



The Boy Whisperer

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In a society where fathers are frequently absent and male role models rare, one man is helping struggling boys connect with their emotions...

Seven boys fill a semi-circle of chairs in a Kelston Intermediate classroom. Twelve or 13 years old, they're all noise, knees and surging hormones. They range from slight and feisty to huge and brawny. And they're here to do something they used to run a mile from – talk about their emotions.

They're the loud boys and shy boys. Some were selected for this programme for their stropiness, others because they were so withdrawn they could hardly speak.

Jon Winder is working to change the way they deal with life by immersing them in his B-Cool Programme For Boys. He comes armed with an exotic drum, a carved African talking stick and 30 years of experience in education.

The problem he's fighting is society's unwritten but unrelenting "boy code". It expects boys to bury their feelings, act tough, never cry, shrug off hurts, take risks, avoid shame and above all, act cool. But all of that can load them up with suppressed hurt, confusion, anger, fear and stress.

Winder's mission is to do some heart healing. Like a horse whisperer gentling jittery colts, he works with great calm. As he sits with them he listens with full attention. No one is allowed to speak over anyone else. And there's no nonsense. If things get boisterous he'll assert control, but so strong is his authority that it takes no more than a slightly raised voice.

Over the course's 20 weeks he waits patiently for the moments when boys can unload their hurts. "There's such a security built up amongst these guys that they can finally let themselves go. It's a moment in time. You're like an aikido master, and bang! There'll be a question, a silence, and sometimes my key thing is to say nothing. I'll hold the tension more and more and finally, something comes out."

Today, halfway through B-Cool's 20-week run, this bunch of boys is smiling and happy to talk about themselves. "I like being part of this," says Harley Bowler. "It helps me talk about my feelings." And Cam Smith volunteers that even in primary school he was in trouble. How much trouble? He gives me a grin. "You wouldn't want to go there!"

This school has kids from 34 nations. They're mostly Pacific Islanders but might as easily come from Ireland or Iran. It's a low to middling-income suburb full of pressured mums and lots of absent dads.

Deputy principal Helen Murray sees boys who've already clocked up six or seven years of failure and are already at a crossroads. She hates to see them take the wrong track.

When the school decided to bring in Winder's programme, she picked "boys it would make a difference for – ones with potential to be leaders who already had mana in the playground." She declines to label them "problem boys" but says the school is small enough for staff to notice changes in the group and she's "really impressed." B-Cool is also running at nearby St Leonard's Primary School, where principal Darren Smith says bluntly, "We're trying to stop the next cycle of domestic violence and fatherless boys."

He likes the way Winder helps group members realise it's okay to be a bloke and to show your feelings. "New Zealand society says, 'bottle it up, don't show your emotions'.

"It's not about boys trying to be like girls. It's about learning that it's better to talk than to hit, better to discuss than to lash out."

-Darren Smith, school principal

St Leonard's is like many primary schools in being short on men. Only one of its 16 class teachers is male. And with many boys lacking dads at home, some get few clues on how good men get on in the world.

Like Murray, Smith asserts there's "no such thing as naughty boys. They're just boys who've made wrong choices."

The slogan of Winder's company, Mindscapes International, is "shaping tomorrow's leaders today". With an MA in English and a postgraduate diploma in educational technology from Auckland University, his CV includes advisory roles with the NZ Council for Educational Research, the NZ Qualifications Authority, Massey University, the University of South Wales and the Ministry of Education. He is also a seminar presenter and executive coach and the author of two books, *Learning Success* and *Exam Success*.

B-Cool was set up about three years ago after talking with senior teachers about boys with troubles. "I said well, let's see if we can take a group and make a difference." Early signs were good and so Jon and his wife, international leadership consultant Diane Hendrickson Winder, set to work on developing the idea.

The Winder's work in four areas: values, communication, leadership and heart balance. That's "emotional fluency – the capacity for people to be aware of and monitor their own emotional state, know where they want to be and have the skills to get there."

Male New Zealanders are not good at this. "Men don't even like going to a medical doctor, let alone going to someone to help them examine their feelings."

The boys earn course credits adding up to bronze, silver and gold certificates – an idea Diane modelled on the Duke of Edinburgh's Awards scheme. "They're incrementally more difficult but just easy enough to get success, to feel they're cracking something by breaking through and being noticed."

Silver-haired and neatly groomed, Jon sometimes wears eye-grabbing bracelets wrought with Celtic or Native American designs. For the boys, this is different – a bloke who wears jewellery and talks about emotions? "They love the jewellery. It's masculine but they're drawn to it. They have boundaries where they can look but not touch."

He starts each session with a brief karakia, giving thanks for everyday things like health, home and school.

