ready to deliver the work;
- How family support and peer relationships contribute to outcomes;
- How programmes can be adapted across communities without losing quality;
- How fidelity should be assessed;
- What infrastructure is required for responsible licensing or replication and how implementation quality affects outcomes.

Lads Need Dads' Blueprint and Toolkit, currently in development, provides an immediate opportunity to research how more than a decade of frontline learning can be codified and transferred without reducing a relational model to a manual alone.

Who should lead. Implementation-science researchers working alongside programme originators, delivery organisations, commissioners and participating schools.

Safeguard. Scaling should not be treated simply as delivering larger numbers. Research must examine whether relational quality, safeguarding, peer belonging and continuity are retained as provision expands.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Develop shared, proportionate and practitioner-informed outcome frameworks

Organisations encountered across the four countries used varied definitions, measures and evaluation approaches. This limits the extent to which practice-based evidence can be compared, combined or used to inform wider policy.

Researchers, funders and practitioners should collaborate on shared outcome areas and proportionate tools that smaller organisations can use without diverting excessive capacity from delivery. These frameworks should recognise that relationship-based change may emerge gradually and may not be captured through attendance or behaviour data alone.

Useful outcome areas include:

- Self-worth and confidence;
- Emotional literacy and regulation;
- Trust and relationship quality;
- Belonging and peer connection;
- Purpose and future orientation;
- Attendance and educational engagement;
- Family relationships;
- Community participation; and
- Longer-term transitions into employment, relationships and adulthood.

Shared frameworks should combine quantitative and qualitative evidence. Matched pre- and post-programme data, longer-term follow-up, boys' accounts, family perspectives, school information and practitioner observations each provide different parts of the picture.

Smaller organisations should be supported to establish robust internal monitoring using anonymous participant identifiers and matched outcome data. Independent academic evaluation can then build upon a reliable practice-based foundation rather than imposing an entirely separate system retrospectively. The approach observed at Top Blokes in Australia provides one example of how internal monitoring and external research can develop alongside one another.

Who should lead. Universities, specialist evaluation organisations, funders and frontline practitioners from the UK and relevant international partners.

Initial step. Convene a practitioner–researcher working group to agree a small core set of shared outcomes, accompanied by optional measures appropriate to different programmes and populations.

Safeguard. A shared framework must not become a burdensome national reporting system or reduce relational change to a single score. Evaluation expectations should remain proportionate to organisational size, programme maturity and available funding.

Taken together, these recommendations call for a different relationship between research and practice. Frontline organisations should not be treated merely as sites from which academics extract data, while practitioner experience should not be treated as conclusive evidence simply because it has accumulated over many years. Each holds knowledge the other needs.

The next stage is to build equitable partnerships in which research tests and strengthens practice, practitioners shape relevant research questions, and boys and families influence how their experiences are understood and measured.

15.3 Recommendations for practice

The international fieldwork found that effective practice depends less upon a particular programme name or curriculum than upon the quality, consistency and structure of the relationships surrounding it. The recommendations below are intended for schools, mentoring organisations, Family Hubs, youth services, commissioners and other practitioners supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure.

They do not propose one model for every boy. They identify the practice principles that recurred most consistently across the four countries and through more than a decade of delivery by Lads Need Dads.

Wherever possible, boys and young men should also be involved in shaping, reviewing and improving the support intended for them. Effective practice requires adults to bring professional knowledge, safeguarding and experience, but it also requires us to listen to how boys themselves experience relationships, support and belonging, and what they say helps them.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Design for relational continuity

Relational continuity should be treated as a core design feature of programmes supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure, not as an enhancement added only when funding permits.

Many boys referred to relational programmes have already experienced loss, inconsistency or the unexplained withdrawal of an important adult. A programme that allows another trusted relationship to disappear abruptly when a contract or funding period ends risks repeating part of the experience it was established to address.

Organisations should plan from the beginning for how relationships will:

- Be introduced and established;
- Develop safely over time;
- Continue between formal sessions;
- Connect with other people in the boy's life;
- Change as the boy matures; and
- Transition or end safely when continued contact is no longer possible.

This does not mean that every mentor must remain involved indefinitely or that boys should become permanently dependent upon an organisation. The purpose is to create sufficient consistency for trust to develop while helping boys build wider relationships and community connections that can remain after a particular intervention ends.

Lads Need Dads' own relationships with some boys have continued for up to eight years. Its progression through Reading Mentors, LadPods, Equip, Engage, Inspire and Ambassadors reflects a developing pathway rather than a set of disconnected programmes. Different parts of that pathway respond to different ages and needs while building upon relationships, confidence and belonging established earlier.

