

From Boys **to Men**

The HeadsUp programme 'Raising Boys for Fathers' aims to support dads in developing more open relationships with their sons as they navigate life's challenges together.



ACCORDING TO THE most recent provisional statistics available from the National Office for Suicide Prevention, approximately 420 people died by suicide in Ireland in 2008, with the frequency of suicide highest among men in their early 20s. It is against this alarming backdrop that HeadsUp, Rehab's mental health promotion project, saw the need to deliver the 'Raising Boys for Fathers' parenting programme. The aim of the course is to offer a protective factor from suicide by supporting dads in communicating and relating better with their sons and by positively impacting on their sons' mental well-being through having a supportive adult to talk to during difficult times.

The course was first developed in the north west of Ireland as a response to the fact that few fathers attended traditional parenting courses. It has been developed by fathers and is delivered by fathers of sons who are trained facilitators.

Martin Murphy is one of the course facilitators and works for National Learning Network in Athlone, Co. Westmeath. Martin did the course himself back in 2006, when his only son was then aged 12 years. "I felt that anything I could do to contribute to my son's life, to make our relationship as good as it possibly could be, would only be beneficial. It wasn't that there was anything particularly wrong with our relationship, but as we were about to enter my son's teen years, I was more than happy to get any tips for dealing with what might lie ahead!"

Martin feels that having the opportunity to talk to other dads in similar situations was invaluable. "It was great to have a forum to talk about our relationships with our sons and not about the usual things that guys talk about when they get together – work, sport, and so on. The

course gave me a lot of confidence around the things that I was doing already. It did, however, make me realise the importance of doing physical things with my son, such as playing football. Boys are very physical beings and it is hugely important that we facilitate that and participate in activity with them as best we can. It's also about managing their risk-taking. Boys need to experience exhilaration and the excitement of an adrenaline rush in a safe environment. So rather than them doing that, for example, by taking a car and driving at excessive speeds, it's about finding other outlets for that need, e.g. a bungee jump; though I'm not saying that dads have to do that too!"

We have all heard the saying that "big boys don't cry". For Martin, he learned that dads should not be afraid to show their emotions with their sons. "If your son doesn't see you displaying emotion, he won't be able to show emotion himself or feel OK about showing emotion and expressing his feelings. It's about allowing the space for you and your son to have time together, to talk about the things that are going on in both your lives and to support him in areas that he might need help with, whether that be around issues such as career, sexuality, etc. Of course, sometimes you won't have all the answers, but that's OK too, to say 'I don't know, but we'll explore it together.' And that space doesn't have to be a set time or place; it can be when you're both out getting the turf in or mowing the lawn or whatever. It should be part of the day-to-day stuff that you do together."

As a facilitator, what does Martin now feel that he most brings to the participants? "The most important thing I feel that I can bring is that I am a dad of a boy too and I feel very privileged to be part of a forum where other men share insights about their relationships with their sons. We all learn from each other."



Pictured: Martin Murphy.

And the results of better communication between dads and their sons have been borne out by research, says Martin. "We know that for some time, girls have been beating the boys in the results leagues in schools and colleges and that boys are more inclined to drop out of school at an early age. However, research has also shown that where boys have good relationships with their dads, that they do equally as well as girls so that's extremely important to know."

If you would like to find out more about becoming a 'Raising Boys for Fathers' facilitator, see the contact information below. ■

Who to contact

For further information please contact:



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