Then the talk begins about how everyone's week has been. One by one, around the circle, small triumphs and bad times get shared. There's worry about a brother hurt in car smash. Frustration over having to mind young siblings who keep on running away. Desperation about not putting on enough weight to shine at rugby. Fear of the next tackle in case a head injury happens again. Winder hears them all out and gives them encouraging responses.

One boy speaks of his struggle to think before he blurts out words he regrets. "I can say crazy things in class. I get this big thing in my stomach, butterflies... I get nervous and start to sweat."

“Why do you think that happens?” asks Winder.

“It’s telling me what would have happened if I’d done it. I’d have got into trouble,” says the boy.

Winder is beaming. “It’s great you’re learning this sort of mastery. You’re listening to your body and mind and knowing where you want to be.” Now it’s the kid’s turn to smile.

Veterans of playground skirmishes, the boys are learning some grown-up strategies for staying out of trouble. “I keep my face still and relaxed and they get bored with trying to pick a fight,” says one.

“I used to get real angry and swear at people, but I don’t now,” reports another. The next one owns up: “I didn’t used to like brown people. But since you’ve been working with me I feel different; I don’t care if they’re brown or pink, I’ll still play with them.”

But not every kid has success to report. One of them hunkers down in silence, eyes downcast. When it’s his turn to talk, he can’t.

Suggests Winder, gently: “Aren’t things going so well?”
The boy’s face twists. He’s close to tears. No one jeers or laughs.
“What would make it easier for you?” Winder asks.
The reply is just a whisper. “If my friend could help me…”
“Will you ask him?”
A silent nod.

Says Winder later: “He’s got a major problem, but believe me, he’s much better than he was. He even made a little speech a few weeks ago. That was a major breakthrough. Speaking is one of the greatest fears boys have.”

Many adults don’t realise how sensitive their sons are, say the Winder’s. Even a throwaway line like “you stupid boy” can crush them, though they may not show it. “They’ll often only have two or three words to describe their emotions. Mostly if you ask them how they’re doing they say ‘good’ and you know jolly well it’s not good. You can see it all over their faces.”

Winder works with boys from eight years and upwards, in 90-minute blocks. For two and half terms the groups meet once a week, same day, same time. “That’s part of the structure. Boys love routine.”

Each session is carefully built around the Maori idea of kawa, using ritual and protocol, as on a marae, to settle the boys down. Each week they recite a set of agreements and building trust is paramount. “We agree in advance we won’t speak about each other’s stuff. Before this they may not have been trusted, or trust has been broken, and so this can be a first-time experience for many of them.”

His most potent tool is telling mythological stories about kings and heroes succeeding against the odds. Then the boys get to talk about what it all means. “You are kings too,”

he tells him with great seriousness. “We all are. All of us have that potential. It’s just that sometimes we lose our way and have to get back on track.”
But it’s hard to feel kingly when you’re bearing big burdens. Winder says the boys’ sense of responsibility “just tears me up”.

He recalls a boy asked to decide, at age nine, whether he wanted to live with mum and dad. “It drove him crazy. His behaviour had gone off the wall. I sat with him one-on-one. Because he loved them both, he couldn’t cope. We went through it from every possible point of view and he was so relieved when I said, ‘I think your decision is to tell mum and dad you can’t decide.’

“You could see his whole face and shoulders lift. It wasn’t a solution, but then he should never have been given the problem in the first place.”

Taking dad’s place can be tough, too. “How many women, when their husbands leave, turn to the eldest son and say, ‘You’re the man now’? The boys all adore their mothers. She can almost do no wrong and they’ll defend them to the last breath, but some of the demands placed on boys in marital breakdowns are immense.”

He has no time for the stoical stiff-upper-lip model. “The boys trot out this common view of men. I tell them it’s rubbish – there’s another way.”

Winder ran his course in 12 schools last year. His anecdotal feedback suggests the boys stay on track well. “They might slip but they know how to pull themselves back and they’re motivated not by an external source, like a teacher or a parent, but by themselves. That’s my whole aim, to reach that outcome.”

Respect is his key value. Ask the kids in the Kelston group if, by and large, they feel respected and there’s an emphatic shaking of heads.

Some have been diagnosed with ADHD, some are on Ritalin. “I’m not enchanted by that,” says Winder dryly, “except that there are some cases where it appears to work. But as their emotional landscape changes, there’s less need for it. Diane adds, “Some of the boys didn’t just throw scissors but a bucket of scissors, or were tipping over furniture. That’s changed now.”

His aim is to make that energy more productive. “It’s about thinking, let’s build something better. [Athletic coach] Arthur Lydiard would say to his people, ‘You’re not just going to be national winners, you’re going to be an international star’. I have the same approach.

“These boys have a huge amount of capacity. I don’t believe there’s one thing wrong with their intellect either. Sometimes they’ve just missed out on their learning blocks.”