Practice principle: Do not measure continuity only by the length of the formal programme. Consider whether the boy leaves with a stronger relational network than the one with which he arrived.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Combine trusted adults, peer support and wider community networks

One trusted adult can be a powerful protective factor but should not be expected to meet every need in a boy's life. Effective practice should help boys develop a network that includes trusted adults, supportive peers, family and community relationships.

Group-based and one-to-one approaches should not be treated as competing models: one-to-one mentoring can provide privacy, individual attention and depth, while group work can reduce isolation, distribute emotional pressure and let boys discover that others carry similar questions, encouraging, challenging and supporting each other in a way that one-to-one work alone may not provide.

This peer dimension is central to the Lads Need Dads model. Boys build relationships not only with mentors and facilitators but also with one another, and over time the group itself can become a source of encouragement, accountability and identity.

Practice should also connect boys with relationships beyond the programme through:

- School staff;
- Extended family members;
- Sport and outdoor activity;
- Cadets and uniformed youth organisations;
- Volunteering and community service;
- Faith and community groups;
- Employers and apprenticeship providers; and
- Other appropriate youth organisations.

Nick Isles described this as building “social network capital”: helping boys develop sufficient relationships and community connections to participate, contribute and gradually stand on their own feet.

Practice principle: The aim is not to find a substitute father, but to build a dependable network of supportive relationships around the boy, while recognising that these relationships do not replace the significance of his own father or feelings about that relationship.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Recruit, assess, train and supervise mentors carefully

The quality of a mentoring programme depends substantially upon the adults recruited to deliver it; good intentions, lived experience or a desire to help are not sufficient on their own.

The US fieldwork identified two recurring routes into mentoring, some men were drawn to it by their own experience of father absence, adversity or exclusion, others by having experienced stable relationships and wanting to pass on what they received, and neither background automatically makes someone more or less suitable.

Men drawing upon adversity may bring empathy, credibility and insight, but need sufficient self-awareness to ensure the mentoring relationship is not being used to resolve their own unmet needs. Men from more stable backgrounds may offer consistency and a constructive model but should not assume that their experience allows them automatically to understand a boy whose life has been very different.

Recruitment and supervision should therefore include:

- A structured application and interview;
- References, safeguarding checks and employment history;
- Exploration of motivation and expectations;
- Appropriate consideration of lived experience;
- Reflection on the applicant’s relationships with his own parents and children;
- Assessment of emotional regulation and capacity to maintain boundaries;
- Training in safeguarding, trauma, grief and boys’ communication;
- Clear role descriptions and codes of conduct;
- Regular individual and group supervision;
- Procedures for raising concerns; and

- Planned, supported endings.

Mentors should understand that they are not replacement fathers, therapists or rescuers. Their role is to offer a safe, reliable relationship within clearly defined boundaries and as part of a wider support system.

Practice principle: Lived experience should neither qualify nor disqualify a man automatically. The relevant question is whether he has reflected upon that experience sufficiently to keep the boy's needs, rather than his own story, at the centre of the relationship.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Embed relational support within schools

Schools are one of the few institutions with regular access to almost every child and are therefore essential to identifying and supporting boys before unmet relational needs become visible through persistent absence, exclusion, poor mental health or crisis.

Relational support should not depend solely upon an external mentor visiting occasionally: schools should be equipped to use the adults already present within their communities, including teachers and pastoral staff, who can provide consistency during the school week.

LadPods was developed with this principle in mind. It gives schools a structured approach through which trained staff can develop stronger relationships with boys, understand what may sit beneath behaviour and create peer belonging, and because those adults remain within the school after the initial programme ends, the learning and relationships can continue to influence the boy's wider secondary-school experience.

School-based practice should include:

- Identification during Year 6 and at secondary transfer;
- A meaningful support offer, rather than identification alone;
- Trained and supervised school staff;
- Protected time for relational work;
- Clear safeguarding and referral pathways;
- Links with families and existing pastoral provision;
- Group and individual support where appropriate; and
- Planned connection with wider community opportunities.

Schools should also make better use of male staff who want to contribute to boys' development but may currently be seen primarily as disciplinarians or behaviour managers. Relational programmes can enable these men to become known as trusted, emotionally available adults while retaining appropriate expectations and boundaries.

Practice principle: Relational work should not sit at the margins of school life as an optional activity delivered only when behaviour deteriorates. It should form part of the school's preventative and pastoral approach.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Build identity, belonging, purpose and skills for adulthood

Programmes should develop more than improved behaviour or short-term emotional expression. Boys also need support to build identity, belonging, purpose, competence and a hopeful understanding of their future.

Across the four countries, the strongest organisations combined emotional development with practical experience, challenge, responsibility and contribution. Boys were not treated only as recipients of support. They were

given opportunities to take risks safely, learn skills, recover from failure, contribute to others and experience themselves as capable.

