

***Boys Returning to Themselves:
Healthy Masculinities
and
Adolescent Boys***

**WiseGuyz Research Report #3
Calgary Sexual Health Centre**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	6
SURVEY RESULTS	6
QUALITATIVE RESULTS	8
WHAT WE CAN CLAIM ABOUT WISEGUYZ	9
THE WISDOM OF BOYS: DEFINING ADOLESCENT HEALTHY MASCULINITIES	9
INTRODUCTION	12
WHAT IS WISEGUYZ?	12
THE BOYS OF WISEGUYZ	13
DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY	13
QUANTITATIVE RESULTS	16
QUANTITATIVE METHOD	16
PROCEDURE FOR DATA ANALYSIS AND STATISTICS	17
CONSISTENT REFERENCE OF MALE NORMS AND SURVEY	17
KEY RESULTS OF SURVEYS	19
RESULTS OF MALE NORMS SURVEY	20
RESULTS OF THE HOMOPHOBIA SURVEY	21
RESULTS OF SEXUAL HEALTH SURVEY	22
QUALITATIVE RESULTS	24
THE ANATOMY OF THE WISEGUYZ SAFE SPACE	25
STRENGTHENING THE SAFE SPACE	28
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EMOTIONAL BOY	30
EMPATHY	35
CULTIVATING CONSCIOUSNESS	40
DISRUPTING NEGATIVE GAY DISCOURSE	42
IN CONCLUSION AND ONWARDS	45
THE CONTINUING NEED FOR WISEGUYZ	45
THE WISDOM OF BOYS: DEFINING HEALTHY MASCULINITY	48

Executive Summary

“WiseGuyz has taught us that it’s okay not to be the biggest guy. It’s okay to be yourself. It feels pretty good to actually understand that. They teach you not to judge people---for who they are.”
– WiseGuyz Participant

“What is often perceived and described as natural to boys is in fact not a manifestation of their nature, but an adaptation to cultures that require boys to be emotionally stoic, aggressive and competitive, if they are to be perceived and accepted as real boys.”
- Judy Chu, *When Boys Become Boys*

The program, *WiseGuyz*, is aptly titled. Through this program, boys begin an initiation into wisdom. They experience an unfolding realization that they are shaped by a larger world around them. They also realize they have agency and resiliency. To be a fourteen-year-old boy and learn this requires a certain kind of bravery - the kind that requires courage to be vulnerable. This is not easy for adolescent boys, as most have learned that their cultural and social currency is an adherence to normative masculinities marked by stoicism, disconnection, and a muting of their emotions. The boys of *WiseGuyz* engage in a journey of undoing their masculinity armor so that they can show up fully and be seen.

This is year three of conducting research on the *WiseGuyz* program and the fifth year of the program operating. Each year brings cohesion of themes that serve to embed the fidelity of the program. Safety continues to be fundamental to the program because it is an opening for the boys to return to themselves: to recover their emotional interior lives; to be the preschooler that psychologist Judy Chu writes about in her research, who

is tender, emotional, and deeply connected in their friendships. In some ways, the boys are able to rediscover who they are within this program by unlearning and learning: stripping away the masculinity mask in order to learn to be what the boys describe as “being ok with themselves.”

Each year also brings unanticipated learnings that deepen and improve the program. Two unanticipated and constructive learnings of this year were: 1) The effects of disrupting the safe space of WiseGuyz and 2) a resounding theme across all programs that the boys learned “it’s okay to be me.” Even more than previous years, the boys talked about how WiseGuyz was many things, but at its core, it was a place they could “let down their masculine figure”— a memorable phrase from a WiseGuyz participant from two years ago. This theme of the boys learning they can be themselves led to a new outcome that emphasized the psychological health the program cultivates and how interrelated mental health is with masculinity.

What is WiseGuyz?

WiseGuyz is a participatory school based program that is offered by Calgary Sexual Health Centre. The program began in 2010 and was offered in two junior high schools in Calgary. Since then, participation and demand for the program have steadily grown. WiseGuyz targets grade nine junior high boys, 14 - 15 years of age. The foundation of the program is an integrated curriculum that is comprised of four sequential core modules that are facilitated over fourteen sessions. A session is one and a half hours in length and takes place during school hours. The program is offered once per week, however with calendar holidays and school events, it takes approximately eight months to facilitate the fourteen sessions and as a result is implemented over the length of the school year.

The sequence of the modules is critical as each module builds into the next: Module 1: Human Rights; Module 2: Sexual Health; Module 3: Gender; and Module 4: Healthy Relationships.

Research Methodology

This report represents the culmination of learnings from research conducted within the WiseGuyz program during the 2014 – 2015 year. A mixed method research approach of quantitative and qualitative paradigms was used. This is the second year that validated survey instruments were administered in the WiseGuyz program. In previous years, the program has relied upon formative outcome surveys and extensive gathering of qualitative data via focus groups and interviews with boys and school administrators involved in WiseGuyz. The qualitative research tradition continued this year with six focus groups held with boys from the 2014 - 2015 WiseGuyz year. The focus group learnings were complemented with findings from the survey instruments. This research is ethically approved through the Calgary Board of Education.

Survey Results

Quantitative data was gathered from 144 boys who participated in the WiseGuyz program from October 2014 to June 2015. Data was analyzed from 100 participants for which there were complete data sets. The participants are from six junior high schools in Calgary in all four quadrants of the city: NE, SE, NW, and SW. The schools have students of varying ethno cultural backgrounds and economic levels. There were a total of 144 boys who participated with an average of 12 – 14 boys in each program. Two WiseGuyz sessions were offered with two groups of boys at four schools: one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Two schools had one group of boys and one session per school. Participants

completed three validated survey instruments twice throughout the year: once before they started the program and once following its completion.

The surveys included:

- Sexual Health Practices Self-Efficacy Scale (SSES Survey)¹
- Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (Masculinity Survey)²
- Homophobia Survey³

Utilizing validated surveys has been valuable in demonstrating statistically significant improvements for the boys in the areas of masculinity norms, sexual health self-efficacy, and homophobia. When comparing the average post-survey score to the average pre-survey score from all participants, there was a *statistically significant⁴ improvement* in each of the three surveys.

Overall Changes in Each Survey Area

- There was significant improvement in the boys embracing progressive male norms. The average post-survey score improved significantly by 11% from the pre-survey. The most significant changes were in areas of boys having increased comfort with emotion and expression of behaviours that could be perceived as feminine. The results suggest that the WiseGuyz program had a positive impact on the participants' perceptions of masculinity norms.
- There was a significant decrease in boys being homophobic. The average post-survey score significantly improved by 19%. This result indicates that the boys have become less homophobic as a result of WiseGuyz.

¹ Barthalow Koch, P. et al. (2010). "Sexual Health Practices Self-Efficacy Scale". In *Handbook of Sexuality-Related Measures*, edited by Terri Fisher et al, p.345 – 347. London: Routledge.

² Levant, R. et al. (2012). Exploratory Factor Analysis and Construct Validity of the Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (MRNI-A-r). *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Note: Throughout this report, the term 'significant' is only used when statistical significance was present. Statistical significance means the difference is large enough that it was unlikely to have occurred simply by chance.

- There was significant improvement in sexual health self-efficacy. The average post-survey score significantly improved by 24% with the greatest improvement being in the sexual relationship category, signifying the positive change in the boys' confidence to have and maintain healthy sexual relationships.

In summary, following the completion of the WiseGuyz program, the average scores among the 2015 cohort indicate that the program has had a significant positive influence on the boys' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs with respect to sexual health, masculinity, and homosexuality.

Qualitative Results

Six focus groups were held with a sampling of boys who participated in the 2014 - 2015 WiseGuyz program. A focus group was held with boys from each school site in which WiseGuyz was offered. In the research there is a consistency of themes with the previous year, illustrating the continued value and fidelity of the program. We see continuing changes in the boys' ability to critically reflect on their behavior and on the constructions of gender, masculinity and sexuality. As in previous years of research, the boys continue to identify that their most significant change is their awareness of language, signifying their shifting perceptions of homophobia and capacity for emotion and empathy. The following are the key qualitative research themes for 2014 - 2015:

- The anatomy of the WiseGuyz safe space
- Emotion and masculinity
- Empathy and masculinity
- Cultivating consciousness
- Disrupting negative gay discourse

What We Can Claim About WiseGuyz

By combining the statistically significant results of the surveys with the ethically validated learnings of the qualitative research, we are able to make the following knowledge claims:

