

**CASE  
STUDY**

# MY FRIEND'S PLACE

**LOS ANGELES, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

How to work with boys and male youth affected by sexual exploitation and abuse in situations of homelessness and marginalization



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The views expressed herein are solely those of ECPAT International. Support does not constitute endorsement of the opinions expressed.

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The illustrations on the cover of this report depict environments and situations relevant to the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys in Los Angeles, USA.

Photos in this cover are from My Friend's Place.

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## CONTEXT OF DOCUMENTATION

Given that programmatic responses to identify and meet the particular needs of boys are scarce, [ECPAT International](#) launched the [Global Boys Initiative](#) (GBI) to explore the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and the services available for their protection. The Global Boys Initiative embarked on a series of research projects in countries around the world to shed light on understanding the scale of sexual exploitation taking place with children, vulnerability contexts and risk factors, barriers to disclosure and access to services, and what we need to improve prevention and response strategies.

ECPAT recognizes that the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys is a global problem and have gathered information on key drivers, risk situations, gender norms, and barriers to access, among other things. We are now focusing on how to address these challenges and how to support boys and service providers in the fight against sexual exploitation. In July 2022, we began a process of mobilizing ECPAT members, partners and practitioners working with boys in different regions of the world to inform them about the GBI, explore possibilities for implementing the Initiative at country and regional levels, and capitalize on members and partners' experiences in working with boys.

In discussions with our partner [My Friends' Place](#) in the United States of America, several learning points were identified as relevant to the success of the GBI nationally and globally. These included the documentation of their work with boys and male youth survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation. To this end, the aim was to document the working practices of service provision to boys and male youth survivors in situations of homelessness. This case study documents and shares the learnings of My Friends' Place, while contributing to answering the global question: *"How can we work with male children and youth at risk or survivors of sexual exploitation and abuse in a gender-sensitive approach?"*



# INTRODUCTION

[My Friend's Place](#) (MFP) is an organization based in Hollywood, Los Angeles (United States of America) that helps youth experiencing homelessness move toward wellness, stability and self-sufficiency. In this context, the teams of MFP regularly work with boys<sup>1</sup> (12 to 18 years old) and male youth (18 to 25 years old) who have experienced and are exposed to issues of sexual exploitation and abuse.

MFP started more than 35 years ago as a volunteer-based group serving meals from the trunks of cars to homeless youth (children and youth of different genders) in the Hollywood area. Now MFP is an organization managing a dynamic drop-in and resource center and has become a point of reference for the local community. My Friend's Place is a community that cultivates growth and opportunity for young people impacted by homelessness.

Their programs are organized in 3 domains: Safe Haven, Transformative Education and Housing & Wellness. Most importantly, **MFP recognizes homelessness as a social, racial and economic justice issue.**



“  
We are really guided by  
values of radical hospitality and  
being a low barrier center, to the  
extent possible<sup>2</sup>  
”

- 1 It is important to note that MFP is considered an emergency service, thus there is no need for a parent or caregiver consent. Moreover, most of the time boys are not connected with their families or it would be unsafe to be in contact with their families.
- 2 Quotes in the text are taken from conversations held with MFP staff during the documentation process.

## METHODOLOGY FOR THE DOCUMENTATION OF PRACTICE AND DISCLAIMERS

This case study was produced with a semi-structured assessment and learning tool developed by ECPAT International's Research and GBI's teams. The assessment and learning questionnaire guided the interview with the teams working with boys and male youth. The questions included in the questionnaire aimed at collecting information on what practices seem effective according to the organization in providing support to boys and male youth in homelessness situations, crises and affected by issues of sexual exploitation and abuse.

The methodology was applied during a visit to MFP's office and its services, in which direct observations could be conducted on the physical space and resources. The research conducted in the framework of the GBI tells us that boys and male youth tend to fall through the cracks of child protection systems, because of biases about their victimization. **This often leads boys and young men to risks of mental health issues, drugs and substance abuse, homelessness, association with community violence (i.e. gangs) and contact with the juvenile justice system.**

This case study builds on these findings and provides some elements of consideration and recommendations to work specifically with these boys and male youth. **The experience gathered by the team at My Friend's Place offers important learnings on how to adopt an intersectional approach that takes into account the different traumatic experiences to which boys and male youth have been through in their lives,** and how to provide support in a way that respects their individual experiences and dignity.