Effective provision may include:

- Practical and vocational skills;
- Sport, outdoor activity and adventure;
- Volunteering and community contribution;
- Leadership and responsibility;
- Creative activity;
- Opportunities to meet men from different backgrounds;
- Reflection on masculinity, values and identity;
- Emotional literacy and help-seeking; and
- Preparation for education, employment and adult life.

This is not an argument against counselling or therapeutic support where it is needed. It is a recognition that boys may also develop through activity, shared purpose and relationships formed while doing something alongside others. Emotional work does not always have to begin with direct conversation.

Outcome measurement should reflect this wider purpose. Alongside attendance, behaviour and attainment, programmes should consider changes in self-worth, trust, confidence, belonging, relationships, purpose and willingness to contribute.

Practice principle: Do not design programmes only around stopping boys from doing something harmful. Help them discover what they can become, what they can contribute and where they belong.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Become father-aware and learn to ask why

Schools, health services, Family Hubs, social care, youth justice and mentoring organisations should develop a more informed understanding of father absence, disrupted father relationships and social fathering.

Father-aware practice begins by asking why a father is absent before deciding what support is required. Bereavement, imprisonment, addiction, mental ill health, domestic abuse, family breakdown, migration, estrangement, unsafe contact and prevented contact do not create identical needs.

Practitioners should be trained to explore:

- What relationship the child has or previously had with his father;
- Why the father is absent, inconsistent or emotionally unavailable;
- What the child has been told about the absence;
- What meaning the child has made of it;
- Whether the child blames himself;
- Whether safe reconnection may be possible or desirable;
- Whether contact would be unsafe;
- Which social fathers or male carers are already present; and
- What additional relational support may be needed.

This questioning should be curious and careful, not accusatory, professionals should not assume the father simply walked away, that the mother is preventing contact, or that reconnection is always the appropriate objective. As set out earlier in this report, some boys communicate distress through behaviour rather than disclosure,

so anger, withdrawal, bravado, risk-taking and emotional shutdown should be addressed appropriately while practitioners also ask what loss, fear, rejection or unmet need might sit underneath them.

Lads Need Dads' Absent Father Aware training has been developed to close this professional-awareness gap. Its ambition is to equip schools, health services, Family Hubs and other practitioners nationally with the understanding and practical tools required to respond more effectively.

Practice principle: Behaviour still requires boundaries, but boundaries should sit alongside curiosity. Ask not only what the boy has done, but what may have happened to him and who may be missing from his story.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Support the whole family, including mothers raising sons alone

Supporting a boy without considering the family around him addresses only part of the picture. Mothers and carers raising sons without a consistent father figure may be carrying emotional, practical and financial responsibilities with limited support of their own.

Practice should recognise mothers as people requiring support in their own right, not merely as routes through which professionals gain access to their sons.

Provision should offer:

- Information about how boys may experience father absence;
- Opportunities to discuss behaviour, grief and identity;
- Emotional and practical support;
- Help navigating schools and services;
- Peer connection with other mothers and carers;
- Support around safe father contact or reconnection where appropriate;
- Guidance on identifying positive men already within the family or community; and
- Continued support through adolescence rather than ending after the early years.

Family support should also recognise that progress for one family member can affect the whole family system. As boys become more expressive, confident or independent, parents may require support to understand and adjust to those changes.

Where a safe father is available, services should avoid communicating exclusively through the mother or expecting her to carry responsibility for including him. Where the father is unsafe, absent or unavailable, support should concentrate on strengthening the child and the family relationships that remain.

Practice principle: Supporting mothers and recognising the importance of fathers are not competing positions. Effective practice can do both while keeping the child's welfare at the centre.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Prepare boys for adulthood, healthy relationships and possible future fatherhood

Support should develop as boys move towards adulthood. The needs of a boy at eleven will not be identical to those of the same young person at sixteen, eighteen or twenty.

Programmes should help young men prepare for:

- Education, training and employment;
- Financial responsibility;

- Routines and independent living;
- Responding to setbacks;
- Maintaining healthy relationships;
- Emotional regulation and conflict resolution;
- Asking for help;
- Contribution to family and community; and
- Possible future fatherhood.

This should not assume that every boy will become a father or suggest that fatherhood determines his value. It recognises that boys may become partners, carers, community members and fathers, and that preparation for those responsibilities should not begin only after adulthood has arrived.

Lads Need Dads BECOMING programme is one practical outcome of this Fellowship and an emerging example of how preparation for adult identity, relationships and possible future fatherhood can be introduced earlier. It is being prepared for pilot and evaluation rather than presented as a finished model for replication.

Practice should also establish transition arrangements for young people leaving children's services or time-limited programmes. This might include peer networks, alumni or ambassador groups, community mentors, employment links and referral pathways into age-appropriate adult support.