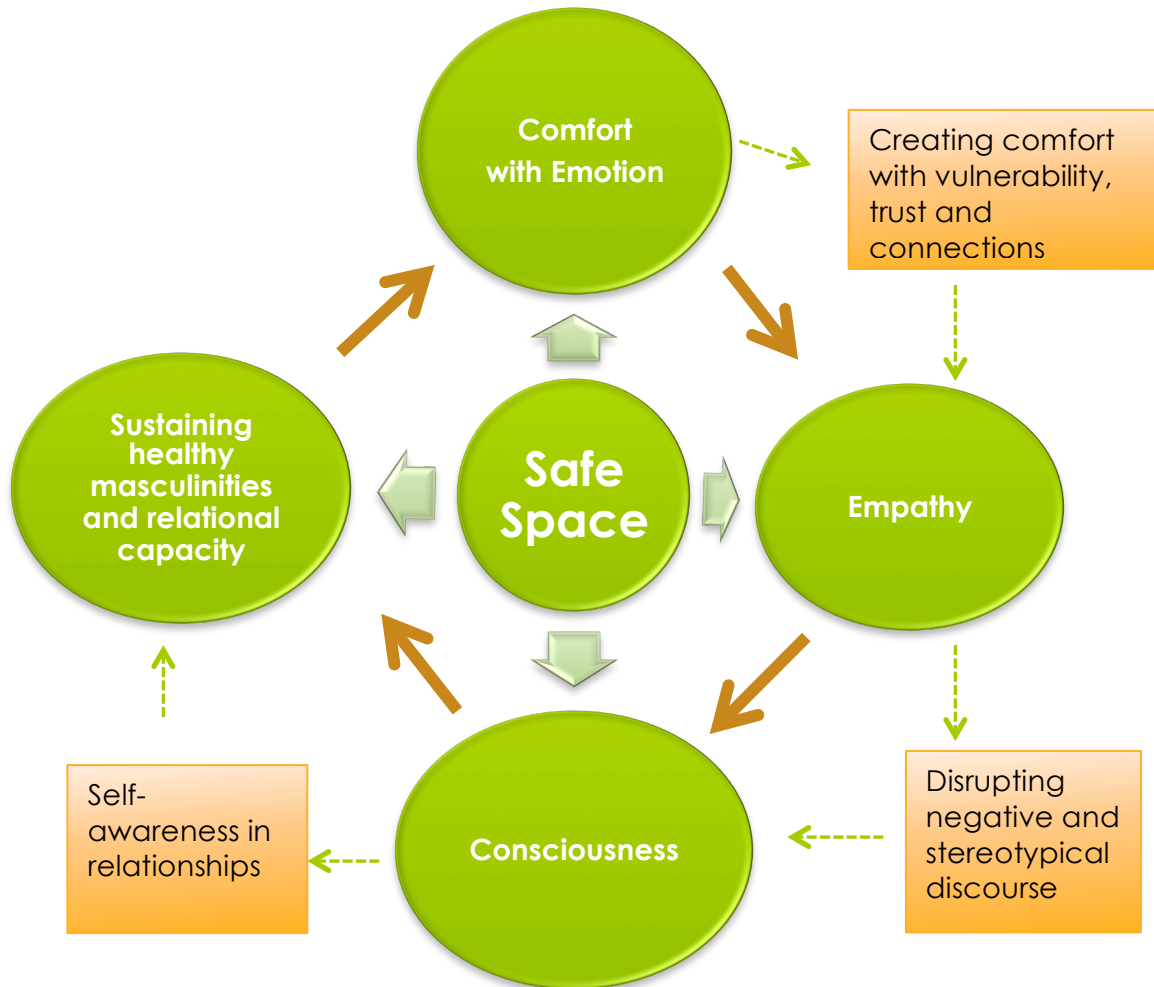
- Boys' largest improvements are in the two areas of:
 - being more comfortable with expression of emotion as a male norm,
 - being more comfortable with expressions of male norm behavior that include traditional feminine traits.
- Boys are less homophobic.
- Boys disagree with conventional and harmful masculine norms.
- Boys are more confident with sexual health self-efficacy.
- Boys feel more comfortable in their connections.
- Boys feel better able to engage in healthy relationships.
- Boys feel able to address negative expressions in their social life related to gender and sexuality

The Wisdom of Boys: Defining Adolescent Healthy Masculinities

Each year in the WiseGuyz program, we witness the shifting normalization of new male norms through adolescent boys becoming comfortable and less restricted in being expressive, emotional and deeply connected in their relationships. The boys show their capacity to change their behaviors through critical awareness and reflection on how they spoke and behaved prior to WiseGuyz. Through their increasing consciousness and

“...like when [you] think of a “man” like the word, they think someone who is strong, really big and tough and emotionless or something like that, like doesn’t cry or anything like that. But like, healthy masculinity I think that just means, be yourself and if you cry, it’s ok, and if you’re big or small or wide or thin, anything like that, that it’s ok, that you’re mentally healthy” (School C).

empathy they learn how their attitudes and beliefs can impact others. The following illustration is based on validated research learnings over three years that helped us to articulate and demonstrate how the boys establish healthy masculinities for themselves and engage these characteristics in their relationships:



The conceptual model above illustrates the core elements of healthy masculinities for adolescent boys based on our on-going research: emotion, empathy, awareness of masculinity within themselves, and in others. In the development of these core elements, we also see indicators

of the boys' progression of these characteristics, such as the boys' development of trust, ability to feel vulnerable in the program and comfort in their deepening friendships with other boys. As the boys develop through the program and experience empathy and critical awareness, we see significant shifts in their attention to language and challenging negative discourses. In particular, they notice and cite several examples of their attunement to homophobic language and making the reflexive connection between harmful masculine norms and homophobic discourse. This incites the boys to reflect on their own masculine behaviors and helps them to recognize this in others. The boys easily cite several examples of how they question or challenge others, such as family members, and friends. Ultimately, we hope that these shifts in consciousness are the beginning of their transformation into progressive young men.

INTRODUCTION

What is WiseGuyz?

WiseGuyz is a participatory school based program for junior high school boys in grade nine. It is guided by an integrated and sequential curriculum that is comprised of four core modules facilitated over fourteen sessions. A session is 1.5 hours long and takes place once per week during school hours. The program occurs over the length of the school year. The sequence of the modules is critical as each module builds into the next: *Module 1: Human Rights; Module 2: Sexual Health; Module 3: Gender; Module 4: Healthy Relationships*. There are currently four WiseGuyz Facilitators and all are male. There is a core facilitator for each program and when possible, an additional facilitator also attends a WiseGuyz sessions to offer additional support.

The WiseGuyz program was piloted in September 2010, and since then, a total of 268 boys have completed WiseGuyz. Since 2010, the program is now offered in six public junior high schools in Calgary, three of which are currently committed to a long-term relationship with WiseGuyz. In October 2014 WiseGuyz expanded to six junior high schools in Calgary. The program participants join voluntarily or are gently encouraged by school administration, a teacher or a parent to join WiseGuyz.

WiseGuyz strategically targets grade nine junior high boys who are between the ages of 13 – 15. These boys are on the cusp of major transitions in their lives, one primarily defined by attending high school the following year. They are at a pivotal and influential development period of progressing in their maturity and curiosity about sexual health and relationships. Boys in junior high school are defining their identity and

perceptions of sexuality, sexual health, masculinity, and relationships.

The Boys of WiseGuyz

During 2014 – 2015 year, WiseGuyz was held at six junior highs in Calgary. The total number of participants in the WiseGuyz program was 144, however we have complete data sets for 100 boys. Complete data sets means that each participant completed a matched pre and post surveys. There were two boys who did not continue with WiseGuyz and chose to leave after an initial session.

Year	WG School A	WG School B	WG School C	WG School D	WG School E	WG School F
2014-2015	25	19	12	14	12	18

Demographic Summary

The following demographic data is collected at the beginning of the WiseGuyz program through an Intake Form. It is intended to give Facilitators and the program evaluator a fuller understanding of the interests, backgrounds and relationship involvement of the boys. The Intake Form was reviewed at the end of the 2013/2014 programs and improved to gather more relevant and specific background information for the 2014/2015 year.

Discussion of Demographic Data

	2015	A	B	C	D	E	F
Average Age (Years)	14.3	14.4	14.4	14.2	14.4	14.4	14.2
# of Participants	100	25	19	12	14	12	18
White/Caucasian	55	9	11	2	10	10	13

	2015	A	B	C	D	E	F
Middle Eastern	10	3	2	5	0	0	0
South Asian	9	6	0	1	1	1	0
Southeast Asian	6	5	0	0	0	1	0
Multiple Ethnicities	6	1	4	1	0	0	0
Other	4	1	0	0	0	0	3
Latin American	3	0	1	0	1	0	1
Aboriginal	2	0	1	1	0	0	0
Black	2	0	0	2	0	0	0
East Asian	2	0	0	0	2	0	0
Metis	1	0	0	0	0	0	1

Each year, the boys are asked about their sexual orientation on the demographic form. This is the first year there has been any variance in the response. We cannot say for certain the causality of this, but propose it may be influenced by the inclusion of gay-straight alliances that are in some of the schools which WiseGuyz is in, in addition to WiseGuyz establishing a cultural presence of safety at the schools. The boys are asked about sexual orientation at the beginning of the program and at the end of the program. Following *completion* of the program, 10% of the 2015 cohort changed their response to the question regarding sexual orientation. Of those, 7% changed their response to 'heterosexual', while 2% went from 'heterosexual' to 'bisexual' and 1% changed their response from 'heterosexual' to 'rather not say'.