### Disclaimers

1. This case study does not only focus on the experiences of boys exposed to and affected to issues of sexual exploitation and abuse, but also of male youth from the age of 18 to 25. Because of rigid gender norms, ideas of masculinity and obstacles to help-seeking, **boys and male youth might only be able to seek support, disclose or receive support at a later stage.** We therefore believe that including male youth can be instrumental to inform strategies to work with boys – not only from a response perspective, but also from a prevention point of view;
2. This case study refers to boys and male youth who **self-identifying as male;**
3. This case study was informed by the experiences of staff working specifically with boys and male youth from Black, African-American, Latinx<sup>3</sup> and the LGBTQIA+ communities. It **does not** in any way seek to reinforce harmful stereotypes and generalizations.

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3 This term is used to indicate people of Latin American origin, descent or heritage. Latinx is a term that aims to be inclusive and non-gendered.

## MAIN CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES AFFECTING BOYS AND MALE YOUTH

Hollywood is perceived to be an area of the city with more opportunities by boys and male youth coming from other areas of Los Angeles and other states. Most people receiving services from MFP are from disadvantaged areas in Los Angeles. There is a general perception that Hollywood, synonymous with the film and music industries, offers access to jobs, money and even fame.

“  
Many boys feel that they can break through the entertainment industry, with little or no information on how difficult this can actually be.  
”

To understand the journey of these boys and male youth it is indeed important to consider a series of elements of complexity and how they intertwine with one another. This understanding is essential for the work of the team at MFP as it allows them to 1) use a holistic and an intersectional approach, and 2) to adjust language and tailor the provision of services.

### A

## Main demographics

The population that MFP teams support are primarily heterosexual and gay boys and male youth from Black, African-American and Latinx communities. All of them experienced issues of systemic racism, with many also experiencing homophobia and rejection from their families and communities. Some of these boys and male youth have gone through the juvenile justice and foster care systems, with many also coming from group homes. Many have experienced sexual abuse through these systems, although this is not always disclosed. When the information is disclosed, this generally happens only after a rapport is built with a team member, or members, at MFP. Often, instances of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by family members (both male and female) or someone from the community. It is more difficult for a male adult to disclose abuse for fear of being associated with homosexuality (especially for straight- identifying boys and male youth).

When child sexual abuse happens in the context of the juvenile justice system, this becomes even more complicated – with boys and male youth not disclosing or seeking help for fear of repercussions and internal power dynamics.

One of the key reasons for homelessness of boys and male youth from the LGBTQIA+ community is rejection from their families. When boys “come out”, they are often times rejected and instead of acceptance, receive shame, blame and judgment.

“

**These kids end up being kicked out of their families, or having to run away. This is particularly true for kids coming from Latinx and African-American families.**

”

*This can be partly explained by analyzing the culture of machismo and harmful ideas of masculinity that are particularly spread among these communities. In this regard, the role of the Church is important to take into account. Churches can represent places and networks of support to Latinx, African-American and Black communities, particularly economic, community and spiritual support. However, they can also reinforce rigid gender norms and homophobic attitudes against children who identify and come out as gay or with other gender identities.*

*Finally, it is important to note that – according to staff – a good portion of boys and male youth present some form of mental disability or developmental disability. MFP staff speculated that traumatic early life experiences and child sexual abuse and violence contributed to these disabilities, although further research would be required to substantiate those findings.*





## Situations and cycles of sexual abuse and exploitation in Hollywood

Hollywood is widely perceived as a place of opportunity, where children and youth can be themselves without judgment. This is particularly true for boys and youth from the LGBTQIA+ community.



“Some of these kids were already homeless somewhere and they believe that somehow Hollywood will be safer for them. Sometimes [it] is a dream, sometimes delusions.”

Social media plays a role in this sense, as it ‘sells’ an image of Hollywood to boys as a place to easily access employment in the entertainment industry, follow their dreams to become artists, and access money and influence. Information shared through social media also persuades children and youth that shelter and lodging are more easily accessible in Hollywood. Understanding these dynamics is important for the staff of MFP to tailor their support to boys and male youth, and to provide information that aligns with reality, while respecting their dreams and hopes.

The sexual exploitation of boys and male youth in Hollywood can take different forms:

- BoysTown in West Hollywood is a famous area known for gay bars, shops and restaurants but also for an under life of commercial male sex and sexual exploitation, including **young male escorting**. Sexual exploitation of boys and male youth can happen in these places as well as at street corners;
- **Scams** to groom boys into sexual exploitation relationship and networks. Boys can be recruited directly in the streets or through social media. Many are promised to have opportunities to do music or television. Some are groomed through advertisements about free photoshoots to start their careers. These advertisements are particularly spreading through social media platforms. Tech-facilitated sexual violence and exploitation of boys and male youth can be associated with higher level of risks. Boys and male youth can be groomed into an older man’s house, held hostage and repeatedly abused. There are instances of boys being abused by multiple adults in houses and then released in the streets. Some of these instances are embedded in some more affluent environments;

- **Transactional sex.** Homeless boys and male youth might get exploited into situations of transactional sex to have their basic needs covered, such as shelter, housing, food, and hygiene. This is true for both straight and gay-identifying boys and male youth. Straight-identifying individuals particularly struggle to share their experiences in this sense, and may use drugs, alcohol and substances as means to dissociate and forget about these encounters. Straight-identifying boys and male youth also particularly struggle in recognizing that another man could use control and power over them. To disclose this information, and to seek out help, does not feel like an option for them.