Practice principle: Completing a programme or reaching the age of eighteen does not mean that development, or the need for guidance, has ended.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Build learning, evaluation and quality assurance into delivery

Frontline organisations should build proportionate monitoring, reflection and learning into programme delivery from the beginning. This should not replace independent evaluation, but it creates the foundation upon which credible external research can be built.

Practice-based monitoring should include:

- Clear programme aims and a theory of change;
- Matched pre- and post-programme measures;
- Anonymous participant identifiers;
- Attendance and engagement data;
- Boys' own accounts of change;
- Family and school perspectives where appropriate;
- Safeguarding and dropout information;
- Longer-term follow-up where resources permit; and
- Structured practitioner reflection on what worked, for whom and why.

Organisations should document not only programme content but also the relational and organisational conditions required for delivery, including preparation, staffing, supervision, safeguarding, group size, family engagement and follow-up. Without this information, other organisations may copy visible activities without reproducing the conditions that made them effective.

Internal evidence should be treated honestly. It can demonstrate promising practice, identify patterns and improve delivery, but should not be presented as equivalent to independent proof of effectiveness.

Practice principle: Evidence should serve better practice rather than becoming a bureaucratic exercise detached from the boys and relationships it is intended to understand.

Taken together, these recommendations describe practice that is early, relational, father-aware, group-based, developmentally responsive and connected to family and community. They do not require every organisation to become Lads Need Dads or to adopt one programme wholesale. They require services to understand that boys growing up without a consistent father figure may need more than brief contact with one well-meaning adult.

They need opportunities to make sense of their father story, a voice in the support they receive, dependable adults who remain, peers with whom they can belong, experiences that build confidence and competence, support for the family around them and a pathway that develops as they move from boyhood towards adulthood.

15.4 Final reflection

Across South Africa, the United States, Australia and the UK, I met researchers, policymakers, practitioners, mentors, fathers, mothers and young people approaching the lives of boys from very different perspectives. I visited programmes, attended national events, sat in classrooms and community settings, spoke with people working inside education, family support, youth justice and fatherhood, and listened to adults reflecting on what it had meant to grow up without a consistent father figure themselves.

What became increasingly clear was not that nobody cared about these boys, or that nothing was being done - quite the opposite. I found committed people, strong practice and valuable research in every country I visited. The problem was how rarely the different pieces joined up: research could tell us about outcomes without always reaching those delivering support, practitioners could see patterns developing without a route for that knowledge to influence research or policy, and policymakers were often responding to problems that had already become visible while those working directly with boys were asking what might have been possible years earlier.

I began this Fellowship wanting to understand how boys growing up without a consistent father figure could be better supported. I expected much of the answer to lie in mentoring. Mentoring matters, but what I found was much bigger than mentoring. Boys need relationships that last, opportunities to belong, positive peers and adults, challenge, practical experiences, people who notice when something has changed and somewhere to make sense of what has happened in their lives. For some boys, one trusted adult may make an enormous difference. But the strongest practice I encountered showed the value of building a network around a boy rather than expecting one person or one programme to carry everything.

The Fellowship also made visible a gap that became harder to ignore the further I travelled. We collect extensive information about what happens when children begin to struggle: attendance, attainment, exclusions, safeguarding concerns, mental health difficulties, offending and other indicators of vulnerability. Yet we know far less about the relationships that surrounded them before those difficulties became visible. Whether a boy has lost a father, never known him, sees him inconsistently, has experienced a harmful relationship with him, or has other dependable men providing elements of fathering is rarely part of the picture in any consistent way.

That does not mean father absence explains every difficulty, or that every boy without a consistent father figure needs intervention. This Fellowship has made me more careful, not less, about making those distinctions. Family structure alone tells us very little. What matters is the quality and consistency of the relationships around a child, what an absence or disruption means to him, and whether he has the support he needs to make sense of it.

I also came home knowing that we are not starting from scratch. The knowledge exists across academic research, frontline organisations, schools, families and communities, and there are promising models, experienced practitioners and people with lived experience who understand these issues from the inside. What is missing is a more consistent way of bringing that knowledge together, identifying relational need earlier and ensuring that recognition leads to something useful. For me, that is now the challenge beyond this Fellowship: not simply to ask for more mentoring, more research or another short-term programme, but to connect what we already know and act on it by equipping schools and services to notice relational need, giving them practical ways to respond,

supporting the mothers, carers and families raising these boys, strengthening and preserving father relationships where that is possible and safe, and making sure that where a consistent father relationship is not available, a boy is not left to navigate that absence alone.

After travelling thousands of miles and looking at this question through different countries, systems and disciplines, I keep returning to something remarkably simple. We should not need a boy to fail at school, withdraw from the world, become mentally unwell, enter the justice system or reach crisis before we become curious about the relationships that have shaped his life.

