

# DEFINING MANHOOD FOR THE NEXT GENERATION:

Exploring Young Men's Perceptions  
of Gender Roles and Violence



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## GOAL

Engaging men is a critical part of the movement to address, prevent, and ultimately end sexual and domestic violence. Greater insight into how young men's understanding and definition of manhood, the role of men and women, and sexuality and sexual orientation can guide the Joyful Heart Foundation and its partners as they navigate authentically building upon the positive underpinnings of masculinity to promote an aspirational view of masculinity and change attitudes about manhood.

While young men prioritize being seen as a “real man,” part of the definition of a “real man” is changing—and for the better. **Young men unanimously agree that “real men” treat women with respect, and also engage boys and young men in conversations about treating others with respect.** In addition, phrases like “man up” and “be a man” appear to be fading from today's vernacular, as only half of young men have heard these insidious directives.

But while many young men state that gender equality and the respectful treatment of others are priorities, the views some hold regarding gender, gender roles, sex, and sexual assault underscore the challenge to catalyze a cultural shift. Too many young men refuse to push back against and outright disagree with antiquated and dangerous societal norms. **The sobering reality as revealed by young men is that:**

- **Nearly nine-in-ten young men do not reject that gender is binary and that men are supposed to be attracted to women,**
- **Two-thirds of young men do not disagree that society punishes them for merely acting like men and awards special treatment to women and girls,**
- **Over half of young men do not challenge that a man should have the final say in his household,**
- **Half of young men do not contest the ideas that a wife should put her husband's needs above her own and a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family, and**
- **One out of every four young men does not disagree that the victim is to blame in cases of sexual assault.**

While deep cultural change does not happen overnight, it cannot happen at all until enough young men take a clear stand against beliefs that normalize rape culture and outdated ideas of gender and sexuality. **Despite these views, there is an opportunity to leverage the:**

1. **Belief young men hold that women and others should be treated with respect,**
2. **Importance young men attach to intervening when they see bullying and fighting among their peers, and**
3. **Traits young men ascribe to good men and male role models.**

Together, these form the foundation upon which a campaign to promote aspirational, authentic, and intersectional views of healthy masculinity can be built.

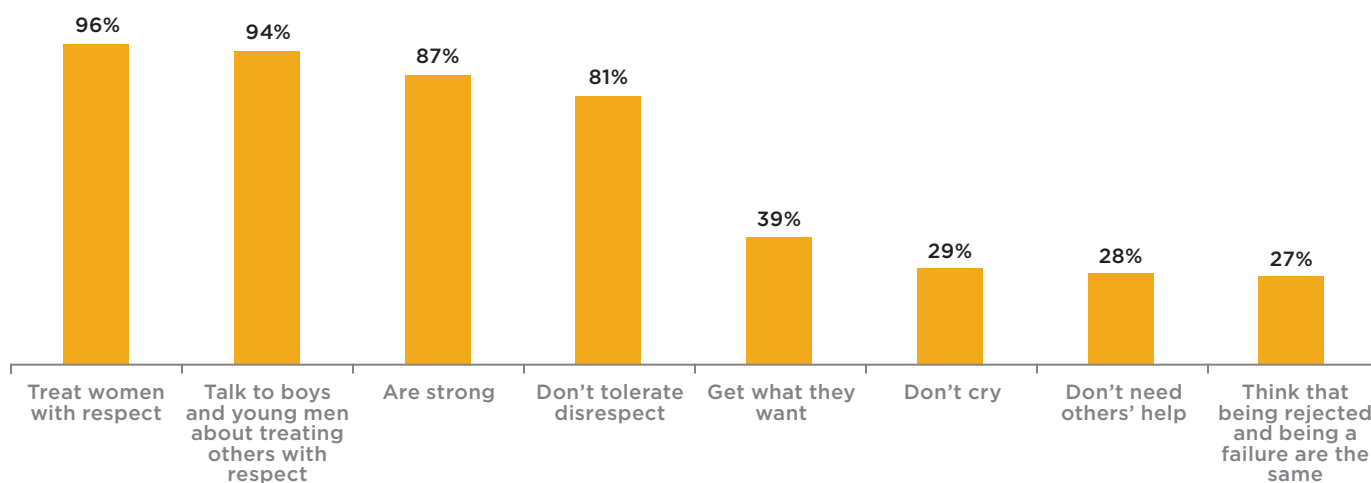
**Knowing the characteristics of a male role model and a good man in the eyes of young men can inform communications and messaging tied to aspirational masculinity.** The emphasis can be positive—not punitive—aimed at helping young men become good men and male role models, rather than fixating only on “failures” or “toxic” masculinity. Given some young men's sensitivity to a perceived double standard benefitting women and girls, a focus on aspirational masculinity also helps ensure the campaign's tone resonates with young men.