“

**There are some places in Hollywood in which if you are a homeless boy or youth standing in the corner, you get easily picked up by a car for quick oral sex in exchange of money or food.**

”

A combination of power dynamics, survival and coping mechanisms, and fear of repercussions make it impossible for boys to identify, name, and report their perpetrators. This of course also interferes with their will to seek and access justice pathways and reparations.

“

**You can use the studio at my house; they (boys) are trying to make their connections and they make them. But then sometimes shame is not strictly related to the situation of abuse, but rather to the acknowledgment that someone had, or has, power over you.**

”

In addition, several boys and male youth have suffered from sexual abuse and violence during their childhood and struggle with setting boundaries and understanding when sexual behaviors and relationships can be disrespectful or harmful. This also changes the relationship that boys and male youth might have with their own bodies:

“

The body becomes just a tool when you experience abuse as a child and you find yourself in high-survival mode.

”



C

### Additional barriers in accessing services and seeking out help.

Boys and male youth may get into situations of homelessness and sexual exploitation upon their arrival in Hollywood. Their lodging is often ‘couch surfing’ or staying in common group houses and shelters, or exchanging sexual services for shelter. This is also the result of unanticipated expenses of living and housing costs in Los Angeles.

Housing services in the Hollywood area follow criteria that need to be respected for housing accommodation and support services. In general, these criteria include staying in the streets or other places that are not designed for human habitation. MFP has been advocating for housing criteria to include not having a stable place to live. Publicly funded housing options follow federal criteria to determine eligibility for housing. This criteria often excludes youth and young adults experiencing housing instability.



“

If someone says I slept on a friend's couch (maybe exchanged sex for that), he gets disqualified from the definition of homelessness and might not access housing services.

”

These policies not only undermine the immediate protection of boys and male youth, but can further dissuade use of formal care and protective systems, therefore potentially increasing vulnerability to risk and danger.

Seeking help is also particularly difficult for boys and male youth from African-American and Black communities, where ideas of masculinity and vulnerability are sometimes internalized as very rigid. Boys and male youth from these communities feel pressured to comply with the rooted idea of what it means to be a strong Black male and the role you need to play in society. This is exacerbated when these individuals have been affiliated with gangs in their neighborhoods. Because of the role and status they held in the past, the concern over who will know (this information about them) is high. **Seeking out help and accessing support can be considered dangerous**, as other gang members might know about their situation of survival sex or sexual exploitation. When vulnerability is identified by others engaged in predatory behavior, this can be leveraged against a both or young man in ways that then “requires” him to engage in more risky behavior - drug/weapon running, sales etc.

Similar norms can be observed among migrant and refugee boys and male youth from Central America. In addition, undocumented boys and male youth experience fear in reporting situations of abuse and exploitation due to concerns over being reported to the police and potentially deported. The complexity of working with migrants is compounded by the fact that many of them suffered from transactional sex or survival sex along their journey prior to their experiences in Hollywood. As with other boys and male youth, there is also a component of ‘shame’ in admitting that their dreams and ambitions were shattered, impeding their capacity to ask for help and receive support.

“

There are a lot of ideas about what the US is, specifically coming to Hollywood. It can be materialistic in communication; there is another level of delusion. I had to go through all of this, and do not even get what I was sold.

”





## HOW TO DESIGN AND FACILITATE ACCESS TO COMPLEMENTARY SUPPORT SERVICES

My Friend's Place is a nonprofit drop-in resource center in Hollywood offering a comprehensive continuum of care, health, educational, and therapeutic services to children and youth experiencing homelessness. The approach adopted by MFP is a low barrier to accessing services that is rooted in radical hospitality. **Being low-barrier** is extremely important to ensure that boys can access support and safety without disclosure, fear of discrimination or the perception that accessing services might put them in greater danger.