By the time the consequences are visible, we are no longer intervening early. If this Fellowship leaves one question behind, I hope it is this:

What might change if we noticed these boys sooner and acted while there was still time to change the direction of their story?

15.5 References

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Dissemination and next steps

The learning from this Fellowship will be disseminated widely across policy, research and practice. The completed report and accompanying Executive Summary will be shared through the Churchill Fellowship and Lads Need Dads' networks and social media platforms, and directly with organisations, researchers, practitioners and policymakers working across boys' wellbeing, fatherhood, education, early intervention, mentoring, youth justice and family support.

Priority audiences will include the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, the APPG on Men and Boys, the APPG for Fatherhood, the Centre for Social Justice, relevant government departments and policymakers, Violence Reduction Units, local authorities and Family Hubs, education leaders, researchers, funders and organisations working directly with boys and young men. The report will also be shared with the international organisations, practitioners and researchers who contributed to the Fellowship.

Findings will be communicated through presentations, policy discussions, conferences, podcasts, media opportunities and professional networks, alongside shorter articles and social media content designed to make the learning accessible to different audiences. I will also seek opportunities to bring policymakers, researchers and practitioners together around the report's recommendations, reflecting one of the Fellowship's central findings: that these three parts of the system need stronger and more deliberate connections if knowledge is to translate into meaningful change.

Emerging learning from the Fellowship was shared throughout the journey through conference and symposium contributions, media interviews and ongoing conversations with practitioners, researchers and policymakers. Publication of this report therefore marks not the end of the Fellowship, but the beginning of a more deliberate phase of dissemination and influence.

The intention is not simply to circulate a report. It is to use the learning to encourage further research, inform policy and commissioning, strengthen practice, and equip more schools and organisations to recognise and respond to the needs of boys growing up without a consistent father figure. Where opportunities arise, I will continue to contribute evidence to national policy discussions and develop practical ways of translating the Fellowship's findings into approaches that can be used beyond Lads Need Dads.

■ ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements

My thanks go first to the Churchill Fellowship for believing in this enquiry and making it possible. The Fellowship gave me the opportunity to travel to countries I had never visited before, spend time inside organisations, communities and programmes, and meet remarkable people who generously shared their knowledge, experiences and, often, deeply personal stories with me.

I began the Fellowship expecting to learn from others, and I did. What I had not expected was how much it would become a two-way exchange. As I travelled, I found myself not only learning from the people I met, but also sharing the experience of Lads Need Dads, raising awareness of boys growing up without a consistent father figure and encouraging practitioners in other countries to consider a group of boys who can remain unseen within wider discussions about mentoring, fatherhood and young men.

The Fellowship has strengthened my commitment to this work, widened my understanding of what is possible and given me the opportunity to bring people and ideas together across countries, sectors and disciplines. This report is not the end of that journey, but the beginning of further conversations, collaborations and change. None of it would have been possible without the Churchill Fellowship, its belief in the importance of this subject and the opportunity it gave me to explore it.

I am deeply grateful to every practitioner, researcher, policymaker, mentor and young person who gave their time, shared their knowledge and, in many cases, trusted me with difficult and deeply personal experiences. Their honesty and generosity shaped this Fellowship and the conclusions within this report.

South Africa

- **Boykie Tsosane**, whose work in Orlando East contributed greatly to my understanding of mentoring, community relationships and the realities of supporting boys.
- **Gift**, whom I first met at The Character Company camp and later visited at David House. Gift was the first young person I had met who had spent almost his entire childhood in the care system, and I was deeply struck by his stability, ambition and hope for the future. His love of poetry, his personal faith and his determination to build a positive life inspired me, and I feel privileged that we have remained in contact. His story also showed me what sustained care and a long-term relationship with The Character Company can make possible in a young person's life.
- **Jaco van Schalkwyk**, founder of The Character Company, for his passion for this cause, for welcoming me into the organisation and for sharing its approach to long-term mentoring and character development.
- **Kingsley Tloubatla**, The Character Company, Soweto, for sharing his experience of facilitating and mentoring boys, and his reflections on the "mirror effect".
- **Raymond Weaver**, whose work in Delft gave me valuable insight into community-based mentoring and the realities of supporting boys in an area affected by significant violence and loss.
- **Redmond Louw**, of The Character Company, for the considerable time and effort he put into organising my itinerary in South Africa. Redmond coordinated visits, made arrangements and helped ensure that I was able to experience the organisation's work across different communities. His practical support, generosity and attention throughout the visit made an enormous difference and enabled me to gain far more from my time in South Africa.