An average of 76% of boys live with both their mother and father. For boys who live primarily with one parent, it is most often a mother they live with. In regards to sexual activity, this result is consistent with the results of previous years. This year, 21% of one the boys indicated they are sexually active. This result is within the social norm of sexual activity for 14-year-old boys. Further, we are uncertain as to the frequency or context of the sexual activity. Of the 21% that are sexual active, 90% reported that they use a condom.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Quantitative Method

Quantitative data was gathered from 100 WiseGuyz participants during the time frame of October 2014 to June 2015. Of the 144 participants in the 2015 cohort, data was analyzed from 100 participants across all WiseGuyz programs.⁵ These data sets were included because they were full data sets of matched pre and post surveys.

All participants completed four survey instruments twice throughout the program, once immediately prior to commencement of the program and once following its completion. The surveys included:

- CSHC WiseGuyz Intake Form
- Sexual Health Practices Self-Efficacy Scale (SHPSE Survey)⁶
- Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (Male Norms Survey)⁷
- Homophobia Survey⁸

The Intake Form was designed specifically for this program and provided relevant demographic and background data on each participant. The other three surveys are externally validated instruments that measured the participant's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours towards each topic. It is important to note that the Self-Efficacy survey's question 15 from the Sexual Assault category was not included. It was removed because the phrasing of the question conflicted with Calgary Sexual Health Centre's anti-oppressive practice and philosophy of sexual assault. The other two

⁵ Tomaras, Elias. (2015). *WiseGuyz Data Analysis: Summary Report for 2015*. Prothos Research and Analytics. Calgary, AB.

⁶ Barthelow Koch, P. et al. (2010). "Sexual Health Practices Self-Efficacy Scale". In *Handbook of Sexuality-Related Measures*, edited by Terri Fisher et al, p.345 – 347. London: Routledge.

⁷ Levant, R. et al. (2012). Exploratory Factor Analysis and Construct Validity of the Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (MRNI-A-r). *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*.

⁸ Levant, R. et al. (2012). Exploratory Factor Analysis and Construct Validity of the Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (MRNI-A-r). *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*.

statements within this category focused on helping a friend who has been sexually assaulted and confidence in ability to deal with a sexual assault if it occurred to them.

Procedure for Data Analysis and Statistics

A database was developed by Prothos Analytics specifically to house the data generated from the surveys. Prothos Analytics also performed an analysis of the all the data. The data collected from the intake form and surveys was organized and filtered to remove any incomplete surveys. All data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel (version 2010) and IBM SPSS Statistics Software (version 20.0). To determine whether there was a significant difference between pre-survey and post-survey scores, a Paired Samples T-test was used. Statistical significance indicates that the difference was large enough that it was unlikely to have occurred simply by chance. Throughout this report, the term 'significant' is used to indicate the presence of *statistical* significance.

Consistent Reference of Male Norms and Survey

Consistent with the previous WiseGuyz research reports, we continue to use the concept of masculine ideologies and healthy masculinities. The pluralizing of the terms is purposeful and we remain committed to the following context of masculine ideologies as introduced in the Masculinity Survey:

...masculine ideology refers specifically to internalized beliefs regarding defined standards or norms for males' roles and behaviors (Pleack, 1981, 1995). Through social interactions resulting in reinforcement or punishment, masculinity ideology informs, encourages and constrains boys and men to conform to the prevailing male role norms by adopting certain socially sanctioned

masculine behaviours and avoiding creating prescribed behaviours.⁹

The continued use of the Male Norms survey¹⁰ has proved immensely valuable in demonstrating the impact of the WiseGuyz program in relation to the program design and the intended outcomes for creating healthy masculinities. A key learning that emerged in our research two years ago still holds true, supporting the fidelity of the program:

The boys in WiseGuyz demonstrate an awareness of the cultural constructions of masculinity and thereby develop the consciousness required to critically examine the constructions. WiseGuyz facilitates this by establishing a safe space for the boys to be free to examine and challenge their own beliefs. Undoing and interrupting the pressure to be extreme forms of masculinity is a significant part of the work of WiseGuyz. WiseGuyz begins to unravel the heteronormative values and behaviours of the boys that are required to maintain their masculinity.¹¹

The masculinity survey entails five sub-scales that are “designed to measure individuals’ behaviour about appropriate behaviour for adolescence boys.”¹² The masculinity survey is a 41-item inventory using a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with the following five subscales:

⁹ Levnat, R.F., Rogers, B.K., Cruickshank, B., Rankin, T.J., Kurtz, B. A., Rummell, C.M., Williams, C. M., & Colbow, A. J. (2012, August 6). Exploratory Factor Analysis and Construct Validity of the Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (MRNI-A-r). *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0029102.

¹⁰ Permission was obtained from Dr. Ron Levant to use the validated survey in WiseGuyz. There are few validated tools that measure adolescent changes in male norms. We see the ongoing collection of data through the masculinity survey as an effective way to demonstrate program impact, but also to contribute to the growing discussion of masculinity studies in the area of adolescence.

¹¹ Hurlock, D. (2013). *Re-imagined Masculinities: Unfolding the Meaning and Affect of the WiseGuyz Program*. Calgary: Calgary Sexual Health Centre.

¹² Levant, R.F., Rogers, B.K., Cruickshank, B., Rankin, T.J., Kurtz, B. A., Rummell, C.M., Williams, C. M., & Colbow, A. J. (2012, August 6). Exploratory Factor Analysis and Construct Validity of the Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (MRNI-A-r). *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0029102.

1. Avoidance of Femininity
2. Self-Reliance
3. Aggression
4. Achievement/Status
5. Restrictive emotionality

Participants of WiseGuyz indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with statements concerning beliefs about how boys ought to behave. The higher scores (from 1 to 7) correspond to more agreement with normative masculine ideologies.

Key Results of Surveys

The following are highlights from the data analysis of the WiseGuyz program's 2015 cohort.¹³

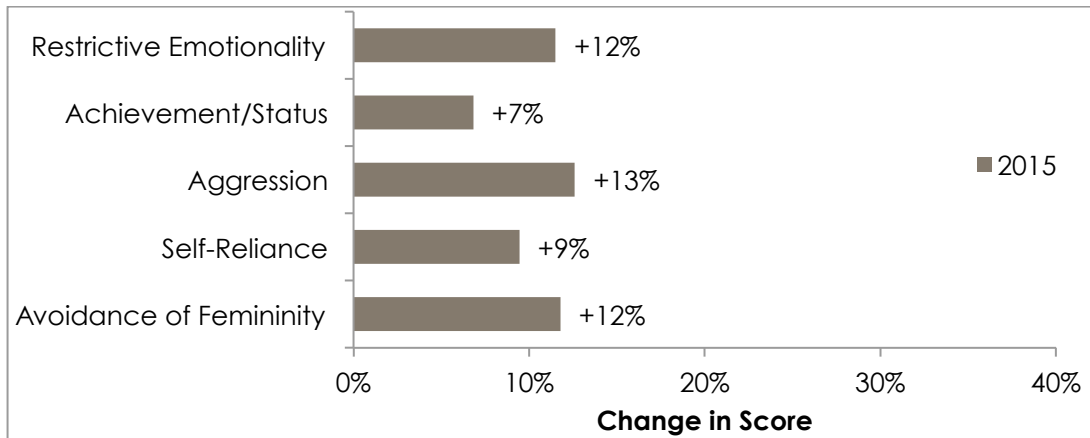
- The average post-survey score shows a statistically significant improvement on each of the three-attitudinal surveys.
- The Self-Efficacy surveys average post-survey score significantly improved by 24%.
- The Self-Efficacy Survey's average post-survey score significantly improved by 13%- 30% in all 6 categories compared to the pre-survey. This is notable, since there was no significant improvement in the Sexual Assault category in the previous 2013-2014 year.
- The average post-survey score on the Self-Efficacy Survey was 3.7, suggesting that, on average, participants are between 'moderately' and 'highly confident' in sexual health practices following completion of the program.
- Among the participants who indicated they were sexually active, 90% of participants said they use a condom during sexual intercourse following the program compared to 63% before the program.

¹³ Tomaras, Elias. (2015). *WiseGuyz Data Analysis: Summary Report for 2015*. Prothos Research and Analytics. Calgary, AB.

- The Male Norms Survey's average post-survey score improved significantly by 11% from the pre-survey. The average post-survey score also significantly improved in all 5 categories.
- The average post-survey score on the Male Norms Survey, suggested that, on average, the participants 'kind of disagree' with conventional beliefs and stereotypes about masculinity.
- The Homophobia Survey's average post-survey score significantly improved by 19% compared to the average pre-survey score.
- The Homophobia Survey's average post-survey score was 2.1, suggesting that, on average the participants 'disagree' with the homophobic statements presented in the survey. This means that the boys have become less homophobic as result of WiseGuyz.

