

Boys wanting a male befriender

Boys with a strong sense of a conventional male identity have a preference for a male befriender:



'So I could play lots of ruffy tufty games... Yeah I need someone that's is ruffy and is tufty as my daddy is.' (Lewis)

'I get guy time and we do all sorts of good stuff.' (Cameron)

'If I said I wanted to do a bit of woodwork or something, a woman'd say oh why would you want to do that, go and do something else or they just wouldn't join in as much as a man would.' (Ian)

'Because he's a man, he can run, he can be active, because boys can do different things than girls, boys can run faster than girls.' (Craig)

'I think with having my befriender we can do more of the like...like go-karting, crashing into things, running around stuff... we can go cycling, and... he can help me and if he crashes I can help him.' (Andrew)

'If a man takes you out sometimes, it would be more people, more often like going to play basketball or going to a football tournament.' (Hamish)



Spending time with a male befriender: the benefits for older boys

For some of the older boys it was important to spend time with an adult male. Andrew had been meeting his befriender for a couple of years. He was clear that he felt more comfortable having a male befriender 'no offence to any of the girls that I hang around with but I just like prefer to be with guys'. He emphasised the activities they did and suggested that their shared interest in horror films was something that he did not think a female befriender would like. Andrew said that his befriender had helped him:

'I'm a lot more confident now, I can talk to a lot more people. I can handle quite a lot of things better... We always have a carry on when we're out so that kind of boosts my confidence... and then I started to think, well if I can do this with one person I'm pretty sure I can do it with quite a few more'.

Andrew said that his befriender was like a big brother to him. His mother thought that it had been good for Andrew to have a man:

'He has a lot of hang-ups about his dad, there is a lot of anger issues to do with his dad not being here and leaving him and what he did to me and stuff like that. So his befriender has completely changed all that... it's been somebody that's consistent in his life and he's spoken to him about a lot of things'.

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More male bendifrienders wanted for children



Background

Befriending projects for children recruit and train adult volunteers to support individual children or sibling groups, through engaging in weekly leisure activities with them. The children face difficulties either at home, in school or in the community, and many of those referred face problems such as their own learning or behavioural difficulty; the disability of a sibling; parental substance abuse or imprisonment; domestic abuse or the death of a parent.

The 'Me and My Befriender' research project



Befriending Networks, an organisation promoting befriending, indicates that children referred to projects come disproportionately from lone mother families and that staff are concerned about the lack of male volunteers for the higher number of boys needing befrienders.

The 'Me and My Befriender' study gathered details of the experiences of 26 children attending 9 befriending projects in Scotland and England. The study wanted to understand how children viewed the befriending relationship. The 17 boys and 9 girls, were aged 6-15 years and came from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The study was interested in the children's views at various stages in the befriending relationship; 17 children were interviewed prior to them knowing who their befriender might be. Some 10 of these children were interviewed a second time, after meeting their befriender. The remaining 9 children had more long-term relationships with their befrienders. In addition, interviews were conducted with 18 lone mothers/female carers and 3 lone fathers and with project managers in each of the befriending projects. All names are pseudonyms.

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Two further briefing papers are available:

- Me and my befriender: an overview of the research findings together with key messages and practice, policy, research implications
- About my befriender: children speak about their adult-child befriending relationships.

Children should have contact with both men and women

Children's befriending projects are divided between those who think that male befrienders definitely should not be matched with girls because of safety reasons and those who think that boys are the priority and also are not keen to 'step outside the box' and go against perceptions of societal views.

Some projects think that such issues can be overcome by matching a girl with:

- A male/female couple.
- A woman who has got a male in her life - he would be police checked.
- An experienced male youth worker.

'Most girls don't ask for a male, although you can see the need sometimes. There is one little girl and her mother wants a male befriender for her... We would consider it we'd just have to see who comes along but we've got so many boys that need men that whilst we would want to...you know, we're stepping outside the box.'

(Befriending project)

The views of parents

Half of the parents of boys wanted a male befriender for their sons:

- Because he is surrounded by women.
- Because he **'zones in on the fathers of other boys'** and is very demanding.
- So he can see a male who **'is able to express himself and talk about his feelings and be sensitive'**.
- To counteract: **'negative' male traits 'defensive and aggressive'** from his father; or from **'being in a class of boys... and there's just so much testosterone, battling all the time, competitiveness'**.
- Wanting a man who can do traditional male activities: **'I cannae like build things, well I can build wee units but I'm, I won't go out and tinker with a car and electrics and, you know, that kind of stuff'**.
- Wanting a male presence: **'it's important that there is a man there somewhere'**.

However, two parents specifically wanted female befrienders for their sons. One boy was emotionally closed since the death of his mother and another had lived with a man who was later convicted of child sexual abuse.

Male befrienders for girls?

All of the parents said they wanted a female befriender for their daughters. One single father gave the following reason:

'On the women side of things she sometimes gets embarrassed asking me so I think a befriender, if they get close enough, it's someone she could talk to about those things that she finds difficult to talk to me about which would be very beneficial'.

One mother thought it was important to have a befriender that she, herself could relate to:

'You can get on with them more comfortably... it's better, safer, more relaxed. She is a bit silly, maybe she'll be okay with a man, but I think to start off with a female is better... because you are female yourself'.

This mother was not ruling out a male befriender and in the study one girl, along with her brother in a sibling match, did get a male befriender. Ailsa did not feel that she and her befriender had much in common:

'I'm not that, like, a football-ish girl, I'm, like, a make-up girl because I have nail varnish on'

However, she liked him and felt that she had really benefited from having him as a befriender.

'Well, I'd really like it if I'd got a female... because I feel like I can get more along with a female. I feel like you need to have like both sexes'.
(Cameron)

'He's just like my brother... I feel more confident because he helps me. He's a lot different to other men I know... because he asks more funny stuff'. (Ailsa)

'Well, maybe, if there's no girls then we don't mind (a man)'.
(Clara)