- **Shanaaz**, Manager of Villa of Hope, and **Sharon** – ‘*House Mother*’, whose faith, compassion and commitment to the young people in her care were deeply inspiring. Her dedication was visible in the stability, care and sense of belonging she worked to create for every young person she supported.
- **Sinola**, for speaking so openly about his long involvement with The Character Company, his experience of its rite of passage and how it had influenced his understanding of manhood.
- **Thando Malepe**, for sharing his deeply personal experience of paternal absence, rejection and eventual forgiveness, and for showing through his life and work what stability, responsibility and presence can mean for boys.
- **The wider Character Company team, mentors and boys**, for welcoming me into their programmes and sharing their experiences so openly.
- **The staff and young people at David House, run by Resthaven Ministries**, for their hospitality and willingness to share their experiences.
- **The staff and young people at Johannesburg Children’s Home**, for their hospitality and openness.
- **The staff and young people at Villa of Hope**, for welcoming me and allowing me to learn from their work.

Additional international contribution

- **Eric Mungai**, Founder and CEO of Yazua Africa in Kenya, whom I met in Johannesburg during my Fellowship. Eric shared his personal story and values-based mentoring model for developing boys as future leaders. Our conversation highlighted the shared principles within our work and the value of grass-roots organisations learning from one another across countries.

United States

- **Attila Tota**, of Boys to Men Mentoring Network in San Diego, for sharing his experience and insight into the importance of understanding the relationships surrounding a boy.
- **Bruce Crenshaw**, of Boys to Men Mentoring Network in San Diego, for sharing his experience of developing school-based mentoring circles and supporting boys within education.
- **Daniel Harris**, of Illuman, for sharing his time and perspective on the reflection, emotional development and support that men themselves may need before taking responsibility for supporting others.
- **Joe Sigurdson**, of Boys to Men Mentoring Network in San Diego, for sharing his time, experience and learning.
- **Jordan Bowman**, of Journeymen Triangle, for sharing the organisation’s approach to mentoring, outdoor challenge, community involvement and rites of passage.
- **Ken Jordan** President and Board Chair of L.A.U.N.C.H. for Life, for taking the time to introduce me to the organisation and its approach, and David Crisafi, Founder and Executive Director, for welcoming me to a community barbecue with the boys, their families and mentors, where I was able to see the programme and its relationships in practice.
- **Nicky Wilks**, co-founder of Journeymen Institute in Washington State, for generously sharing his experience and helping me understand how mentoring, challenge and deliberately recognised transitions can support boys as they move towards adulthood.
- **Rebecca Hayes**, together with the staff and boys at Carver Middle School, for welcoming me into their work and allowing me to see the mentoring circles within the school environment.
- **Dr Warren Farrell**, internationally recognised author, researcher and advocate for boys and men, whose work has helped shape understanding of the challenges facing boys and the importance of fathers in their lives. I am especially grateful for the time he gave me, the generosity and warmth with which he welcomed me into his home, and his willingness to share decades of knowledge and insight.

Meeting someone whose work has influenced the international conversation about boys, men and fathers was a particular privilege and a memorable part of my Fellowship.

- **Warren McCrickard**, of Boys to Men Mentoring Network of Virginia, for his exceptional hospitality and generosity during my time in Virginia. Warren created an extensive itinerary that enabled me to see the work within its wider context, including visits to schools, community groups and mentoring circles, time at local courthouses, conversations with social workers and the opportunity to hear directly from a judge. His generosity in opening doors, making connections and hosting me gave me an unusually rich insight into both the mentoring and the wider systems surrounding the boys they support.
- **The wider Boys to Men Mentoring Network community in San Diego**, for welcoming me and allowing me to learn from their work.

