

"At a time when we are losing so many young men, a resource like *Real Men* can literally save lives."

—Dr. Pedro Noguera



Real Men 2.0

A Curriculum Guide for Promoting Positive Masculinity

David Heller, M.A.T. and Jillian Luft, M.Ed.

Foreword by Edward Fergus

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Session 3

Acting Like a Man

SEL FOCUS: SELF-AWARENESS

Story to Use: “Removing the Mask” by Melvin Pichardo

Story Summary: Melvin goes against his father’s ideas of what it means to be a real man. Studying acting helps him break out of traditional male roles.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Reflecting on their sense of self and identity
- Being able to take the perspective of others from diverse backgrounds
- Developing an expanded sense of masculinity

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing to express personal, social, and cultural connections and insights

Materials

- Colored Pencils
- Tape

Preparation

- Read the story ahead of time. Reflect on your personal response and how the group may respond.
- Read the session plan and prepare the agenda.
- For the Opinion Continuum activity, create a sign that says “**agree**” and one that says “**disagree**.” Hang the signs on opposite ends of the room.
- For the Explore the Ideas Activity, make enough copies of the Gender Mask handout (p. 49) so everyone in the group has one.

GETTING STARTED (2 minutes)

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Acting Like a Man

- Review Group Agreements
- Opening Activity: Opinion Continuum
- Read and Discuss: "Removing the Mask" by Melvin Pichardo
- OPTIONAL ✓ ● Explore the Ideas Activity: Draw It/Gender Mask
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — OPINION CONTINUUM

(10 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After welcoming the group, point out the two signs that are posted at opposite ends of the room. Explain to the group that they will be doing an activity that allows them to move around while learning more about what they and their peers think about a topic.
2. While the group is still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
 - "On either end of the room, there are signs that read 'agree' and 'disagree.'"
 - "I will read a statement and you will decide whether it's true for you (agree) or not (disagree). Then you will move somewhere in between the two signs that reflects your opinion. If you're unsure, you should stand somewhere in the middle."
 - "Once everyone has moved, I will invite volunteers to share why they chose to stand where they are."
3. Clear a space and ask group members to stand somewhere between the two signs.
4. Read the first statement and ask group members to move to a spot between the two signs that reflects their opinion:
 - "Men and women are pretty much the same."
5. Once all group members have moved in response to a statement, ask them to notice where other group members are standing. (You can support minority positions by moving closer to someone who is alone at one end of the continuum.)

6. Ask for volunteers to share why they are standing where they are. Ask at least one group member from each side of the continuum. Tell group members they may change their position if they are influenced by another group member's opinion.
7. After each question, have everyone return to the middle.
8. Repeat for each statement:
 - "My family expects me to be a certain way because I'm a boy."
 - "I feel like I have to act a certain way to fit in as a guy."
 - "It's harder to be a guy than to be a girl."
 - "It's OK to change something about yourself to fit in as a man."
9. Thank group members for sharing their opinions.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (30 minutes)

By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, group members build comprehension and make meaning of the story.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that they are going to read a story by a young man who is trying to find out what it means to be a man.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 25 in their anthologies. (Your version, with read-aloud questions, is on the next page in this guide.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As the group leader, pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a brief discussion before returning to the text.
4. **After reading and discussing the story:** Continue to either the Explore the Ideas Activity or Closing Circle, based on your choice as the leader.



Removing the Mask

By Melvin Pichardo

I grew up believing that to be a man I had to be macho. My father wanted me to learn that men must be strong and valiant for themselves and women—and that men should be closed-minded, emotionless, and always winners. He seemed to think that the only acceptable time for a man to show emotions like sadness was if he'd been drinking. My father would criticize me when I showed my vulnerabilities, so I showed them only when I was alone or with my mother.

My father wasn't the only one I saw acting macho. In my neighborhood, young men hid their vulnerabilities by acting tough. I saw that when a guy was upset, he kept his body still, wore a blank expression, and reacted to nothing around him. Instead of expressing his real feelings, he would become verbally aggressive and loud so he wouldn't be seen as weak.

By the time I was 14, most of the young men my age were trying out this act. We were starting to go through puberty, and many guys became defensive if they didn't have facial hair or their voice hadn't changed. There was huge pressure for guys to get into relationships and have sex, wear the right clothes, and have money. To express their masculinity, many guys started to make fun of others, and to speak badly to girls. Other boys got into sports to fit in. But I wanted to think differently, and I did.

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

["What message do you think Melvin is getting about what it means to be a man? Do you get similar messages?"]

At the beginning of my sophomore year of high school, I aspired to have high grades, but none of the subjects I was "supposed" to like as a guy interested me. I wasn't determined to become a great student in math, science, and engineering. That year, I was more interested in theater.

Even as a child of 7, I was intrigued by acting. Sometimes I'd stand on a chair and tell my dad, "I'm a star!" I wanted him to notice me, to hear me. Late at night, after everyone was asleep, I'd get up and look in the mirror, make

faces, and pretend that I was walking across a stage. I would conjure up an audience, even hear the music, and I'd practice lines and gestures. I liked reinventing myself.

At 14, I began practicing monologues and dialogues with my 10-year-old sister. It gave me the freedom to be whoever I wanted, letting go of the superficial things and discovering my soul.

["What do you think Melvin means by 'letting go of the superficial things' and 'discovering' his soul? What superficial things might he be letting go of?"]

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

That year, I auditioned for a program for high school students at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting, and I got accepted.

Adler believed that an actor must observe specific details in the world around him. To prepare for a role, an actor must train his mind and understand the characters in the play.