The drop-in center managed by MFP can be considered low-barrier as during intake there is no request for documentation, precise information about age or detailed information about their situation. The drop-in center includes a welcoming space where boys and male youth can access the space to rest and have their basic needs covered while going through the intake process<sup>4</sup>. Understanding the impact of trauma and crisis, My Friend's Place uses a harm reduction approach in understanding and addressing risk behavior. For example, when a young man presents under the influence of substances, staff evaluate well-being and the young person's ability to stay safe while accessing services in the community space. The space can be a place where these individuals can rest and access food, water, and clothes, among other items, without judgment. The space is also set up in a friendly, clean and warm way. Visuals and posters about MFP values and different activities are available everywhere in the space, in English and Spanish.



“  
When someone comes in and does not want to have a conversation, they can still take a shower and have their basic needs covered. This helps in building trust and, at some point, they will want to have a conversation. We know it is very brave for a young person to come in and trust us with our work.  
”

<sup>4</sup> Cases of Children and youth that cannot be supported by MFP are systematically referred to other available services in the area.

Information that boys and youth might share during Day One does not provide MFP staff with their full situation and protection concerns. Many of the boys and male youth might not discuss the issues that they had while in the juvenile or foster care system or in the streets. For these reasons, MFP adopts the key following approaches:

1. **The questions asked by MFP staff during the intake process start as indirect and become more specific as the boy or male youth indicates willingness to share.** Questions can be, for instance, formulated as: *“did anybody ask you to do something you did not want to do?”*, or *“is there anything else you would like us to know about you?”* This type of questions can help in identifying if the boy or male youth might have some concerns over his own safety or security. However, this data is hard to collect and often is gathered during the case management process and the development of an individual safety plan;
2. Intake does not necessarily happen on the first encounter. The principle of radical hospitality can be appreciated at many levels at MFP, including that boys and male youth can enter the center to simply shower or eat. **Having their basic needs met is the first priority and helps with trust-building;**
3. During **case management and support, more specific questions can be asked or discussed.** The staff of MFP is aware that information shared on Day One can be very different from the information that is shared on Day Six (for example). Trust-building and the provision of basic needs help boys and male youth ask for support – mostly about their housing situation or other needs they might have. MFP matches these individuals with the most appropriate housing services. Interestingly, it has been noted that boys and male youth who are not interested in being matched might be involved in trafficking networks or have safety concerns. MFP in its case management takes a counseling/case management approach. Case managers partner with boys and young people to understand their goals, housing and otherwise, and then motivate them towards them;
4. As federally required, MFP participates in a youth count in Hollywood for purposes of understanding the number of sheltered and unsheltered that fit the required definition. In parallel, MFP conducts the unofficial count that includes youth who are experiencing homelessness and housing instability but do not fit the federal criteria. Gaps might indicate situations of trafficking, such as boys and male youth couch surfing or staying in hotels. This data is utilized to improve internal approaches for services and local advocacy.


“

When a boy or young person is trying to step away from someone who is controlling them, it comes out during services, not at the beginning.

”

MFP staff prioritize helping **boys and male youth understand that the drop-in center is a safe space.** This means informing the boys and youth they do not have to share uncomfortable information, and if they do, they will not be reported to the police. MFP uses transparency for those issues that require mandatory reporting, such as suspected sex and labor trafficking of children.

During intake, MFP staff remain aware of information shared by the boys and male youth that could represent a red flag. In these cases, MFP staff takes a proactive approach sharing prevention information, engaging in problem solving and options to avoid risky situations. This helped some of the boys to feel more comfortable in opening up. MFP staff also observes which boys and male youth come to the services through boys (peers) who are being supported. Understanding how these contacts have been established can help in identifying connections and understanding if there are concerns of a potential trafficking network.



“  
Sharing information works more than  
anything else to get a response.  
”

In establishing trust and rapport, several factors come into play and help the MFP staff in daily activities:

- Having a **diverse staff** ensures more representation and possibilities of connection, though this should not be generalized. Diversity in staff does not only mean staff with similar backgrounds or ethnicities but also of different genders and ages. In particular, it has been noted how younger staff can establish connections with boys and male youth over shared language and references;
- **Language and shared references** play an important role in connecting with the boys and youth for who they are and what they like, shifting the focus from the difficulties they are experiencing. Boys and male youth have varied interests and it is beneficial to provide space and time for those conversations. MFP staff identifies areas of interest to build on, and finish their meetings with: *“is there anything else you would like to talk about today?”* This approach leaves the door open for more time and sharing, or allows the boys and youth to share their concerns after having had the chance to relax;
- **Staff share information about themselves.** MFP staff generally find it useful to share some information about their own lives, backgrounds and interests to establish a connection with boys and youth. However, boundaries still exist to avoid oversharing or over-identifying;

- **Challenging perceptions about social workers.** Considering that many boys and male youth had difficult experiences with personnel from the formal protection, foster care or juvenile justice systems it is important to challenge and break the perceptions they might have of social workers. Informal clothing, language and attitudes can help build a sense of community – rather than a power relationship. MFP's community approach often allows youth to informally meet and interact with social workers affording rapport before engaging in formal case management. This rapport can both strengthen and expedite the working partnership.