Australia

- **Alick Weber**, of The Man Cave, for sharing his knowledge and learning.
- **Dr Arne Rubinstein**, of the Rites of Passage Institute, for inviting me to participate in his three-day Rite of Passage Leadership programme. This had not formed part of my original Fellowship plans, and his generosity in making it possible for me to attend at a substantially reduced cost gave me an unexpected opportunity to experience rites of passage first-hand and significantly deepened my understanding of their potential for boys and young men.
- **Ben Gathercole**, of Menslink, for his exceptional hospitality and for making my week-long placement possible. Ben went to considerable lengths to organise my time in Canberra, opening up access across Menslink's leadership, mentoring, school and counselling programmes, arranging a breakfast with the Menslink Board and a radio interview, and providing generous practical support throughout my stay.
- **Ben Vasiliou**, of The Man Cave, for welcoming me into the organisation and sharing its approach.
- **Benny**, a former participant in a rites-of-passage programme, for sharing his reflections on how the experience had affected his relationship with his father.
- **Professor Bruce Robinson**, founder of The Fathering Project, whose early conversation and generous guidance helped point me towards people and organisations who could contribute to my Fellowship.
- **Dr Christina Jarron**, of Top Blokes, for sharing the organisation's approach to programme duration, evaluation and maintaining the quality of relational work as it grows.
- **David Maywald**, for his generosity and hospitality during my time in Canberra, and for convening a roundtable of practitioners, charity leaders and policymakers. This created a valuable opportunity for discussion and exchange around the issues at the heart of my Fellowship.
- **David Parkes**, of Menslink, for sharing his experience and learning, and for taking me into schools to observe Menslink's work with boys.
- **Dom Alford**, of The Men's Project, for discussing the Adolescent Man Box research with me and sharing his experience of working with boys and young men.
- **Ebony Biden**, of the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium, for contributing her knowledge and insight.
- **Gerry Banks**, of the ACT Government's Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Office, for contributing her policy and practice perspective.
- **Graeme Hincksman**, of Menslink, for sharing his knowledge and experience.
- **Henry Goodwin**, of Menslink, for generously sharing his time, experience and insight.
- **Associate Professor Jacqui Macdonald**, of the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium, for sharing her research and learning.
- **Dr James Brown**, for sharing his clinical insight into boys' and men's emotional expression, and the importance of creating the trust and emotional safety that allows them to speak openly.
- **Jennifer Ericksen**, of the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium, for sharing her research and experience.

- **Chief Superintendent John Hawkins**, of ACT Policing, for sharing a valuable policing and prevention perspective.
- **Joshie Glover**, of The Man Cave, for sharing his time and insight.
- **Dr Karen Wynter**, of Deakin University, for sharing her research and helping me understand the development of fatherhood research in Australia.
- **Káti Gapaillard**, together with the wider Fathering Project team, for their welcome, support and generosity.
- **Lindsay Marchment**, of The Man Cave, for contributing his time, experience and insight and arranging such helpful meetings with his team.
- **Lucy Barrat**, of The Man Cave, for contributing her time, experience and perspective.
- **Maggie Dent**, for sharing her extensive knowledge and experience of working with boys and families.
- **Matthew Taylor**, of Menslink, for his time and contribution to my understanding of the organisation's work.
- **Michael Wilson**, of Movember, for sharing his knowledge and insight into men's health, relationships and the importance of combining compassion with accountability.
- **Mike Kelly**, for generously sharing reflections drawn from more than four decades of work across youth justice, youth homelessness and child protection.
- **Professor Rebecca Giallo**, of the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium, for contributing her expertise and perspective.
- **Scott McIntyre**, together with the team at Boys to the Bush, for generously sharing their model and learning with me.
- **Associate Professor Zac Seidler**, of the Australian Fatherhood Research Consortium, for contributing his research and perspective.
- **The young man who shared his poem during the Rite of Passage Leadership programme**, for allowing me to include part of such a personal and moving piece of writing in this report. His words about losing his father, caring for his mother and twin, and learning from the other men in his life stayed with me and captured powerfully what bereavement and growing up without a father can mean for a boy.
- **The wider team at The Man Cave**, who welcomed me into their work over several days. I was able to learn about their approach to evaluation, take part in practitioner training, observe their work, exchange learning with the team and share the work of Lads Need Dads. Their openness and generosity were hugely valuable.
- **The researchers, practitioners and speakers at the Australian Fatherhood Research Symposium and other fatherhood events**, whose perspectives contributed to the wider learning from my time in Australia.

United Kingdom

- **Dr Anna Machin**, for sharing her knowledge and research on fatherhood, fathering and social fathers, and for the valuable insights she brought to our discussion.
- **Professor Anna Tarrant**, of the University of Lincoln, for sharing her research and giving me permission to draw on material from her work on father-inclusive Family Hubs.
- **Ashley Mills**, for his openness in sharing his story, and for the insights that helped me think more deeply about what happens when boys who grow up without a consistent father figure become fathers themselves.
- **Professor Ben Hine**, of the University of West London, for his earlier research collaboration with Lads Need Dads, which helped establish an important foundation for understanding teachers' experiences of supporting boys growing up without a consistent father figure.
- **Chris Stein**, of Future Men, for sharing the organisation's experience of working both with boys in schools and supporting new and expectant fathers.