At the end of the course, I had to present a scene from *Jitney* by August Wilson. I had the part of Darnell. He's a macho older man who has trouble demonstrating to his wife that he has changed. He was no longer getting drunk and cheating on her. He was secretly working to buy a house and make a better life for his family.

I read the whole play, but the scene I had to perform was toward the end, when Darnell's wife confronts him. She angrily asks him what he's been doing, assuming he's been up to no good. That's when Darnell reveals the surprise he's been working toward. Not only that, but he begins to tell her his true feelings. He's no longer the person he was. He lets her know that he's afraid of losing her, and he's nervous about how she'll react to the change in him.

I used the acting techniques I learned at Stella Adler to try to become the character—not just when I rehearsed, but all the time. I imagined Darnell to be someone like my father so I began studying the way my father moved, his tone of voice, even the way he breathed.

I read the script multiple times, trying to understand Darnell. What was he like? What were his intentions? I reminded myself from the minute I woke up to the time I went to sleep that I was Darnell. In doing so, my behavior became a lot like my father's.

Instead of my usual awkward slouch, I started sitting with one leg casually crossed, my arms resting on each armrest of the chair with a confident posture. My saliva didn't taste the same, I smelled a different kind of air, and everything sounded strange. I was no longer Melvin; I was now Darnell.

One day after school, I was on the floor staring at the ceiling practicing my lines when I spontaneously said, "Melvin." I felt so confused. It was as if I was hearing my own name for the first time and I thought, "Who is Melvin?" I realized I had become so immersed in the character of Darnell that I'd lost my sense of self. I wanted to talk to my director about it.

I told him how I was beginning to question who I was. He looked at me with a knowing smile and asked me, "Have you ever heard of Socrates?"

"He's the philosopher?" I asked.

"Yes, Melvin, and when he was a young man, he asked himself the same question you're asking yourself." He paused and waited for me to say something. I was silent.

"Melvin, many people at the age of 40 don't know who they are and the fact that you managed to question that at such a young age is beautiful." I couldn't move or say a word. I thought everyone knew who they were and I was just being silly.

I thought about how, generation after generation, guys grow up to believe they aren't supposed to show their feelings or care about their true selves. We are supposed to be tough, strong, independent, athletic, physical, rugged, powerful, respected, and feared. If we don't measure up, we are considered wimps or sissies. Becoming a man in many cultures isn't about being a man, but appearing masculine.

READ-ALOUD
QUESTION

["How do you think the director made Melvin feel by telling him to keep questioning himself?"]

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That summer I began to analyze my life, trying to have a better understanding of my real happiness, fears, and wants. Playing Darnell and looking at my father, I concluded that I didn't want to wear the mask of masculinity and hide my true self.

Instead, I wanted to understand my emotions—the things that made me happy as well as those that scared me. What was happiness to me? It was when I wasn't trying to be anybody but me. I didn't want to have to worry about appearing intimidating or tough.

Sometimes I slip back into the mentality of what society believes men should be because everyone around me thinks that way. When someone asks what I want to be, sometimes I lie and say "businessman" or "cop" because I think the real answer—an actor or writer—might make people think of me as less of a man. But those moments of trying to fit society's idea of masculinity happen less and less frequently.

I realize now that the Stella Adler Studio didn't just teach me to be a better actor, it also helped me learn about myself. Now, for the first time in my life, I'm listening to my own voice.

["Turn to a partner and share your thinking in pairs: What does the writer learn in this story about what it means to be a man? Does it fit with your own ideas and feelings?"]

READ-ALOUD
QUESTION

After graduating from high school and the Stella Adler acting program, Melvin worked in acting and in real estate.

 OPTIONAL
EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — DRAW IT

(20 minutes)

During this optional post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors. This activity can be used during the session plan or to extend the learning afterwards.

1. Introduce this activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we are going to do a drawing activity that explores how we feel about our own identities as young men.”

2. Ask the group to listen to this quote from the story:
 - *“We are to be tough, strong, independent, athletic, physical, rugged, powerful, respected, and feared. If we don’t measure up, we are considered wimps or sissies. Becoming a man in many cultures isn’t about being a man, but appearing masculine.”*

3. Pass out colored pencils and the Gender Mask handout (p. 49) to group members.

4. Explain to the group:
 - “In the mask, write or draw some of the things you show or are pressured to show on the outside in order to appear as a real man.”
 - “Flip over to the blank side of the paper and write or draw some of the things you keep to yourself or don’t show to others.”
 - “When you are done, crinkle up your paper and toss it into the middle of the room.”

5. Give group members about 10 minutes to write, draw, or a combination of both. Move around the room offering encouragement and support.

6. After time is up (or everyone is done), have each group member take a turn picking up a crumpled handout from the middle of the circle. After everyone returns to their seats, they can go around the circle reading aloud what’s written on both sides of their gender masks.

7. Invite group members to share what they noticed about one another’s creations and what connections they made to them.

CLOSING CIRCLE (10 minutes)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. "What stood out for you in Melvin's story, 'Removing the Mask,' and our activities today?"
2. "Finish this sentence: To be a real man means..."

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just sitting and thinking:

- In this story, Melvin challenges traditional ideas about what it means to be a man. How do you see the "mask" of masculinity affecting the boys in your group? When do they feel comfortable taking it off?
- What do you think of traditional gender expectations? In what ways do you act more like Melvin's father, and in what ways do you act more like Melvin?



"Removing the Mask" by Melvin Pichardo

Gender Mask

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