Successfully promoting healthy masculinity hinges on definitions echoing the traits young men identify with a “good man.” However, masculinity—and what it means to be a good man today—varies by life stage, race/ethnicity, income, region, and young men's experiences growing up. **Consequently, an authentic definition of masculinity must be intersectional. Too narrow of a definition risks alienating young men, effectively discounting their experiences of manhood.**

# YOUNG MEN COMMITTED TO THE FIGHT FOR GENDER EQUALITY

**What it means to be a “real man” appears to have broken with stereotypes of the past, and this change is for the better.** Young men unanimously see treating women with respect (96%) and talking to boys and young men about treating others with respect (94%) as key elements of what it means to be “real men” today. Respectful treatment of women and others outpace stereotypical associations with “real men.” How young men regard “real men” is critical, as over three-quarters (77%) prioritize being seen as a “real man.” The importance of being seen as a “real man” is echoed and likely reinforced by young men’s peer group. Over eight-in-ten young men (82%) believe their friends place the same importance on being seen as “real men.”

**Real Men...**



Importantly, gender equality is not a zero-sum game in the eyes of most young men. Over eight-in-ten young men (82%) disagree that extending more rights to women means that men will lose out. Furthermore, only one-in-ten (11%) think that gender equality solely benefits women.

When describing what gender equality means to them:

- **80% say that it means that men and women have equal rights, and**
- **72% say it means that men and women have equal access... to opportunities.**

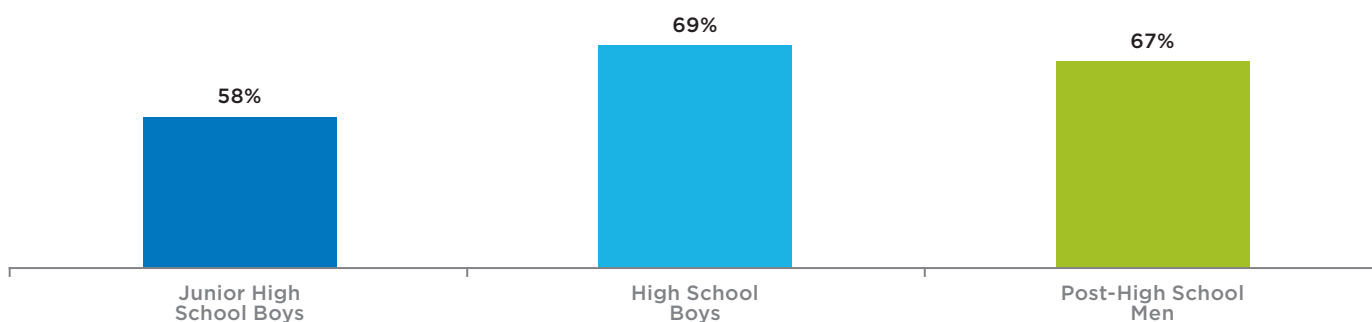
Young men are less convinced about the alignment between gender equality and pay equality (58% say that it means men and women receive equal pay) and that gender equality demands the same expectations of women, including conscription and serving in wars (39% say it means that women are expected to do the same things as men such as serving in wars and being drafted into the military).