“

I can speak to you in your own language,  
I keep it informal. They (the boys) know if you  
do not really care about getting  
to know them.

”

In addition to the language and attitudes of MFP staff, other activities and materials help the boys and male youth feel accepted and at ease when participating in the activities of the center. This includes:

- Having **visual materials** (posters, pins, stickers, etc.) that support diversity and inclusion and provide a visual reference of the principles and values of the center and its staff;
- Organizing different **diversity and inclusion-related activities and events**. For example: Black History Month, mental health days, Pride Month, among others. These events represent an opportunity for representation and to reinforce the principles of work at MFP. They also play an important role in ensuring a sense of community and facilitating peer support dynamics;
- Scheduling a **series of creative activities** that allow boys and male youth to relax, decompress and develop any passion or talent that is otherwise unavailable to them. These activities also inherently build or strengthen skills. Instead, they serve as opportunities for people to express themselves without pressure or judgment. Boys and male youth coming from Black communities might face increased barriers to ask for help or share struggles, especially when related to sexuality, safety and sexual violence. Creative activities allow them to relax, build trust and manage their emotions in an alternative way than having a direct conversation. Finally, these activities contribute to the creation of a sense of hope, dignity, community and purpose – which facilitate the interest and pathway to counseling and case management.

“

When you use words as social  
worker or mental health professional,  
you shut them down. There is a lot  
of stigma associated to help  
and mental health.

”



It is also important to note the MFP drop-in center offers diverse possibilities for creativity and relaxation. Moreover, the process helps MFP staff in engaging with boys and male youth outside of conversation sessions. When boys and male youth might be reluctant or shy to speak, conducting a creative activity together is extremely helpful. The mix of these individual, group and activity interventions can support boys and male youth in relaxing, building a sense of self, holding harm reduction conversations, and instilling a **sense of hope**.



“  
Especially adolescent boys, their  
minds are still impressionable. There is  
a chance to restore a sense of hope in  
them, or actually give it to them for the  
first time because they never  
had it before.  
”

MFP deeply values the importance of fun and creative activities at the center that can increase a feeling of community of support among the people they serve. In particular, the holiday season (thanksgiving, Christmas – November and December) are months when feelings of loneliness and isolation can increase among youth who lack support networks and homes. There is an increased schedule of activities and options during this period to buffer against these feelings and increase a sense of belonging within the community. Internal learning from MFP surveys demonstrates the factors driving a sense of belonging were related to the level of engagement in the different activities, and were not strictly related to the identity of different children and youth.

## UNDERSTANDING AND HANDLING POTENTIALLY DYSREGULATED REACTIONS

MFP staff is not only aware of the pressure deriving from gender norms and ideas of masculinity, but also of other factors that might influence the behaviors and attitudes of boys and male youth participants. Because the majority of survivors of affected individuals come from marginalized communities, it is essential for MFP staff to take into account the full picture.

“

It can be scary to support complex cases, because of unconscious biases some boys might feel more threatening for us.

”



This is why is important to center the experience of young people and making sure that **a link is established between pressure deriving from gender norms, experiences of racism and potential unconscious biases**. It is important to understand that these young people did not always get the benefit of the doubt in the past, rather, quite the opposite.

“

We know that a young black male does not get the same opportunities to get angry in public as much as others, and what might be the consequences for him if he does.

”

When boys and male youth get upset while receiving services, My Friend's Place staff recognize that this might be an indication that the youth feels safe enough to express themselves demonstrating a measure of trust and confidence in the staff to hold the emotional expression.

Staff knows that there might be several different reasons for these reactions, requiring a constant assessment and evaluation of each situation. However, if these behaviors become dysregulated, MFP staff follows established guidelines and reschedules the meetings with the boy or male youth.

*"I cannot help you today; we will have a conversation when you are back and calmer".* This not only protects MFP staff, but helps in establishing a respectful relationship and setting boundaries. It also provides an opportunity for youth to understand that these reactions are not helpful for them in society. This also challenges ideas of masculinity where boys and male youth are expected to show aggressiveness as a sign of strength, and avoid any traditional idea of vulnerability. For these reasons, many boys and male youth who are rejected from other services providers find acceptance at MFP. Staff also acknowledges that the majority of these boys and youth are in "fight or flight" mode or in situations of survival with high levels of pressure. **Providing a space to rest** (not a schedule, no questions asked, etc.) **that is safe to take a break can create the right opportunity for later conversations.**

Similarly, many boys and male youth are rejected from other services for being under the influence of drugs or abusing alcohol. MFP staff understands how substance and alcohol abuse can be a direct consequence of the traumatic situations in these boys and male youth are living, including sexual exploitation and abuse.

