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Great Yarmouth Young Men's Project

The project won the fpa's national Pamela Sheridan Award in 2004 for outstanding work in sex and relationships education.

The Great Yarmouth Young Men's Project was set up in June 2001 as a teenage pregnancy initiative to address the sexual health needs of young men in the area and to develop support for young fathers. Working in partnership with a wide range of agencies the project delivers sex and relationships education (SRE) to boys in 5 high schools in Great Yarmouth and is one of the core services at school based health clinics in 4 of these schools. Those boys who are not in mainstream education receive input from the project though work conducted with other agencies such as the Youth Offending Team and the Youth Service. The project engages with young men aged over 16 through delivery at colleges and training providers.

Consultation

The Project began with consultation with young men and young women, individually, in groups and at a young person's conference. The young people included those in mainstream education, those who were excluded or at risk of exclusion from education and those who experience exclusion in other forms such as care leavers, young offenders, young fathers and young mothers. The conference explored and evaluated young persons' experiences of SRE. Two separate seminars were held to enable pupils to develop the nature and design of the School Based Health Service provision. Consultation was also conducted with staff from schools, colleges, sexual health services and other agencies who were, or who could be, working with young men.

The consultation revealed that young men felt that their needs were not being met by the sex and relationships education they received at school and that they felt excluded from sexual health services within Great Yarmouth. Consultation remains an ongoing process as part of the formative evaluation of the work of the project.

Programme of work

A programme of work was developed and delivered in single sex groups to complement the SRE delivered by the schools. This work is delivered to Years 9, 10 and 11 with a partner agency who work with the young women. Various models of work

have been piloted but single sex groups have proved for us to be by far the most effective.

Masculinity

Masculinity was identified through various sources as one of the major barriers to positive protective sexual health behaviour. Boys are growing up within a very stereotypical and restrictive understanding of who men are, what they do, what they don't do, how they can behave, communicate and relate towards others. The starting point for the work with young men is to explore their understanding of masculinity and what it means to them. This enables them to communicate with each other in a way that they do not usually have the opportunity to do.

The first session with each group is designed to create a safe environment in which the young men feel more confident about their knowledge, or lack of it, and also, significantly, the levels of knowledge of their peers. The work in this session allows young men to be candid and open in the questions they ask and the information they are prepared to give and receive in subsequent sessions. In the feedback received during the evaluation process boys and young men identify what they enjoy about the sessions; statements regularly include "talking to each other", "listening to each other" and "sharing our feelings".

Access

The young men, after receiving input from the project worker during SRE, can access him via the school-based health service through which the worker can, when it is appropriate, support them in accessing other services within the community. As a result of this work young men are accessing health services in much greater numbers than before and report higher levels of confidence in doing so.

Young men have made up a significant proportion of the young people attending the school based health services. At one of the schools attendance has been evenly split 50/50 between young men and young women. At the other schools the figures have been more variable but young men have made up a high proportion of attendees, at one school rising during the autumn term to make up 60% of young people

attending. Not only are the young men attending the service but their contact and communication with staff has been open and confident.

Evidence

Some of the most significant evidence of the impact of this programme has been anecdotal. What is clear is that young men are talking about the input of this project and it is causing a buzz amongst young men in Great Yarmouth: "This stuff kicks arse!" The participants discuss the content outside the session, they talk within their year groups, and they talk across year groups. The young men are also talking across different schools, they have been known to be able to tell me (correctly) which school I will be working in next. Professionals from other agencies are finding that young men are instigating discussion with them regarding the input of this project

Talking and listening

Through the SRE young men receive information regarding their sexual health but this in itself is not enough to create accessibility of health services. Accessibility is being achieved in a variety of ways usually identified by the young men themselves. Working in close partnerships with agencies, making visits to local services, reassurance over confidentiality and positive, non-judgemental attitudes from staff, effective local promotions all play a part in this.

Young men want to look after their health and the health of others, and they want to access services. The reasons that have not traditionally done so are complex but the solutions are less so. The ground-work is talking to, and more importantly listening to, boys and young men.

The future

The Young Men's Project was set up by Great Yarmouth PCT with only short-term funding for 3 years. It now receives mainstream funding from the PCT and is currently engaged in identifying ways to roll out the work across the rest of Norfolk.

The project also provides support for young fathers and alongside other services is delivering antenatal support for young men. But that's another story...