Moreover, gender equality’s importance is personal for most young men. Fully seven-in-ten young men (70%) state that achieving gender equality is important to them personally. However, many young men question the distance society still has to go in order to achieve this goal. Four-in-ten young men (40%) either believe we have completely achieved gender equality or that we have come far enough, 38% acknowledge we still have a long way to go before we achieve gender equality, and 21% don't know. Young men who are African American (52%), Latino (45%), and living in a household with an annual household income of less than \$75K (43%) are more likely to believe that we still have a long way to go before we achieve gender equality.

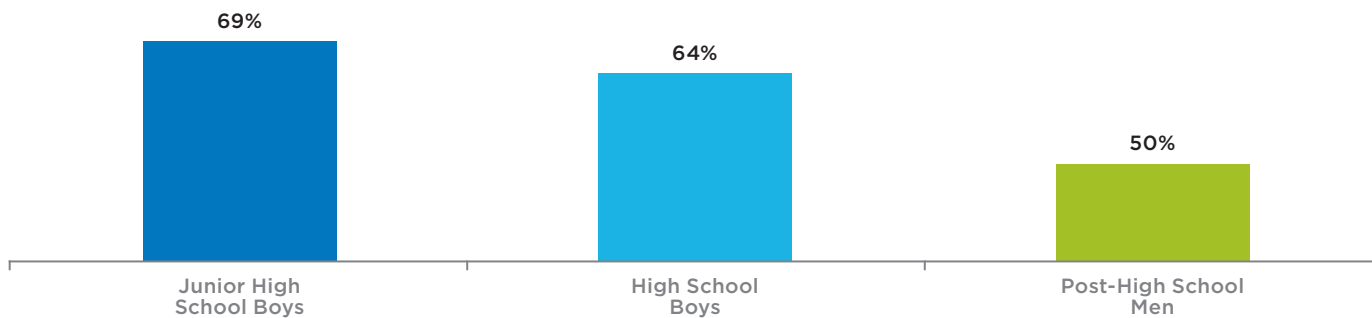
# HELPING YOUNG MEN BECOME MORE THAN BYSTANDERS

Reinforcing the importance of being more than a bystander is vital as young men age, because the younger a man is, the more likely he is to recognize the importance of involving himself in these situations. While gender equality is personally important to many young men, two-thirds of young men (66%) admit that when they witness a man and woman their age fighting in some way, they do not feel comfortable intervening. Boys in junior high school feel most comfortable injecting themselves into these scenarios (42% comfortable), while roughly one-third of young men in high school and post-high school feel similarly (31% and 33% comfortable, respectively).

**% Not Comfortable Getting Involved When Man/Boy and Woman/Girl Your Age are Fighting in Some Way**



**% Saying it is Important to Get Involved When Man/Boy and Woman/Girl Your Age are Fighting in Some Way**



Teaching young men the importance of combatting and how to combat violence against women when they witness it amongst their peers is not the only area where young men need assistance taking a stand—they also need training on how to be an ally when they witness someone their age being bullied because of their sexual orientation. Nearly three-quarters of young men (72%) believe it is important to get involved when they witness someone their age being bullied because of their sexual orientation. Unlike with violence between men and women, the importance young men attach to interceding in bullying based on sexual orientation does not waver by life stage.

However, a majority of young men (56%) do not feel comfortable involving themselves in these situations. Whereas junior high school boys feel somewhat more comfortable compared to their older counterparts getting involved to stop violence between a boy and girl their age, when someone is being bullied because of their sexual orientation, the older a man is, the more comfortable he feels interceding (37% comfortable among junior high school boys, 43% comfortable among high school boys, and 48% comfortable among post-high school men).