“  
If I am straight and  
I know an older gay man might want  
sex from me that is not what I am into  
– but this for survival. If I can use drugs  
to remove myself from anything I might  
have to experience with these men.  
”

When boys and male youth come under the influence or are intoxicated, MFP is a safe space where they can *"come down from a high"*. MFP staff is constantly monitoring and ready to act if needed, all staff is trained in crisis intervention and CPR (Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation). Boys and male youth can sleep for a set time of three hours without shame from anyone in taking "a nap". When boys and youth know they can do this, they know that MFP can be a safe space, free of judgment, and that also vastly helps in rapport building.

At MFP, **conversations around dysregulated or under-the-influence reactions happen constantly** – across teams and programs. In every individual interaction, staff reinforces that help-seeking behaviors are positive and problems can be communicated in a safer way. Small conversations and engagements can help. This is exemplified, when staff communicate kindly and respectfully, this contributes to also slowly enhancing skills to live in the broader society. Staff also constantly reminds boys that these inappropriate behaviors can negatively affect their lives, and endanger them, especially with law enforcement. Staff has also noted a mix of genders (among both children and youth in the community, and staff) can help build life skills. Some boys might come in with little-to-no structure, which must be taken into account while working with them. **Mixing different genders in program activities helps to demonstrate respectful language and establish friendships.**

Consistency is also important when setting boundaries. **This conversation will not happen only once.** Depending on the individual, being direct with boundary setting can be helpful: *“I did not like that, your reaction made me feel uncomfortable”*. Consistency is not only present in one-to-one interactions between staff and boys and male youth, but across MFP teams. All staff try to ensure consistency in the approach and language used. All staff understand that the reactions of boys and male youth are largely dictated by their life history. This helps depersonalize negative behaviors and crisis reactions.

These conversations can be made easier through:

- Setting individual **private meetings**, which release peer pressure and create a space to talk about sensitive issues or concerns the boy or male youth might have;
- Reaffirming **confidentiality** in private meetings, where boys can be reassured that information shared will not be disclosed to other youth at the center;
- Talking to other MFP staff that already established rapport with the singular individual.

To build rapport with boys and male youth, many factors come into play. As seen, **all staff have a common understanding of how life experiences might have led boys to those reactions.** In creating rapport, it is essential to know these boys and male youth for who they genuinely are, as well as **their histories**. Having knowledge about their lives and stories allows staff to be prepared about potential triggers resulting from language or memories. Especially for those boys and male youth that experienced the foster care or the juvenile justice system, it is essential to continuously show up for them.

“

You need to find a connection with them; you need to be showing up, even with the ones with the most problematic behaviors, show them that you actually care.

”



Finding a connection with the boys and male youth can be done in different ways. This depends on each individual staff member's personality and relationship with the boy. Yet, **building rapport and dealing with problematic behaviors is a team effort**. Consistency, connection, showing up and support need to be provided by different staff members. This not only helps the boys in creating a support network, but is also useful for MFP staff – as it can reduce levels of pressure on staff or allow for redistribution of problematic cases if a staff member does not feel comfortable in a specific situation.

### Useful tips for creating rapport in these circumstances:

Staff to represent positive models, showing kindness, respect and help-seeking affirming behaviors and attitudes;

Creating a sense of community where there is no 'us versus them', and have staff involved in relaxing and creative activities directly with the boys and youth (watching a movie, having a coffee, etc.);

If disclosure of traumatic or uncomfortable experiences happens during a crisis moment, provide direct immediate support with affirming language and no judgment. Acknowledge their experiences as real and that they are believed.

When boys and male youth disclose or share<sup>5</sup> situations of involvement in transactional sex, there can be an **opportunity to start harm reduction interventions**. When they share information, having a conversation about their options and ideas creates a judgment-free space that nurtures trust and respects their agency, while acknowledging the extremely difficult circumstances in which they exist. In these occasions, individual lines of response become even more critical, as to avoid biases and generalizations.