Results of Male Norms Survey

The Male Norms Survey asks respondents to indicate on a 7-point scale, their agreement with 41 statements that relate to 5 categories: Restrictive Emotionality, Achievement/ Status, Aggression, Self-Reliance, and Avoidance of Femininity. Lower scores indicate greater disagreement with conventional views and stereotypes, while higher scores indicate stronger agreement with normative views and stereotypes. In the following figure, the changes for each subcategory are indicated and also shown in comparison to the previous year's results:



The two most consistent and largest improvements are in the areas of boys becoming more comfortable with expression of emotionality. Closely linked to this is the other improvement in boys being comfortable with what is stereotypically labeled as “feminine” behaviors. This co-relation is significant because being stoic or emotionless and avoiding feminine behaviors are emblems of conventional masculinity. This quantitative result also intersects the qualitative data in which we hear from the boys how they have become increasingly comfortable with their emotions as a result of WiseGuyz. These results illustrate how WiseGuyz supports the emotional health of boys. In being part of an experience that is safe, they are not isolated from nor do they have to disguise or disengage from their feelings. This is important because disconnection from their emotional being is a factor that research has claimed can lead to depression and suicide in boys.

Results of the Homophobia Survey

The Homophobia Survey was the fourth survey delivered to program participants prior to and following the WiseGuyz program. It asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed, on a 7-point scale, with 9 different statements regarding homosexuality. Lower scores indicate

greater disagreement with the homophobic statements presented, while higher scores indicate stronger agreement with the homophobic statements.

The average post-survey score significantly improved by 19% compared to the average pre-survey score. The improvement was greatest on Question 9 – men should never compliment or flirt with another male (27%), and improved the least on Question 9: it is disappointing to learn that a famous athlete is gay (6%). These results suggest that the participants tend to disagree more strongly with the homophobic statements presented in the Homophobia Survey than the Male Norms statements presented in the Male Norms Survey. This tells us that as a result of the WiseGuyz program, boys are less homophobic. This result is strongly correlated in the qualitative data.

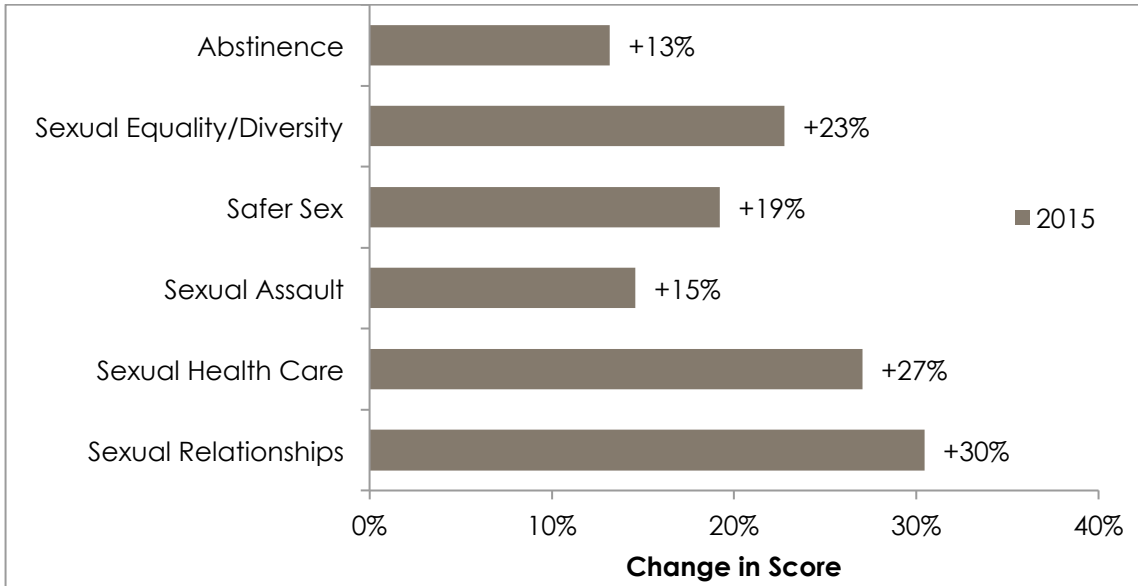
Results of Sexual Health Survey

The Sexual Health Practices Self-Efficacy Scale (SSES) contains 20 questions relating to sexual health practices, where respondents indicate their confidence in performing these practices on a 5-point scale. The questions are organized into six categories:

- Sexual Relationships
- Sexual Health Care
- Sexual Assault
- Safer Sex
- Sexual Equality/ Diversity
- Abstinence

As shown in the figure below, the average post-survey score significantly improved by 24%. The average post-survey score also significantly

improved by 13% - 30% in all 6 categories compared to the pre-survey. This is notable, since there was no significant improvement in the Sexual Assault category last year. The average post-survey score improved the least in the Abstinence category (13%) and the greatest in the Sexual Relationships category (30%).



Following completion of the WiseGuyz program, the average scores among the 2015 cohort suggest that they are 'highly confident' in sexual health practices, 'kind of disagree' with conventional beliefs and stereotypes about masculinity, and 'disagree' with homophobic beliefs. Undoubtedly, the results indicate that the program has had a significant positive influence on the boys' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs with respect to sexual health, masculinity, and homosexuality.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

The qualitative research employed a generic approach that is informed by interpretive traditions, which emphasizes seeking to understand what and how the boys change as a result of the program. The best interpretive research holds a duality of “incitement to discourse”¹⁴ to want to talk more about the program and the issues it surfaces and attends to. However, effective interpretive research also incites more questions. In this way, the research is at once convincing of its claims to knowledge about the WiseGuyz program and in its further possibility about the topic.

The consistent demonstration of qualitative themes over three years substantiates the program's rigor, fidelity and ethical application. We are confident that the fulsome nature and critical depth of the program is creating positive results for the boys who participate in WiseGuyz. Long term, we anticipate that the fidelity of the program constructively influences gender and social norms, supporting youth in having healthy relationships and contributing to violence prevention.

The key themes of this year's research are an extension of themes first established three years ago. The qualitative themes this year is:

1. The Anatomy of a Safe Space
2. The Emotional Boy
3. Empathy and Masculinity
4. Cultivating Consciousness
5. Disrupting Gay Discourse

¹⁴ Lather, Patti. (1993) Fertile obsession: Validity after post structuralism. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 334(4), 673 – 693.

The Anatomy of the WiseGuyz Safe Space

“The trust that was built from the start, that was really special.”
(School B).

“I call a ‘safe container’—a place where people can share experiences honestly, knowing that what they share will be respected and kept in confidence.” – *Brene Brown, Rising Strong*

Safety is a continued central theme in the WiseGuyz research. In this third year of the research we are able to further explicate safety to understand its anatomy and why it is important for the boys. Across all three years of research the boys repeatedly share why they feel safe in WiseGuyz: they felt they could “be themselves”, share their feelings, open up about their lives and ask questions that they would not typically ask because of fear.

In this third year of research, our understanding of safety is taken to a new depth as we confidently claim that the safe environment is fundamental to boys being able to feel vulnerable, which leads to them being able to experience a range of emotions that they have previously been disconnected from. In Judy Chu's book,¹⁵ *When Boys Become Boys*, she follows a group of pre-school boys for two years in which the boys all begin in very tender and open states of vulnerability. This slowly changes as boys' age, learning that asserting their masculinity is a way of protecting their vulnerability:

So long as the expression of tender feelings and the wish for close relationships involve revealing vulnerability and are linked to femininity, we can expect that boys will continue learning to project a cool indifference (e.g. as evidence by the claim “I don't care)

¹⁵ Chu, Judy. (2014). *When Boys Become Boys: Development, Relationships, and Masculinity*. New York University Press: NY.

that can simultaneously protect their vulnerability from risk exposure and affirm their masculinity.¹⁶

What WiseGuyz is trying to prevent and disrupt is boys further developing the anti-emotional and disconnected characteristics of masculinity. One of the ways the safe space is created is by the Facilitators modeling vulnerability and sharing. The boys' discuss in the focus groups the non-judgmental way Facilitators engaged them in conversation, and how important it was to them that the Facilitators opened up about themselves. This is important in two ways: it shows boys that being vulnerable is a safe and healthy part of masculinity, and secondly, it strengthens trust among the boys. The boys commented on how important this was to them and how they felt valued and trusted by the Facilitators:

Like they'd tell us kind of personal things. For example, [the facilitator] told us he was having a kid recently. That also gave us a sense of trust that we could actually trust these people. Like, they're incorporating their own personal lives. Like we didn't necessarily need to know he had a kid, but he still voluntarily told us that cuz he felt that he could trust us about it (School C).

This disrupts the dichotomous, more conventional notions of the Facilitator-Participant relationship that is hinged on distance and objectivity. Whether it was a Facilitator sharing news of becoming a father or revealing that they are gay, the boys always responded with compassion and increased trust.