Winder describes his work as “going right into their engine of anger and resentment, the very base, negative feelings they have around themselves very often. But once they get through their emotional blocks, they feel different about themselves. It makes more juice available for their neo-cortex, the thinking part of them.”

He would like to train more men to do the work, but it’s not easy to find the right candidates. “I hear amazing stuff. Some boys are suicidal. A few have either attempted

it, or have thought about it, at 10 or 11. This is critical care sometimes because once you go into that emotional area it requires a lot of sure-footed tactics.”

One boy carried deep sadness that his dead father wasn't there for him. “It was a huge grief for that boy. He'd built an anger pattern around it that was so charged he was finding it hard to keep control in school. When he got his first certificate he said to me, ‘My dad would be pleased with me’. Part of that came because I'd put it to him that his dad could be present to him in another way, through the mind.”

In some schools, 60 to 70 per cent of fathers are distant figures. Even if they are at home, “a boy may only have small windows of time one-on-one with his father, and dad is often too tired to be there for him.”

Sometimes sons simply need to know they are loved. One mother admitted to Winder that when her second child was born she'd neglected the first. All her boy needed was her hand around his shoulder more often.

“Parents will discount something so simple. They'll say, ‘He knows I love him, I'm always telling him that’. But boys are very kinaesthetic learners – they're hands on. They're not necessarily big on being hugged all the time; they may just need a touch to be reassured.”

B-Cool sessions are open-door. Teachers, social workers and parents are welcome. “Very seldom do we have fathers. They generally don't show up, but they're always invited.”

Visitors are expected to share some of their own feelings. The boys know, for instance, that Winder has been through divorce. “I declare what I'm feeling. It means they can see an older person talking about struggles, real life, personal relationships. Sometimes I'll say ‘I haven't told anyone else about this’, and they'll respect that because they know I'm telling the truth.”

At one school, half of the group said they hated their fathers. “I didn't tell those dads that because I never break a confidence, but I did phone some of them about how they could be working with their sons.

“All those boys ended up doing more things with their dads that were boy-friendly and the issue started to melt away.”

With 60-something boys currently enrolled, Winder has to remember all their stories and know when to stay silent and when to say the right thing.

He prefers their progress to be slow and incremental, but boys can reach a critical release point. “They will cry, explode or say something so quiet you can hardly hear it. You've been sitting around for so long and when it comes out there's a relief. There has to be something new put into that hole, and, in a way, that's the love that comes from the group.”

Kids who once might have jeered now unite in support. “Sometimes a boy's in such distress that I'll ask the group to stand and just surround him and sometimes rock to and fro. It supplies a sense that these are your mates, we're there for you, and it's not even spoken. There's such a security built up amongst these guys that they can finally let

themselves go after so long.”

Those breakthroughs lead to solemn promises, spoken with Winder’s African speaking stick in hand. “Whatever a boy’s big decision is, for me it’s a given. They’ve said it and I know they’re going to follow through.

“Many people have held that stick, probably thousands. It’s imbued with story. I’ve had parents cry holding it, it’s been dropped and cracked, but it’s still holding up.”

As each session ends, Winder gets out his drum, passes out plastic bins for the boys to bash on, and they all launch into a gleeful blast of noise. It helps to ease any tensions, re-charges their energy and sets them up for the rest of their day. The aim is for every kid to leave every session feeling good about himself.

Schools are paying \$5000 for each course of 20 sessions. It’s money that schools can’t find easily. “And yet there’s a huge need. Downstream, if nothing is done and one of these guys gets off the rails, the cost can be hundreds of thousands of dollars, as well as people’s lives.”

Some funding has come from the James Family, a branch of Presbyterian Support Northern. “We’ve done evaluations and B-Cool gets glowing reports,” says spokesman Jim Heays.

In Winder’s view, healing boys’ hearts should be a major ministry initiative. “We’re in serious, serious shape in this country and unless we get more emotional fluency happening we won’t have young men and women (yes, girls are affected too) who’ll be capable and resilient enough to lead us through the complexities of the future.”

It seems to be working for 12-year-old Cam Smith, who says being in B-Cool is a “one-time privilege”. He’s keen to do better in class, has found new friends and likes the trust shared in the group. His mother, Bronwyn, has seen a difference. “He’s always been boisterous,” she says and then adds with a smile, “no, make that wilful. But I’ve noticed he loves saying sorry now.”

Principal Darren Smith also thinks it works. “The level of intervention we have to take to sort out problems is significantly reduced.” That’s teacher-speak, of course, for saying these kids have got better. Or, as a Year Six tearaway says, “Before I used to have bad fights. Now I have more respect.”

The B-Cool Program is an initiative of the Winder Foundation Charitable Trust.
www.winderfoundation.org