# DANGEROUS PERCEPTIONS THAT IMPEDE CULTURAL CHANGE

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In order for society to realize cultural change, young men must shift out of the neutral positions in which they currently find comfort. Too many young men are not challenging antiquated and dangerous perceptions of gender, gender roles, sex, and sexual assault, undercutting young men's commitment to gender equality and the respectful treatment of women. Some young men outright agree with these ideas, while many others reveal they are on the fence. Neutrality in these instances requires education and attention because too often silence and indecision can be used to support the status quo.

Young men accept outmoded ideas about gender roles:

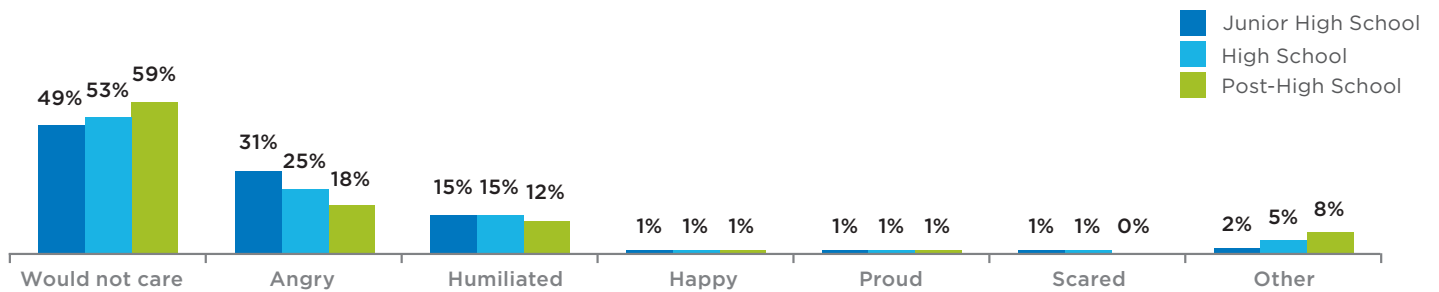
- Over half of young men (52%) do not challenge the idea that “a woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family” (23% agree, 29% neutral).
- Nearly four-in-ten young men (37%) do not disagree that many parenting tasks are women's responsibility. “Changing diapers, giving kids a bath, and feeding the kids are the mother's responsibility” (14% agree, 23% neutral).
- In fact, many young men see the ideal as men espousing the role of breadwinner, while women take care of the home front. Over six-in-ten young men (63%) think “ideally, men would be responsible for having a job and earning money, and women would be responsible for taking care of things at home” (32% agree, 31% neutral).
- While seemingly innocuous on its own, young men unanimously (98%) believe that a wife should be supportive of her husband's career and goals (82% agree, 16% neutral). The problem? While there is universal consensus that men should have a supportive spouse, that support does not extend both ways.
- Young men do not see men and women as equal partners in relationships, as roughly half (47%) do not dispute that “a wife should put her husband's needs above her own” (13% agree, 34% neutral). A majority of young men (55%) also fail to challenge the notion that “a man should have the final word about decisions in his home” (22% agree, 33% neutral).
- Three-quarters of young men (75%) do not disagree that “women/girls need to talk about their feelings more than men/boys” (45% agree, 31% neutral).

Young men also see a punitive double standard in society that benefits women and girls at their expense:

- Three-quarters of young men (74%) do not dispute that “men/boys are held to a higher standard than women/girls” (43% agree, 31% neutral).
- Two-thirds of young men (64%) do not challenge the assertion that “men/boys are punished just for acting like men/boys today” (32% agree, 32% neutral).
- Two-thirds of young men (67%) do not disagree that “women/girls receive special treatment” (37% agree, 30% neutral).