Throughout the focus group discussions, particular words become common phrases expressed by the boys. They repeatedly spoke of "trust"

¹⁶ Chu, Judy. (2014). *When Boys Become Boys: Development, Relationships, and Masculinity*. New York University Press: NY.

“safety” and not feeling “afraid.” The boys trusted that they could question their own beliefs and understanding in WiseGuyz without feeling judged:

I think WiseGuyz made a really **safe** environment. I definitely **trusted** all the guys like, definitely [the facilitators] I **trusted** them with anything I was going to tell them. I wasn't afraid that they were gonna say anything or **judge** me so I definitely **trusted** them and I think that they created a really **safe** environment just in general for all of the guys establishing rules and stuff. So nobody was **judging** anybody and nobody would go and make anybody upset...so **definitely a safe environment** (School E).

The boys also asserted that in order for them to fully experience WiseGuyz they needed to be open about their thoughts, beliefs, and values. They described sharing as feeling “scary” but they felt the Facilitators would not judge them, so they let themselves be vulnerable:

[we were] not scared to ask whatever you want... like...before you could be scared... “Oh what are these guys gonna think of me, I'm like a dumb ass or something (School A).

The boys also commented that because their learning was not “graded” this added to them not feeling judged. They explained that their learning was possible in part because it was different than the formal learning processes they have in school and in WiseGuyz they felt safe to be curious and comfortable in asking questions.

The boys emphasized that the Facilitators co-created a safe environment, from the very beginning:

They [facilitators] really made this idea clear that this place is a secure and safe place for us to talk about problems and everything. And like, we can talk about it and they'll automatically help us no

matter what, like even if it's like someone is on drugs or something like that. They're obviously gonna be like, we're gonna help you out, like we're not gonna get mad at you for this or anything, we're gonna help you out (School C).

The safe space only continues to deepen and renew itself as the boys grow more trusting, non-judgmental, and vulnerable:

So we could learn from them [facilitator] which was trying to show us 'hey, if you're not comfortable' to give us passes. If you don't wanna talk about this, don't worry about it, but if you really feel like you need to talk about something, go for it (School B).

Safety is fundamental to the program because it is the opening for the boys to return to themselves, to recover their emotional interior lives, to be the preschooler that Chu writes about in her research who is tender, emotional, and deeply connected in their friendships. In some ways, the boys are able to rediscover who they are within this program by unlearning and learning: stripping the masculinity mask in order to learn to be what the boys described often as "being ok with themselves."

Strengthening the Safe Space

Through our research, we ensure a constructive relationship between research and practice, thereby establishing "ethical validation"¹⁷ which is the "appraisal of whether the research findings inform and transform our practices and assist us in doing things differently."¹⁸ The research results show how the program is making a consistent difference, and help to continuously improve the program. This interrelated and iterative relationship between research and practice itself is a claim about the applicability of the research and a measure of its ethical validation.

¹⁷ Moules, Nancy; McCaffrey G., Field, J, and Laing, Catherine. 2015. *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice*. Peter Lang: New York.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 173

In the 2014/2015 year there were an increasing number of boys participating. This year was a precarious balance of not wanting to exclude any boys, and finding the right balance of numbers to ensure a safe space. Through the research we learned that the safe space was occasionally unsettled because of some boys' disruptive behavior and not taking the program seriously. The boys who wanted to be in WiseGuyz also wanted these peers to be more serious in their efforts:

Sometimes it's hard to say some stuff you want to say in there and then there's just people who just laugh. They look at you and like, well that's not cool cuz sometimes it's hard to say and they can just bring you down (School A).

We know that if the "safe container" is jeopardized, the boys will not feel comfortable in asking questions or sharing thoughts because of fear of judgment and shaming from their peers. Thus, without the safe space the boys are limited in their experiences of learning. This was the first time this was encountered in the WiseGuyz program and we wanted to ensure a quick and productive response to address this issue.

The boys who are committed to the program also want the other boys in to be equally as committed. Some boys proposed solutions to address this, recognizing that everyone deserves a chance, yet not wanting some boys to dismantle the safe space that is central to their learning. The boys suggested dealing with disruptive behaviors earlier in the program by talking one on one with the boys, and offering another "chance" to stay in the program.

This research learning was a key turning point in the practice for the Facilitators and in improving the program and creating a process of being more attentive to boys' behavior from the onset and putting into place

procedures and boundaries for attending to these behaviors as soon as they show up in the space. The boys asked for processes to be created that were not punitive but constructive and to give boys who were disruptive a chance to change. This is an example of the value and significance of the research to practice relationships that the WiseGuyz program adheres to and how each year, the program endeavors to strengthen and improve because of the application of the research.

The Importance of the Emotional Boy

“Yet the story of the lack of intimate friendships among males and their attempts at emotional stoicism and autonomy is not new.”
- Niobe Way, *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendship and the Crisis of Connection*

Judy Chu's research into how pre-school boys develop their masculinity in relationship with others is extremely relevant and pivotal to the WiseGuyz program. It affirms for us that the boys develop their social and emotional capacities within relationships and that “each boy's experience is predicated on many factors, such as family, peer and teacher interactions, media exposure, and individual makeup.”¹⁹ The relational capacities that we see fostered through WiseGuyz are a response to the social disconnection and isolation that boys can feel because of male norm pressures. Relationships are the means within which boys learn and develop a sense of who they are. The participatory group process of WiseGuyz supports the development of new individual friendships, but also a strong social network for the boys. The group structure provides a strong sense of inclusion. In previous years, school staff observed many of the boys developing new friendships through WiseGuyz that they would not

¹⁹ Vicki Zakrzewski. 2014. Debunking the Myths about Boys and Emotions. The Greater Good http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/debunking_myths_boys_emotions

have generated before.²⁰ The boys experience the value of inclusion and belonging that mitigates the pressures of hyper-autonomy that can be required to demonstrate masculinity:

a relational framing of boys' development leads us to reconsider our assumptions about the purpose and value of requiring boys to prove their masculinity and worth by demonstrating their autonomy and self-sufficiency. As we acknowledge and account for the centrality of relationships in boys' lives, we begin to move towards a more comprehensive understanding of boys' development and how we can help boys to thrive, rather than merely survive, within the cultures of boyhood and beyond.²¹

The deepening of relationships through WiseGuyz is in part possible because boys feel safe to be vulnerable, which is the *gateway* to emotion and connection.²² This also aligns with what researchers are increasingly claiming about boys and emotionality:

...scientists are discovering that what society says about men's (and boys) social and emotional abilities is simply not true, and that cultivating their natural capacity for emotional attunement and relationships is critical to their overall well-being. But we can't wait till they're men to do so—we need to start when they're young.²³

Vulnerability within WiseGuyz counters common perceptions of vulnerable as meaning at-risk, or susceptible to attack or wounding. Understanding vulnerability as courage to be one's self is shaping a new narrative that mitigates the discourse that boys are not to be emotional and the long-standing archetype of “boys don't cry.” The meaning of vulnerability in WiseGuyz is “not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not

²⁰ Hurlock, Debb. (2013). Re-imagines Masculinities: Unfolding the Meaning and Effect of the WiseGuyz Program. Calgary Sexual Health Centre.

²¹ Chu, Judy. 2014. Boys Relational Development: The importance of relationships for boys' psychological and social well-being in Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/when-boys-become-boys/201405/boys-relational-development>

²² Brene Brown. (2015). *Rising Strong*. Random House: New York.

²³ Ibid.

weakness; it's our greatest measure of courage."²⁴ The boys in WiseGuyz demonstrate vulnerability by asking questions without feeling shame, particularly in relation to sexual health.

Many of the boys in the program spoke about their feelings of disconnection and how WiseGuyz helps them feel more connected to themselves and the other boys in the program. In the WiseGuyz program they have a sense of belonging and cultural permission to be connected to the other boys in the program. The connections they create in this space are often very deep and continue on after the program as boys describe WiseGuyz as a "family." Niobe Way, in her book, *Deep Secrets: Boys, Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*, writes about the crippling affect that disconnection has on the psychological health of adolescent boys. The crisis of connection that adolescent boys experience, and how being emotional is "frowned upon" because of the great weight of cultural stereotypes: "In a culture where needing or wanting emotional support or intimacy is the antithesis of manliness, boys during late adolescence suffer the deep alienation that comes with such an equation."²⁵

Through WiseGuyz we have learned how deeply disconnected some adolescent boys feel from themselves and from people in their lives because of the cultural expectations of masculine ideologies to be stoic, invulnerable, and autonomous. Way further claims that at this pivotal point in development for adolescent boys, they experience great loss of intimacy in friendships, homophobia, and conventions of masculinity begin to create "gender straightjackets" for boys. She proposes that these

²⁴ Brown, Brene. (2015). *Rising Strong*. P. 4. Random House: New York, NY.

²⁵ Way, Niobe. (2013). *Deep Secrets: Boys Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.

confines can be linked to suicide and depression rates of boys being double that of girls.