“  
One lesson learnt for us  
was: it is not mine to label someone's  
experience of trauma or put a definition  
on it. That can be very damaging.  
”

5 Or where MFP has evidence that boys and male youth might be involved in situations of transactional or survival sex.

# DEALING WITH HYPER SEXUALIZATION, HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIORS AND NAVIGATING SAFETY IN THESE SITUATIONS

As seen, some of the boys and male youth might display aggressive or inappropriate behaviors and attitudes towards MFP staff. This includes harmful sexual behaviors, including sexualizing staff (especially female staff), other people, and objects. Staff also noticed a trend among straight-identifying boys and male youth that might be engaging in transactional sex to be more aggressive towards women, potentially because of a perceived need to reinforce their own – and other people's perceived expectations– of their masculinity. This trend is noted in harmful sexual behaviors and in a stronger use of offensive language, including homophobic comments.

Harmful and hypersexual behaviors can hamper the implementation of activities and put the safety of (especially) female-identifying staff and other community members at risk. Setting boundaries is important from the very beginning and includes a series of actions. Two key helpful practices and lessons learnt from the MFP staff include:

- 1. Addressing self-soothing behavior and providing education.** Sometimes boys and male youth might touch themselves and masturbate in front of female staff or other community members. In these situations, MFP staff understands the importance of not making assumptions about their sexuality. The majority of these young people do not have the possibility of self-soothing while in the streets or in other unstable settings. These situations also represent an opportunity for staff to challenge boys and male youth's inappropriate behaviors and begin a conversation with them around consent and respectful relationships. Showing the impact that these behaviors have on others in a calm and kind manner can introduce concepts related to consent;
- 2. Schedule different counselling or service hours.** For those boys and male youth who are known for displaying hypersexualized and harmful sexual behaviours, sometimes staff can make the decision to schedule their sessions at times when there are fewer community members at the center, or have private conversations with them. This also allows staff to have more open discussions with the boys and youth, as sometimes these inappropriate behaviors are conducted in front of other individuals as a way to 'show off' or to act as 'men'. Boys and male youth can continue to participate and join activities and use the services of the center, and therefore feel included. This practice allows MFP staff to have safer conversations with the objective of re-integrating boys and youth in group activities that can be protective and respectful for everyone.

Through experience and training, MFP staff knows that hypersexual behaviours from boys and male youth can stem from a variety of causes, **including experiences of child sexual abuse**, sexual violence and general struggles with consent due to difficult living circumstances. MFP staff takes an approach that both protects them, and other female youth from potential harm and opens up an opportunity to discuss these behaviours with each individual, trying also to build up their skills for life in society. **This work is guided by principles of being trauma-informed and avoiding any kind of judgment.** Avoiding judgment when these situations happen is essential to ensure the conversation with boys and male youth can even happen. Other useful practices shared by the team include:

- Rules and principles regarding how the MFP drop-in centre and its staff work are shared and repeated at the beginning and throughout the activities and sessions with the boys and male youth;
- When warning signs are identified, sharing information with other MFP team members and case conferencing;
- All staff is trained on how to de-escalate these situations and how to engage in conversations with boys and youth who are displaying these behaviours;
- All staff retains from creating a sense of shame in these boys and youth, and rather creates an environment of detachment.

When rules and boundaries are explained, (*especially*) female staff reinforces those boundaries while detaching themselves from that situation and understanding how trauma – and sometimes, other issues – led to those behaviours. Staff are also aware of the importance of constantly reminding about their professional role and avoiding expressing any judgment – as the majority of these individuals may not have had any role models in this regard before.



**We know that his experience before is that he could test boundaries with female frontline workers. You need to explain: this is my relationship with you; this is not how we can exist together. I am a woman and I am being kind to you – this might be something they never were exposed to before.**

To avoid escalation, all relevant MFP staff is trained about warning signs and harmful behaviours and attitudes towards staff. However, when there might be an escalation, it can best useful to include a male identifying colleague during a session.

## HUMAN AND TECHNICAL RESOURCES

The human resources at MFP include both staff and volunteers, and all of them engage regularly with young people. This helps in ensuring that boys and male youth can know everyone, and ensure that everyone remains grounded in the mission of MFP. As previously seen, **diversity** in the staff helps ensuring that boys feel represented. This means having a diverse work environment at the center, allowing for representation but avoiding over identification with the cases. In particular, MFP staff noted how the majority of boys might feel more comfortable at sharing information about situations of sexual exploitation and abuse with female identifying staff. This is also due to the boys' previous perceptions of the role of women from their families and communities.

All staff receives Attachment, Regulation and Competency (ARC) training, which is adopted for youth-serving organizations locally. The model is a trauma-informed model, understanding attachment in upbringing, trauma and its effects on children's brain development. Interestingly, the model also provides training on the impact on the nervous system and regulation, essential for the MFP's work. Developed for personnel who are providing direct care to children and youth, this training is conducted with all staff and volunteers and serves as an organizational framework. The value of this training is that it allows staff to reinforce empathy with boys and youth and **understand when individual triggers might be activated**. Conversations around potential personal triggers happen constantly within MFP staff, and these can be direct or team discussions.

