

Time to man up

Both boys and girls would benefit from more male volunteer befrienders, says Sue Milne

Lone mothers of boys referred to befriending projects are often seeking a male volunteer to support their sons. Some emphasise the role a man could play in engaging in traditional male activities like woodwork and mechanics. Others want the involvement of “a male who is able to express himself, talk about his feelings and be sensitive”. But many are just seeking a male presence in their sons’ lives, particularly if they are “surrounded by women” such as sisters and their mother’s female friends and daughters. Boys themselves talk about wanting to have a male befriender whom they can spend ‘guy time’ with.

“It’s important there’s a man there somewhere”

Andrew was nearing the end of high school. He had a disability and had had problems making friends. He said: “I just prefer being round with guys and that, no offence to any of the girls I hang around with but I just prefer to be with guys ... I think with having my befriender we can do more, like go-karting, crashing into things, running around”.

Andrew’s mum said she thought it had been good for him to have a male befriender. “He has a lot of hang-ups about his dad, there are a lot of anger issues to do with his dad not being here and leaving him,” she said. “His befriender has completely changed all that ... it’s been somebody consistent in his life and he’s spoken to him about a lot of things.”

Whilst some boys really want, and need, a male befriender, others are quite happy to have a female volunteer. Angus and his mother had faced a range of difficulties because of troubles with his father, and he felt it was good having a befriender “because it’s somebody to talk to when you’re feeling down, and you can have lots of fun with them”. He had had his befriender for 10 months and the activity he most enjoyed was football. “It gets me out of the house ... so then it stops me being angry or bored,” he explained. “I’m more into football than any other activity.” But Angus didn’t think it would have made any difference to him if his befriender had been a woman. “Apart from the man would prefer sport games ... unless it was a girl that was sporty, obviously.” Being sporty was the most important characteristic.

Sometimes girls are matched with a male befriender. Ailsa and her brother, who are both at primary school, live with their mother, who as a lone parent struggles to cope with the children’s illnesses and regular admissions to hospital. A befriender gives her some space and gives the children an opportunity to do different activities. Ailsa and her brother were matched with a male volunteer, although this was not Ailsa’s initial choice: “I don’t actually feel confident with a man there and I don’t like a man helping me”. But she was persuaded to give the volunteer a try and even though they did not have much in common, she found that he made a good befriender. “I feel more confident because he helps me ... I feel confident with him,” she said. “He’s a lot different to other men I know ... because he asks more funny stuff.”

However matching girls with men is unusual. Some befriending projects say they would not match a girl with a man: “[It’s] quite sad in some ways, and it’s not necessarily what I personally think is right ... that’s just society”. Other projects say while they would match

male volunteers with girls they see boys as the priority, because there are too few men volunteering to take on a befriender role. They spoke of male befrienders as offering a positive role model:

“There is no male role model in this young person’s life ... There’s possibly been a male in this young person’s life that’s been a very negative impact ... Trying to ... see that not all males have that sort of negative influence ... a lot of young people haven’t had a consistent male in their lives, [they] have never known a dad, they’ve not had very positive experiences.”

“A lot of the mums we’ve got are doing a pretty wonderful job with their boys, but they’re not men ... they don’t have male friends either. The boys say I want a man ... what you need from a male role model is ordinariness ... A lot of these kids have models of footballers ... they don’t know any men that are ordinary, that are not perfect ... they need contact and they need a relationship, so then they can accept their own ordinary bits.”

“Lots of the girls that need befriended have got no positive male role model in their life and it would be quite nice for them to know that not all men are bad or abusive.”

Figures from Befriending Networks, a membership organisation supporting befriending projects, show less than a quarter of volunteers are men. Discussing possible reasons for this situation, participants at a recent seminar reporting on findings from the research study *Me and My Befriender* suggested that:

- Men are interested in the befriending role but are frightened of how they will be perceived by the rest of society. The question was raised of whether this is a particularly British phenomenon? Is it even the same across the UK or across different cultural subgroups within the UK?
- Men are quite daunted by the prospect of becoming a befriender and of having a young person “relying” on them.
- Staff of befriending services (and in fact many social services) tend to be female.
- Frustratingly men are much more likely to volunteer to sit on the boards of befriending services than they are to volunteer as a befriender.
- Maybe men feel they don’t have the necessary skills to be befrienders.

However, projects have found that when men do come forward, undertake the training and take on the role of befriending a child, they tend to commit. Let’s hope that more male volunteers come forward to support children like Andrew, Angus and Ailsa.

Sue Milne conducted the Me and My Befriender research. For more details on the study go to www.cfr.ac.uk/befriending