She further asserts that some scholars claim we are in the midst of a “boy crisis.” She challenges this and purports that there is “crisis of connection” that is ubiquitous in our culture.²⁶ Brene Brown in her vulnerability research calls it a “human crisis”, and Miriam Greenspan describes our western culture as “emotionally phobic”²⁷. This is furthered by what one of the boys describes as an emotional block where he “gets blocked enough that I don't really have emotions” (School A). For adolescent boys, they live this crisis more acutely because of the additional weight of cultural stereotypes of masculinity that intensify their experiences of disconnect, stoicism, and autonomy—all of which are ways of outwardly demonstrating their masculinity. As the pressure to silence or mask their inner feelings intensifies, so too do their feelings of shame.²⁸ This is a danger to the boys' psychological health: they over compromise themselves by not staying true to what they feel in lieu of adapting to masculine norms. When asked what they would carry forward most from WiseGuyz, the boys unanimously stated healthy relationships and awareness of the “man-box”. They shared that at the age of 14 they feel intense pressure about the “man-box” and that “*you can't show emotion*” and that “*you gotta be tough. You gotta be mean*” (School A).

In WiseGuyz, the boys learn to unlearn by undressing the armour of disconnection and stoicism. They redress with comfort in emotion and

²⁶ Way, Niobe. (2013). *Deep Secrets: Boys Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.

²⁷ Greenspan, Miriam in an interview with Barbara Platek, *Trough A Glass Darkly* Miriam Greenspan On Moving From Grief To Gratitude in The Sun. www.sunmagzone.com

²⁸ Brown, Brene. (2015). *Rising Strongly*. Random House: New York, NY.

feeling safe to ask questions in their intimate relationships. One of the boys shared a story about how he is able to talk more with his mother:

Having a relationship with my mother and talking about math with my mother, it's really different. I'd like to talk about feelings...and get to know each other a little bit better. WiseGuyz has taught me how to do stuff like that and let out how you feel and how you can talk to a partner or somebody (School B).

Consistent with previous years' research results, emotionality remains one of the most significant improvements for the boys. Some of the boys, as in previous research, spoke

"You can't really cry in front of other people, you can look sad, but no tears" (School F).

about the common barriers of limiting masculinity; that they need to "be tough" or as one of the boys shared "my Dad tells me "you gotta suck it up" and that "you have to hide your fear inside sometimes" (School E). The boys are wedged in the liminal space between wanting to be "tough, but at the same time, you don't want to get into a fight" (School E). In this space, there is no room for the boys to experience emotions other than repression, anger or fear. Some of the boys talked about how they hide their emotions:

I get through it. Everything that's happened to me when I was a kid I just deal with it in my own way. I'll keep it in my mind. I don't say it out loud to people cuz then they're like "Oh he's depressed" and he's like a dud. So when people pour their heart out for the little things, I just kind of laugh (school A).

These central themes of the struggle with emotion first surfaced in year one of the WiseGuyz research and since then, has consistently appeared. The opening of emotionality through WiseGuyz is a kind of permission for boys "to have an internal life, approached for the full range of human emotions, and help in developing an emotional vocabulary so that they may better understand themselves and communities more effectively with

others”²⁹. The centrality of fulsome emotion is fundamental to the psychological well-being of adolescent boys, to sustaining healthy male norms and to their ability to engage in healthy relationships.

Empathy

“I try to “pick my words before I say them. I used to say “oh that’s so gay, that’s so dumb.” But now, after WiseGuyz, I’m like, all of those words have meanings to them and I really shouldn’t say them anymore” (School D).

In the first research report we stressed that WiseGuyz could not be described without “a catalogue of essential features, it’s very multidimensional nature is its essence”.³⁰ As the boys become comfortable with vulnerability, they then move through the gateway to emotion, connection, and empathy. As their critical awareness of language is cultivated, it initiates experiences of empathy that the boys did not have before. Developing awareness of language and its power to heal and hurt is a critical learning for the boys, which often led to empathy of how people are marginalized through language:

I used to look down on gay people...cuz that’s what I’ve been taught as a kid with our religion. Now, I see they’re just as human [as me]...religion sort of tells people to hate them...I don’t get why. I am Muslim, so being gay is like the ultimate bad thing you could do. I don’t look down on them, but I used to think of them as like a completely different person, like their mind is messed up or something. Or, they’re confused, but now I really think...there’s no difference between us. We’re just people (School F).

²⁹ Kindlon, D and Thompson, M. 2000. *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*. p. 240. Ballantine Books.,New York, NY:

³⁰ Hurlock, Debb. (2013). *Re-imagined Masculinities: Unfolding the Meaning and Effect of the WiseGuyz Program*. Calgary Sexual Health Centre.

Brene Brown, a researcher in vulnerability, wrote, “empathy fuels connections.”³¹ This is precisely what the boys experience in WiseGuyz: connections of language to critical awareness, to reflection and to empathy. The boys gain awareness of how homophobic discourses influence perceptions and behaviors and ultimately how it can destructively affect people who are LGBTQ:

“If I didn't come to WiseGuyz and someone [who is gay] came up to me, I guess I would not try to talk to them anymore. But, now cuz I learned stuff, I probably could deal with it and stay friends with them” (School F).

If I say this, [then] I might have offended somebody that might be secretly gay and I shouldn't have said...so ever since I've learned that every time I hear someone say “You're a faggot, you're gay, you're queer” I'd be like “Yo bro, what's up, what if I was secretly gay, I'd feel unprotected (School B).

They empathize with someone who is LGBTQ and what they “go through and if someone does tell you they're gay, you have to be supportive to them cuz it takes a lot of courage to say that” (School F). Indicators of empathy are showing up most commonly in the boys' awareness of and shifting understandings of how language violates people who are LGBTQ:

...like if you're playing video games with your friends and you call them a fag, as in like, when 'you're so stupid', it's just kind of like you use it as a hurtful term...you're not actually saying “oh you like men” you're just saying “oh you're stupid right.” But if you were doing that in public and said that, then like if there was someone who felt that way about the same sex, then they'd just feel kind of like, they'd know you're using it as a stupid term. You kind of make it feel like you are calling them stupid, right? So, if you just say, 'oh, you're a fag as in 'oh, you're stupid. You know, a person who likes

³¹ Brene Brown, <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-shorts/2013/12/Brene-Brown-on-Empathy/>. Accessed December 2015.

the same sex will be like, “oh, I’m stupid because I like men (School D).

In this lengthy excerpt we can trace the boy’s first movement of recognizing how they use language and how they have chosen to use homophobic language.

Secondly, they further deepen their awareness by connecting how the use of this language would negatively impact someone who is LGBTQ. Boys in all focus groups cite this narrative often; it speaks to their profound honing of attention to language and how it constructs and perpetuates harmful social norms. This developing awareness of the boys is critical to their own healthy psychological development. One of the boys admitted that he still used the “fag discourse” but not in public anymore and only with close friends, in a joking way. This reminds us that the boys in WiseGuyz will experience different levels of awareness and behavior change, and this boy expressed, “I don’t use it to hurt anybody, but I guess it still could hurt someone. So...you gotta be careful” (School D). This boy exemplifies the beginning movements toward empathy by recognizing how the language can hurt someone. As the boys grow more comfortable with empathy, they develop deeper and more compassionate connections:

Empathy, the most powerful tool of compassion, is an emotional skill that allows us to respond to others in a meaningful, caring way. Empathy is the ability to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes – to understand what someone is experiencing and to reflect back that understanding.”³²

Through their consciousness of language, the boys realize how they can hurt themselves and others by engaging in oppressive language:

³² Brown, Brene. (2012). *Daring Greatly*. P.xx. Gotham Books: New York.

Cuz it could actually hurt someone's feelings. Cuz I know a lot of people who like, who could be gay, and like they don't wanna say it. Like they're secret about it and if I say something like that [then] they might think, 'oh maybe I shouldn't be gay because it's not proper,' but like there's nothing wrong with it, so I shouldn't be saying that (School A).

Following the development of critical awareness of their own language, boys shared stories of how they started to outwardly challenge and disrupt others when they heard oppressive language, challenging their friends and their family members:

I notice more stuff, like more gay stuff. It was like we watched this Toyota commercial [in WiseGuyz, about how buying a truck makes you more masculine]. I saw it at home and I said 'Dad watch it.' I was like, this is what I am talking about—this is why we shouldn't say gay, why does it make you more manly to have a truck? What's the difference? Even like TV or like magazines you can see...you have to be masculine (School A).

Another boy shared how he now speaks up in his own home:

It's like you can't just say those words cuz if you think about it, there are gay people, and like why do we dis them like that? Like even my Dad, he says "Oh that's gay" and I'd be like. I actually talked to him, I was like, 'Why, why is that gay? What does that have to do with gay people? He said, 'What do you mean?' I talked to him and I haven't heard him say it since' (School A).

"I feel like they're not trying to be offensive but...many people talk until they want to be included so they say these homophobic slurs without even having their mind into it." It was drilled into our minds that "gay" is negative" (School B).