A majority of young men (55%) shrug off comparisons of themselves to girls. However, young men do not wear these comparisons with pride (1% say they would feel proud) or happiness (1% say they would feel happy). The older a young man is, the more likely he is to state he would not care if someone said these things. However, these comments provoke some feeling from roughly half of junior high school boys (49% would not care) and high school boys (53% would not care). Three-in-ten junior high school boys (31%) would feel angry at this comparison, and 15% would feel humiliated. One-quarter of high school boys (31%) would feel angry at this comparison, and 15% would feel humiliated. One-quarter of high school boys (25%) would feel angry, and 15% would feel humiliated.

**How Young Men Would Feel if Compared to a Girl/  
Told They Did Something “Like a Girl”**

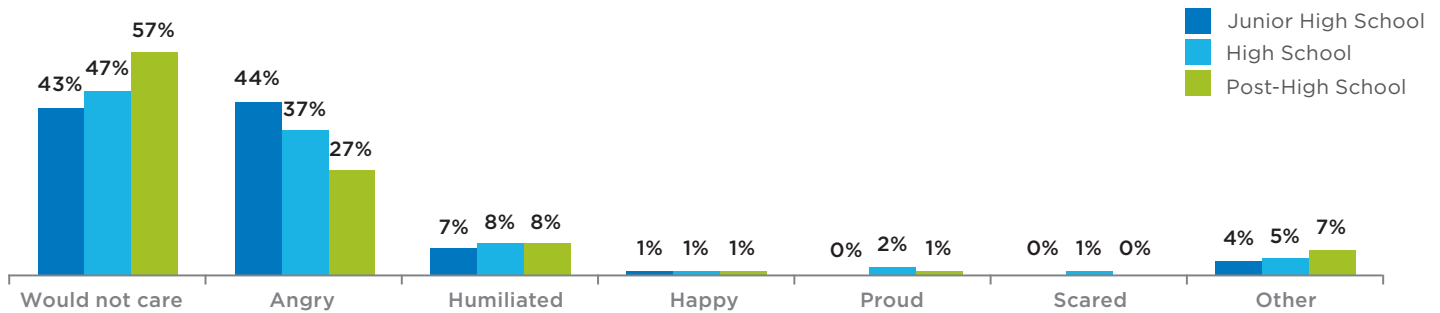


Most young men do not push back against heteronormative views of sexuality and do not see gender as fluid:

- A majority of young men (57%) agree that “men/boys are supposed to be attracted to women/girls.” Another 29% feel neutrally toward this statement.
- A majority of young men (58%) agree “a person is either male or female, there’s no in-between.” Another 27% feel neutrally toward this statement.

Being called gay tends to evoke more emotion from young men than being compared to a girl, and is interpreted as an insult by half of junior high school boys (44% would feel angry, 7% would feel humiliated), over four-in-ten high school boys (37% would feel angry, 8% would feel humiliated), and over one-third of post high school men (27% would feel angry, 8% would feel humiliated). The anger young men would feel regarding being called gay wanes the older they get.

### How Young Men Would Feel if They Were Called Gay



Young men’s\* attitudes toward sex and sexual assault represent some of the more alarming and disheartening findings. These attitudes demonstrate the need for public education. Without more men taking a decided stand against the attitudes normalizing rape culture, meaningful cultural change cannot occur.

Many young men see sex as something they need more than women, and as something that is done, not discussed:

- Six-in-ten young men (61%) do not contest that sex is something that men need more than women (19% agree, 41% neutral).
- Nearly half of young men (46%) do not challenge that “men don’t talk about sex, you just do it” (15% agree, 31% neutral).

One out of every four young men blames the victim in cases of sexual assault:

- One-in-four young men (26%) fail to outright reject that “when a woman is raped, she usually did something careless to put herself in that situation” (8% agree, 19% neutral).
- One-in-four young men (23%) do not contest that “if a woman doesn’t fight back, you can’t really say it was rape” (7% agree, 16% neutral).

Tying back to the perceived double standard some young men see, three-quarters of young men (77%) do not dispute that “it’s unfair that women are not held accountable for their sexual behavior when they have been drinking, but men are” (45% agree, 31% neutral).

