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## What's It Been Like?

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**Purpose:** To enable participants to reflect on their past and current experiences as sons, men, and fathers. To offer men the opportunity for peer support as they talk about these experiences.

**Materials:** None.

**Time:** 70-90 minutes.

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**Planning Note:** When choosing between this activity and “Manhood Collage” (Activity 3-3), it is important to know how comfortable the men feel talking with each other and how they respond to discussion questions. If the group gets into discussions easily and most of the fathers participate, choose this activity. But if the group has many silent members, or monopolizers, or those who don’t yet trust each other enough to respond to personal questions, choose “Manhood Collage.”

Many men in this program have experienced abuse, neglect, poverty, and racism at some point in their lives, and all these factors affect how they see themselves as men. They may not have had good relationships with their own fathers and may be unwilling or unable to talk about their past. Thus, this activity can be hard for the men. The facilitator should be aware that in some instances it will be helpful (and less stressful) to ask the participants to think of men other than their fathers who may have been influential in their lives. The fact that they have made it thus far suggests that, somewhere along the way, someone was there for them. If any father seems truly upset by this activity, connect him with the case manager, or refer him directly to additional counseling.

**Procedure:** Tell the fathers that Sessions 1 and 2 have helped them get to know each other, what they value in their lives, and how these values have been developed. Then say something like, “In today’s session we will talk about manhood. We will try to answer the question ‘What is a man?’ We will also discuss how you came to be the men that you are today.”

**Start** the activity by saying that the ideas people hold about manhood have a lot to do with how they were raised; with the kinds of relationships they had with other men, including their fathers; and with the things that happened to them in the past. Tell them that this activity will give each man an opportunity to talk about what his life has been like.

**First**, ask each person in turn to share the following:

- His age.
- The name(s) and age(s) of his child(ren).
- A little about the family he grew up in, including who raised him, the number of children in his family, and how he would describe himself as a boy growing up.
- The neighborhood he grew up in.

**You can** conduct this activity in several ways:

- Lead an informal discussion, spending a few minutes on each question, and let the fathers respond freely to whatever is said; or, if they prefer, have them talk generally about their lives as men and fathers.
- Discuss only one or two questions, and spend the extra time hearing from all the fathers.
- Write each question on an index card, give one card to each father, and ask him to respond to that question. (If there are more than 15 participants, you can add some other relevant questions, or have more than one person respond to the same question.)
- Give each father a copy of all the questions, asking him to choose one that he feels comfortable talking about.

**When** everyone has shared the basic information about himself, select an approach from the options above to discuss their experiences as sons, men, and fathers. If you choose an informal discussion, as facilitator you should play an active role to guide the men to the important issues of manhood (such as what it has been like to be a father, a worker, a provider, etc.). Keep the discussion moving, and, if necessary, focus it to include some of the issues raised in the discussion questions.

**In selecting** questions, begin by allowing everyone to talk about the men who were important to him growing up (who these men were, how the community viewed them, what kind of work they did, etc.). Then focus on where and from whom the participants got messages about what it is to be a man (for example, the definition of a “successful man,” their idea of men as workers, providers, etc.). After everyone has participated in this discussion, focus on the men’s relationships with their own fathers. Finally, focus on their relationships with their children and how they view themselves as men, fathers, workers, and providers.

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### ▼ Discussion Questions

1. Think back to when you were a boy. Who were the men in your life that you remember seeing every day? Who were the men who were most important to you? (Encourage the participants to think of all possibilities. Their role models did not have to be “upstanding” men in the community. They may have had good relationships with men from all walks of life. Encourage open, honest sharing.)
2. What good or helpful things did you get from these men? (Participants might share such things as “how to do something,” “how to deal with women,” “how to be a man.”)
3. What kinds of jobs did the men in your community or neighborhood have?
4. What ideas did these men give you about a man’s role as a provider?
5. How did people around you view men who did not work?
6. What was your relationship like with your own father (or, possibly, stepfather or your mother’s boyfriend)?
7. As a boy, what were your ideas about “being a real man”?