Through cultivation of critical awareness and reflection, the boys are able to notice, deconstruct the image and its affect, and then "*begin to care*" as one of the boys noted. One of the boys shared a story of watching a boy from the WiseGuyz challenge another boy in the hallways of school who was engaging in homophobic language:

...the thing that I kinda wanna emphasize is the respect about people and also just like the homophobic things, or like racial slurs. Cuz now everyone understands why it's bad, like sorry, everyone in WiseGuyz understands why it's bad. Cuz like I know I've seen some guys from WiseGuyz, [if] somebody would say something in the hall, I've seen some WiseGuyz go up to them and be 'Hey, stop that. The reason why this is bad is because...' Then they'd say the reason for it and then they'd be like 'Could you please consider my argument because this is a serious thing and I don't want anybody to feel bad about themselves because of who they are.' It's really been changing people. I know that for sure (School C).

WiseGuyz is engaging in the work that Judy Chu describes as the "practical and productive work: to help raise boys' awareness and foster boys' critical reflection so that they can make more informed decisions about how they want to be and act."³³ Through the WiseGuyz research, we are hearing more narratives of how the boys challenge others outside of WiseGuyz:

anyone outside of WiseGuyz, they make fun of kids in WiseGuyz...like a few of my friends [from WiseGuyz said], 'Oh don't say gay, c'mon man' and they're like 'gay, gay are you gay?'... They start making fun of you for bringing it outside [of WiseGuyz] because they don't know what goes on in that room (School B).

This quote is powerful and speaks not only to the changes that happen for the boys, but how hard it is for them to be active bystanders in their social and familial lives.

³³ Chu, Judy. (2014). *When Boys Become Boys: Development, Relationships, and Masculinity*. New York University Press, NY.

Cultivating Consciousness

"You're either this or that and WiseGuyz helped me to see the middle."
(School B).

The boys' experiences of comfort with their own vulnerability are the foundation for a rich awareness of homophobic language, media constructs of gender, and gender equality. The boys have varying degrees of increased capacity for critical thinking, however, each year we see some level of change in all the boys. The boys are able to articulate the difference in their behaviors before and after WiseGuyz:

I don't know..I wasn't very nice. I wasn't very accepting and stuff. I didn't like...I fell for the stereotypes that guys had to be really like big and strong and had to be like good at sports. But I think once I joined WiseGuyz I pretty much instantly realized that all of that was just pretty much stupid. I definitely don't need to be all into sports and stuff or anything like that. I definitely think I've become more accepting and stuff. So I think that WiseGuyz has definitely changed me a lot (School E).

I think that before WiseGuyz I was disrespectful and I was a douche bag towards women too. I've changed a lot with them.... I'm not disrespectful. I guess there are times I can be disrespectful, but I'm not as disrespectful as I was before. I think I've been noticing a big change because girls in general, they like hanging out with me more than they used to because I'm not saying rude things to them anymore. You know, some of the people that I have pushed away by being a dick too...I think that some of them have come back and you know, embraced me and kids have said 'you've changed and I'm proud of you (School E).

The two recurring responses to what the boys learned most were media literacy and awareness of homophobic language. Some of the boys openly shared their apathy when they started WiseGuyz and how they are bombarded with media images that they know *"are wrong, but you*

don't really care" (School D). Stirring these boys to care is an unspoken and pivotal nuance of the WiseGuyz program.

Another boy shared how media literacy shifted how he sees women, and how media shapes gender constructs: "I'll be with my friends and I'll just see like random billboards and I'll say, 'oh, look a half-naked lady beside a pineapple, they're selling a pineapple'" (School D). The boys continued saying their friends just shrug it off, but for themselves what was once "normal and they saw nothing wrong with it," they now see it as "sickening" and how it impacts their female friends: "if I'm with women and I see that it makes them like...feel like who they should be and stuff" (School E). This also points to the boys' empathy for how media impacts their female friends.

Another example is one of the boys reflecting on his aggressive behaviors before WiseGuyz and his realization now that it was connected to maintenance of cultural norms and peer acceptance:

Honestly I could see myself as a bully. I know I have pushed people around, but like honesty, I needed to say it to hurt someone. I just kinda see myself saying it to look cool, look tough, look masculine, and be big around bigger people than me. Like its' really made me think that's not cool, like I'm actually hurting people (School D).

Prior to this 'noticing', the boys shared that the influence of media for them had become normalized. They described their experience of becoming media literate as "opening their eyes." The boys were able to reflect on their behavior previous to WiseGuyz. One of the boys shared how he "used to be disrespectful, and would say nasty things about them [girls] and call them names and things like slut....I think I am a lot better with that now" (School E).

Disrupting Negative Gay Discourse

“One thing I really took out about it was like, when you call people gay or if you call them pussy, if you actually think about it, what are you actually saying? You might say it as a dis, but like, if you think about it, there’s actually meaning to that word. That’s something I really took out of WiseGuyz” (School A).

Awareness of what the boys term, as “homophobic slurs” is a continuing theme in this third year of research. There is an interrelation of homophobic language and maintenance of what boys perceive as being masculine. This thematic area consistently shows significant improvement for the boys. For the past two years, the survey data results have illustrated statistically significant improvement in the boys being less homophobic as a result of WiseGuyz. Further, this narrative theme shows up heavily in this year’s research, as it has in the previous two years.

The implications of this are significant because the consistent survey results and cohesive themes demonstrate an important change in awareness and belief for the boys. This tells us that they are paying attention to discourse and how it limits understanding and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about people who are LGBTQ. Further, they are able to deconstruct the relationship between language and masculinity norms and how discourse is practised among adolescent boys. In particular, they describe the difference between “gay and fag” as the word fag brings the gendered nature of homophobia into focus:³⁴

Before WiseGuyz, me personally, I’ll admit I actually did used to say some things like that “Oh that’s a gay game” or something like that. I didn’t understand why it was not ok to use it. But after WiseGuyz, I realized that, like, why it’s not okay and like I don’t know, now I just have a full understanding to it, like why it’s not ok. Now that I can’t

³⁴ Pascoe. J. 2012. *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. California Press: University of Los Angeles, LA.

actually go back, I feel bad about it. But except I now know that I can teach other people why it's bad if they say it. That for me is more important than actually feeling bad about myself cuz I did that. So I can actually teach other people so they don't make the same mistake (School C).

In our third year of research we have come full circle. The repetition of themes has solidified into validated results from the WiseGuyz program. The following quote is from the first research report in 2013 and serves as a reminder of the resonance of this theme:

...their biggest learning was in noticing and attending to language, specifically the demeaning discourses of gay, or calling someone 'gay' or 'faggot.' Further, they identified that this changed them as they noted that they no longer make assumptions about people they do not know, or project assumptions about others who people may stereotype. The boys, who admittedly used the language before WiseGuyz, did so as a way to effeminate other boys. These boys do not appear homophobic, but when feeling scared and pressured to assert their masculinity, the most effective way to do this was to feminize another boy through language and describing someone as gay, therefore attempting to de-masculinize him.³⁵

Attending to the discourse of adolescent boys in WiseGuyz is one of the key indicators of how we know they are changing their understandings and behaviours. "Discourse is social" and the meaning of the words depend on the context.³⁶ The term "casual homophobia" was a term the boys used in some of the focus groups:

I don't think they mean to be homophobic but 'gay' it's just a word like 'gay' is a slur that everyone uses for some reasons to bring people down. Saying that like makes people that are gay, makes them not wanna come out and tell other people in case they are bullied (School E).

³⁵ Hurlock, D. 2013. *Re-imagined Masculinities: Unfolding the Meaning and Affect of the WiseGuyz Program*. P.63. Calgary: Calgary Sexual Health Centre.

³⁶ MacDonnell, Diane. (1986). *Theories of Discourse*. Basil Blackwell: New York, NY.

They recognized how they casually use homophobic language and the serious implications of it. One of the boys commented:

..for me it was like we learned about casual homophobia and how like using 'gay' and stuff is putting that group of people down and using it as an insult is not cool. I used to sometimes, before, use that as an insult and then after we learned about it I really stopped and I then started to call people out when they wouldn't stop putting down a group of people so that group of people wouldn't feel bad.
(School E)

The Continuing Need for WiseGuyz

“When we know what we know, we cannot deny that we know and we are ethically obligated to do something about it.”
- Nancy Moules, *Conducting Hermeneutic Research*

“You never really think, like before WiseGuyz, about the stereotypes of being a guy and like what they’re supposed to do. You just kind of follow that. After WiseGuyz...you’re more open for breaking free from the stereotype” (School C).

Although there are many positive changes that WiseGuyz is cultivating, we know the need for WiseGuyz continues to grow. We know this from the extensive requests for the program locally and nationally. But most importantly, we know this because for as much as the boys change through WiseGuyz, there is still more work to do. The cultural pressures of masculinity do not disappear, but we believe that through WiseGuyz the boys have cultivated the ability to mitigate the pressures so that they will have a rich interior life, which extends into healthy and equitable relationships.