- **Colleagues within Essex County Council Public Health**, for contributing their time, knowledge and local perspectives.
- **Colleagues working across Family Hubs nationally**, for sharing their experience and insight.
- **Ed Davies**, Research Director at the Centre for Social Justice, for helping me understand the fragmentation of responsibility for families, fathers and boys across government and public services.
- **Dr Helena Wright**, of the RSHE, Citizenship and Equalities Unit at the Department for Education, for her helpful response regarding the updated RSHE guidance and the importance of supporting boys without stigmatising them.
- **Dr Joshua Fullard**, of the University of Warwick, for contributing his research perspective and helping me think about the relationship between frontline practice, research and policy.
- **Karla Allen**, former East of England National Adviser with the National Centre for Family Hubs, for sharing her knowledge of father-inclusive practice and the opportunities for mentoring to complement the developing Families First reforms.
- **Luke Taylor**, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Social Justice, for his leading role in the *Lost Boys* research and for generously sharing his knowledge and reflections with me.
- **Neil Thomas**, then Deputy Director for Public Sector Reform and Efficiency at the Cabinet Office, whose early conversation with me about prevention and the Government's Test, Learn and Grow programme helped crystallise questions that I went on to explore through the Fellowship.
- **Nick Isles**, of the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys, for sharing his insight into the emerging policy landscape for boys and men, and his perspective on connecting research, policy and frontline practice.
- **Peter Barden**, of aBandOfBrothers, for sharing the organisation's approach to mentoring, social fathering, rites of passage and long-term community support.
- **New Philanthropy Capital and Movember**, for involving me in the scoping work examining organisations and funding focused on boys and young men, and for giving me the opportunity to contribute frontline experience to that wider conversation.
- **Ruth Talbot**, of Save the Children and founder of Single Parent Rights, for helping me understand the sensitivity around discussing father absence without blaming or stigmatising single mothers.
- **The policy lead for the Ministry of Justice's Turnaround Programme**, for an open and constructive discussion about father absence, evaluation and youth justice.
- **The practitioners and professionals who contributed anonymously**, for trusting me with sensitive experiences and perspectives that helped strengthen this Fellowship.
- **The Youth Endowment Fund**, for a valuable conversation about evidence, commissioning, scale and early intervention.
- **The 59 men who completed the lived-experience survey**, for reflecting honestly on what growing up without a consistent father figure had meant across their childhood and adult lives.
- **The 69 mothers who completed the Mothers Raising Sons Alone survey**, for sharing the realities of raising boys without a consistent father figure and the support they believed would have made a difference.

My family

Finally, my deepest, heartfelt thanks go to my family, who have supported me throughout this Fellowship and throughout the work that led to it.

- **My husband, Joel**, for his unwavering support, dedication and patience throughout the entire Fellowship. He has encouraged me through the travelling, research, writing and many hours spent bringing this report together, while continuing to stand beside me in the work of Lads Need Dads. I could not have completed this journey without him.
- **Our three sons**, Josiah, Micah and Daniel who have been part of this journey and the work I have undertaken for more than a decade. They have grown up alongside Lads Need Dads and have offered their perspectives, ideas, encouragement and practical help along the way. Their experiences and insight have helped shape how we work with boys and young men, and they continue to influence my understanding of what young men need from the adults and relationships around them.

This Fellowship involved far more than the international travel itself. It required months of preparation, interviews, reading, reflection, writing and rewriting. I could not have completed it without the generosity of the people named here and the support of those closest to me. I remain deeply grateful to every person who helped make it possible.

Appendix: fellowship surveys

As part of this Fellowship, Lads Need Dads CIC conducted two surveys to bring lived experience into the research: one with adult men who grew up without a consistent father figure, and one with mothers raising sons in those circumstances. Together, they provide perspectives from both adulthood looking back and families experiencing these issues while boys are still growing up.

1. Men who grew up without a consistent father figure

Lads Need Dads CIC conducted a survey of 59 men aged 18 and over who grew up without a consistent father figure. The survey gathered quantitative data and qualitative testimony across childhood emotional experience, education, relationships, work, identity and, where applicable, their own experiences of becoming fathers.

Headline findings included: 68% rated the emotional impact of their childhood at 4 or 5 out of 5; 83% said their adult relationships had been shaped by their upbringing; and 66% received no formal support at the time. Among those who had become fathers or stepfathers, 71% described a strong determination to parent differently from their own father. At the same time, 42% said their upbringing had created challenges in their own parenting, while 21% sometimes felt unsure how to be a father without a model to draw on.

The survey adds a perspective that is often missing from fatherhood research. Rather than examining the impact of fathers on children at a particular point in childhood, it asks adult men to reflect on what growing up without a consistent father figure meant for them across different stages of their lives.

[Read the full Men's Lived Experience Survey](#)

2. Mothers raising sons alone

Lads Need Dads CIC also conducted a survey of mothers raising sons without a consistent father figure. The survey explored mothers' experiences of raising sons in these circumstances, the practical and emotional pressures they faced, the support available to them, and what they believed would have made the greatest difference to themselves and their sons.

The findings provide an important complementary perspective to the men's lived-experience survey. While the men's survey looks back at the longer-term experience of growing up without a consistent father figure, the mothers' survey captures what this can look like while boys are still growing up and families are navigating those circumstances in real time.

[Mums Raising Sons Alone Survey](#)