8. Who were your male heroes?
9. As a boy, what kind of job or career did you hope to have when you grew up?
10. As a boy, what did you think would make you “a man”?
11. What is your earliest memory of feeling that you had become a man?
12. What were your feelings on the day you became a father?
13. What has it been like to be a father so far? What has been good about it?  
What has been hard?
14. What kind of father do you want to be?
15. Which of your own experiences as a boy would like to share with your child?
16. Which experiences do you wish you had had as a boy?
17. Would you like your child’s life to be the same as yours or different?
18. If you could change your relationship with your father today, what would you change?
19. Has your relationship with your father influenced your relationship with your child? How?
20. Who were the most important women in your life? What did they teach you about manhood?
21. What do you want your daughters to know about what it’s like to be a man?

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## Manhood Collage

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**Purpose:** To give the participants an opportunity to reflect on their past and current lives as sons, men, and fathers. To help the men think about their experiences as adolescents moving toward manhood.

**Materials:** Pictures from magazines that depict “male” life as a teenager (such as pictures of sports, the playground, school, graduation, food, candy, clothing, family, friends, beer, cigarettes, cars, cologne, women, music, work, etc.); “feeling” words (such as *cool, hot, bad, crazy, wild, smooth, diss, respect, friends, depressed, happy, confused*, etc.); construction paper, scissors, and glue.

**Time:** 70-90 minutes.

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**Planning Note:** The goal of “Manhood Collage” is to help the men think about their experiences as teenagers, when they were making the important transition into adulthood (and manhood). The use of pictures helps them to recall those powerful feelings. For men who have not resolved some of the difficulties of their teenage years, these feelings may still be close to the surface.

The collage activity can generate discussion in a group where some members are uncomfortable “just talking.” The pictures give them something tangible to grasp and help to focus discussion. They also get everyone involved, even the quiet members. If your group might have difficulty talking freely in “What’s It Been Like?” (Activity 3-2), choose this activity instead. Be sure to end with a discussion about the participants’ experiences as men and fathers, using the questions provided (or your own).

Before the session, cut out pictures and “feeling” words that depict aspects of male life, particularly those of adolescence. Browse such magazines as *Sports Illustrated*, *Essence*, *Ebony*, *Weight Lifting*, *Jet*, *THROUGH*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Latino*, or any others that reflect the culture and ethnicity of the participants. Mount each picture and each word on a separate sheet of construction paper. Make enough of these so that each participant can select four or five images and words that represent who he was as an adolescent — and what manhood meant to him. (You can get back-dated magazines from your friends, the doctor’s or dentist’s office, the barber shop, etc., allowing you to build a “collection” over time.)

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**Procedure:** Tell the participants that they are going to do a fun activity to help them remember what they were like as boys, thinking about becoming a man. In this activity, “a picture is worth a thousand words.”

**Place** all the pictures and words in the center of the room, on a table or the floor. Say something like, “I would like you to pick up as many pictures or words as you want that show the group who you were as an adolescent. Pick items that show the activities, feelings, or ideas that you thought would make you a man.”

**When** everyone has gathered four or five pictures or words, lead a discussion using the following questions.

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### ▼ Discussion Questions

1. What were you like as a teenager? What was important to you? What did you spend your time doing? Who were your friends?
2. What do the pictures and words that you chose tell us about you during your teen years? How did you feel about yourself? In what ways have you changed?
3. What kinds of things did you do as a boy that helped you make the transition to manhood? What people were important at this time in your life? How did they influence your becoming a man?
4. Which people in your neighborhood or community did you see or have contact with every day? Who were the men in your life? Which men did you look up to?
5. What ideas did these men give you about being a man? About being a father?
6. What kinds of jobs did the men in your community or neighborhood have?
7. What ideas did these men give you about a man's role as a worker and provider?
8. How did people around you view men who did not work?
9. As a boy, what kind of job or career did you hope to have when you became an adult?
10. What was your relationship like with your family? With your father (or, possibly, stepfather)?
11. What thoughts do you remember having about what your life would be like if you became a father someday?
12. Were you a teenage father, or did you have friends who were? If so, how did this experience shape you (or your friends) as a father? What would be different if you had become a father when you were older?
13. In what ways are your children's lives like your own as a boy? In what way are they different?

- 14. From the pictures and words that you chose to represent who you were as a teenager, which would you like your children to someday choose or not choose?
- 15. Who were the most important women in your life? What did they teach you about manhood?
- 16. What do you want your daughters to know about what it's like to be a man?

**When** everyone has had an opportunity to talk about his life during adolescence, have a general discussion about how boys become men. Include all the factors that influence a young man's development, including friends, parents, schools, media, and the community (prompt the men to discuss not only people but also their teenage opportunities, ideas, values, experiences, world events, etc.).