“

**We constantly analyze our nervous system responses with some specific cases. We – as caretakers – need to be insightful with our own identities, triggers and biases. There is an implied responsibility in understanding where your blind spots are.**

”

Besides technical knowledge and training, and coupled with diversity, it is important that staff shows soft skills and are people-oriented, while sharing the values of MFP's mission. The recruitment of staff is also based on meetings onsite that allow for an initial evaluation of the candidate's reactions to the organization and provide an opportunity to assess potential biases they might have. During the recruitment process, candidates are also informed about potentially triggering, aggressive or verbally difficult situations and comments they might receive. Scenario-based interviewing is a useful exercise in this sense.



As previously seen, dealing with most complex cases requires a team effort. Three useful practices that were identified can be summarized as:

- **Case conferencing.** These are moments where MFP staff can share struggles, challenges or ideas about individual cases with fellow team members and supervisors. This allows for safe spaces to ask for advice and find common solutions to more complex cases, including those involving aggressive and harmful sexual attitudes. These meetings are guided by questions such as: *“how can we successfully support him and be able to uphold our principles and values?”* These meetings allow staff to share feelings of fear and concern, or be challenged about possible unconscious biases that they might have about a specific case;
- **Supervision models.** Formal supervision sessions are essential throughout the work of MFP and particularly in dealing with cases that could be more complex or with hypersexual and harmful sexual behaviours. For MFP staff, knowing that there is a formal opportunity to speak and share with their supervisor is not only important to navigate these cases, but also to release pressure and alleviate the emotional toll of the work. Supervision sessions are also spaces where one can be challenged and assess potential over-identification with the case. In addition to these sessions, clinical group supervision happens once a month for skill-building and supporting regulation;
- **Informal teaching moments.** MFP staff huddles three times a week to debrief together, and every two days in small teams to discuss unique challenges that they are facing. Group conversations help in sharing lessons learnt and knowledge and can be important teachable moments.

“  
This behavior can appear threatening or scary, but let’s think of the whole history of this boy, his experiences in childhood and what he might have experienced with the protection system. We need resetting, what could be the reasons behind this behavior and how can we adjust our approach to allow this boy to still be here?  
”

## Conclusions

The experience accumulated by the team of My Friend's Place in the United States of America in working with boy and male youth affected by sexual exploitation and abuse provides important learnings and insights. Adopting an intersectional approach that has **the individual and his own story at the center** of any support activity. The approach used by the teams of MFP is trauma-informed, navigating the different complexities of these issues in the lives of boys and male youth and noting how these complexities are connected. As seen in the case study, the different activities and interventions of the staff of MFP build on one another and allow staff to create trust and rapport with boys and male youth. When working with them, consistency, coherence and internal communications mechanisms become essential.

The learnings gathered through this case study underline the importance of several factors to take into account when working with boys and male youth affected by issues of sexual abuse and exploitation, such **understanding pressure deriving from rigid ideas of masculinity, obstacles in seeking out help and disclosure, and navigating 'uncomfortable' situations such as violent attitudes and harmful sexual behaviours**. Moreover, the experience of MFP shows again the importance of ensuring diversity in representation of staff, the availability of supervision frameworks and the possibility to discuss staff well-being, emotional regulation and mental health.

“

We are asked all the time to address discomfort, at all levels.

”

The experience gained by the staff of MFP can be harnessed to create awareness-raising messages that challenge harmful stereotypes about boys and male youth from marginalized communities and backgrounds. Indeed, common perceptions and beliefs about the 'perfect victim' of sexual abuse and exploitation globally leave boys and young males out of the debate. This is even more problematic when **gender biases interconnect with biases and prejudices rooted in racism and homophobia**.

## TO DELVE DEEPER INTO THIS

To know more about the work of My Friend's Place in the United States of America and obtain more detail on their approach and services, please visit: <https://www.myfriendsplace.org/>

To better understand the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and the work of ECPAT International on this at the global level, please visit: <https://ecpat.org/global-boys-initiative/>

To learn from other practitioners around the world on their work with boys: <https://ecpat.org/story/global-boys-initiative-case-studies/>

To know more about the work of the Global Alliance on the Protection of Boys from Sexual Violence (GAPB): <https://gapb-ecpat.nationbuilder.com/>

To find additional research on boys experiencing trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation in the United States: [And Minnesota Boys, Too](#)



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