Through focus group discussions, the boys remind us of the stressors they experience. Although the boys in WiseGuyz are aware of the pressures of masculinity, they can still feel discouraged that the society around them is not going to change. Often they would say, with resignation, that “this is just the way the world is” or “if you don’t have a job and you don’t have a wife or a girlfriend,

“It sucks cuz you can never really let loose, you always gotta make sure you have this wall up that no one can see the real you. You gotta be the person they want you to be. You can’t be yourself” (School A).

you're not a real man" (School F). The boys feel masculine ideologies are ideals to live up to within their social-cultural environments. Some of the boys spoke about pressure from their family to maintain conventions of masculinity. Often they cited a father and grandparents as placing the pressure on them. One of the boys shared a story of how he would like to be a chef and his grandmother discouraged him and suggested that he enter a more "manly field." Another boy shared that his father grounded him when he challenged him about his negative perceptions of people who are LGBTQ.

Another common story shared by the boys is the pressure to fight and how scared they are. They have a polarized sense of self as they feel the need to be tough, yet are terrified: "You try to act super tough, but inside, you're like terrified. You're like all butterflies, like I don't know what to say. I've gotta be tough, but I can't let them punch me" (School F). Often boys will be teased or heckled into fighting. If they walk away, then they shared how they are socially positioned by peers as weak, branded "a pussy, fag or a queer."

In one of the focus groups, the boys shared this powerful dialogue that illustrates the dichotomous pressures of masculinity and how their expressions of masculinity require them to be tough and unemotional:

(WG is a WiseGuyz participant and R is the Researcher)

WG We are not allowed to feel scared at all.

WG No we're not.

R In anything in life, like with friends?

WG No, no.

WG Well if you're with your friends they understand it. Of course, you've got feelings of fright and you don't wanna get hurt.

WG But like if you're with a complete stranger for example and, like they don't know you right, you don't wanna show fear or else they might take advantage of that and put you down, start bullying you.

R That's a lot of pressure.

WG It's like you cannot be scared, like, in fighting situations like that.

R What about being emotional then? Are there times where it's not ok to be scared or to feel emotion?

WG You can't really cry in front of other people, you can look sad, but no tears.

WG Yeah honestly I've actually had times like that. If I'm sad about somebody, like emotional, I text a friend or something. Yeah like girls, girls are dramatic right so they know what to say, they're good at supporting and stuff.

R Would you text a guy friend if you were feeling sad?

WG Would not no, definitely not.

(Excerpt from School F)

These boys went on to share how it would feel uncomfortable to ask for help from another friend, "that it's weird, it's not right." This particular group of boys spoke intensely about their changes in understanding of how not to hurt others, but are still growing in their awareness and understanding of limiting masculine norms. They spoke of the pressure to project an image of being tough that does not match their interior being. However, the boys went on to discuss that at WiseGuyz, "you're with people you can trust, then you take that mask off. Once you leave them, you put it back on" (School F). One of the boys explained that the mask does not feel fake, in fact, it is so deeply integrated into his being that the routine of wearing a mask does not feel disingenuous. This poignant statement from one of the boys reminds us that within WiseGuyz he feels

relief from the pressures of masculinity, yet the outside world still requires the mask. This underscores not only of the importance of WiseGuyz, but also the collective efforts required to shift the broader social norms. Changing harmful masculine norms will require collective effort with other organizations and systems.

The Wisdom of Boys: Defining Healthy Masculinity

“[Healthy masculinity] is.... being yourself as a guy. You know, like still being able to call yourself a man and being yourself and not trying to be something you're not” (School C).

“...you don't have to like hide yourself you know. Like you're male and you just, you gotta just don't pretend to be someone else, right? (School C)

Judy Chu's research reminds us how boys at a very young age negotiate “their self-image in light of cultural constructions of masculinity.”³⁷ This research is very relevant to WiseGuyz as we learned that boys slowly develop a split consciousness as their outer behavior is based on adaptation in order to be accepted into cultural norms of masculinity. One of the boys reminds us of the stress of this split:

...like with the stereotype thing, like men are expected to be this and that and tough and stand up for you...I guess that's not healthy to push aside your feelings and just kind of be this macho whatever. So I guess healthy would mean kind of being open. Just to kind of break that barrier (School C).

This “barrier” prevents boys from being vulnerable, emotional and deeply connected.

³⁷ Chu, Judy. (2014). *When Boys Become Boys: Development, Relationships, and Masculinity*. New York University Press, NY.

It is at this young age that the tension begins between what boys feel about who they are and the cultural norms of masculinity. Judy Chu observes that this gap, unless disrupted, or as one of the boys noted, unless the “barrier” is broken, it will continue to widen and intensify as the boys grow older. In this regard, we can hypothesize

“...like when [you] think of a “man” like the word, they think someone who is strong, really big and tough and emotionless or something like that, like doesn’t cry or anything like that. But like, healthy masculinity I think that just means like, be yourself and if you cry, it’s ok, and like if you’re big or small or wide or thin, anything like that, that it’s ok, that you’re mentally healthy” (School C).

why there are high rates of depression and suicide among boys and young men. One research study emphasizes how mitigating harmful masculine norms creates resiliency. The researcher notes that “boys resistance against societal pressures to align with masculine norms... this resistance [can] be linked to higher levels of academic engagement, as well as to higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression.”³⁸ With the boys in WiseGuyz we bear witness to this tension and we see and hear the relief when boys are able to “take off their mask”³⁹.

In each of the focus groups, the boys defined what “healthy masculinity” means to them:

- “The way you wanna be, the way you feel comfortable.”
- “Just be yourself.”
- “It’s not a feminine or masculine thing, it’s just more of who you are personally.”
- “It’s who you are personally.”

³⁸ Carolos, E. Santos, *The Missing Story: Resistance to Ideals of Masculinity in the Friendships of Middle School Boys* (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2010).

³⁹ The Representation Project. *The Mask You Live In*. <http://therepresentationproject.org>.

- “I think it's kind of more of being who you are and don't let masculinity get in the way.”
- “It's okay to be different, if you're not a male who is white and skinny and masculine and sporty. It's ok.”

There were repeated comments across all the focus groups of “be who you are” and “be comfortable” in who you are “just be yourself.” What we have come to learn is that for adolescent boys, just be yourself is an arduous journey of alignment of their interior lives with their outward expressions which are based on maintaining conventional masculinity. Judy Chu noted this emerging divide as boys age:

..[it] seems mainly to force a split between what boys know (e.g. about themselves, their relationship and their world and what boys show. In the process of becoming ‘boys,’ the boys essentially were learning to disassociate their outward behaviors from their innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires.⁴⁰

It is the boys' psychological health that is at risk in this tension as they learn to forego their own well-being and interior landscape for the culturally scripted one in which they believe they will be recognized, identified and valued within a masculine context.

Through deeper reflection and examination of five to six year old boys, we learn that they *learn* to disconnect interior and exterior worlds. Their internal beliefs about behaviors and expressions being either feminine or masculine are not fully formed yet. For young boys they are simply expressions of being human: desire for intimacy, emotional connection, and nurturance. As the boys age they learn that they can separate their interior landscape from their outside behaviors, creating a duality of who they are. Given that Chu's research highlights the onset of this divide and

⁴⁰ Chu, Judy. (2014). *When Boys Become Boys: Development, Relationships, and Masculinity*. New York University Press: NY.

dissociation, it is not surprising that adolescent boys in WiseGuyz are saying that healthy masculinity is a matter of “being yourself” or becoming who you are. In WiseGuyz, they can be themselves: they do not have to separate their outward behaviors from their innermost feelings and thoughts. They do not have to worry about separating themselves into feminine and masculine, and maintaining masculine norms to ensure acceptance.

In our third year of research, we come full circle, only to continue to deepen the circle and to widen it. In our first year of WiseGuyz research we sought to understand what was changing for the boys and why. In our second year of research, based on the changes boys experienced, we integrated evaluative tools and research approaches. In our third year, we have ethical validation: we see consistent qualitative themes that deepened each year. We saw consistent statistically significant changes in the quantitative results that indicate the boys are improving in understanding of positive male norms, increasing in their sexual health self-sufficiency and becoming less homophobic. All of which lead to greater empathy, relational capacities and shifting homophobic discourse.

Thus, we arrive at a place of being open to learning more while also making claims of what we know to be true based on our research. As a society, we have to fundamentally extend the notion of what it means to be a boy and a man. The broadening of masculine norms we experience each year in the WiseGuyz program. We witness the normalizing of adolescent boys being comfortable and unrestricted in being expressive, emotional and deeply connected in their relationships. The adolescent boys show their capacity to change through critical awareness of language, which leads to self-reflection. Through increasing consciousness they foster empathy through recognizing how their own attitudes and

beliefs can positively or negatively impact others. This signifies an understanding of masculine ideologies that is critical to the boys influencing and shifting equitable gender norms. This shifting of social norms is an enormous and long-term endeavor; however, redefining masculinity for fourteen year-old boys is an invaluable starting place.