\*Questions pertaining to sex and sexual assault were not asked of junior high school boys.

# CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Young men’s conceptions about the traits and characteristics defining a “good man” provide a solid foundation upon which to build an educational campaign promoting masculinity as aspirational, authentic, and intersectional, aimed at helping young men become good men. While young men tend to prioritize many of the same attributes when describing a good man, the emphasis they place on specific traits varies somewhat by their life stage, race/ethnicity, household income, and region. Thus, an authentic definition of masculinity must be intersectional.

Traits of a Good Man											
	JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL BOYS	HIGH SCHOOL BOYS	POST-HIGH SCHOOL MEN	WHITE	AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINO	<\$25K	\$25K-<\$50K	\$50K-<\$75K	\$75K-<\$100K	\$100K+
Protect and provide for your family	1 (53%)	1 (56%)	1 (52%)	1 (53%)	1 (68%)	3 (50%)	3 (51%)	1 (58%)	1 (56%)	1 (54%)	1 (50%)
Take responsibility	2 (50%)	2 (51%)	3 (44%)	4 (45%)	5 (35%)	1 (57%)	1 (56%)	4 (46%)	3 (42%)	4 (43%)	1 (50%)
Be honest	3 (47%)	3 (45%)	1 (52%)	2 (48%)	4 (37%)	2 (55%)	2 (52%)	2 (50%)	2 (46%)	2 (51%)	3 (46%)
Be a father who is involved and present	4 (42%)	4 (42%)	4 (42%)	3 (47%)	2 (47%)	(33%)	(31%)	3 (47%)	4 (38%)	3 (45%)	3 (46%)
Be a loyal spouse/partner	(28%)	(25%)	5 (38%)	(32%)	3 (40%)	(26%)	(26%)	(31%)	5 (36%)	(26%)	(34%)

Traits of a Good Man (cont.)				
	NORTHEAST	MIDWEST	SOUTH	WEST
Protect and provide for your family	2 (48%)	1 (59%)	1 (54%)	2 (51%)
Take responsibility	1 (51%)	3 (45%)	3 (45%)	2 (51%)
Be honest	4 (44%)	2 (46%)	2 (49%)	1 (52%)
Be a father who is involved and present	3 (47%)	4 (44%)	4 (44%)	(33%)
Be a loyal spouse/partner	(30%)	(30%)	(31%)	(34%)





When describing a male role model, nearly two-thirds of young men (65%) note that they are describing a male relative. A male relative is the number one role model cited by young men, with nearly half (48%) choosing their father.

**“My dad because he teaches me good character, how to be nice to girls, and how to be a good husband.”**

11-year-old boy in 6th grade, living in the South, who is white

**“My father because he taught me what it means to be a man.”**

12-year-old boy in 7th grade, living in the Midwest, who is white

**“My dad. He is always available to talk to me even though he lives in another state. He listens to what I have to say and shows that he loves me.”**

17-year-old boy who is a junior in high school, living in the Northeast, who is African American

**“My dad. He’s strong, and a good man and a good father.”**

15-year-old boy who is a freshman in high school, living in the West, who is part African American and part white

**“My dad because he works hard to provide for the family.”**

23-year-old man who is a sophomore in college, living in the West, who is Latino

**“My dad—he shows me the kind of person I want to be when I’m older.”**

15-year-old boy who is a freshman in high school, living in the West, who is white

**“Dad—always tried to be honest with us and show us how to be good men.”**

23-year-old man in technical school, living in the Midwest, who is white

**“My dad. He’s someone I want to be like when I grow up.”**

11-year-old boy who is in 6th grade, living in the West, who is white

Young men who are Latino (40%), post-high school (39%), African American (39%), living in a household where the annual household income is less than \$25K (32%) are less likely to cite their father when describing a man they consider a role model. Instead, they often describe another male family member.

**Because young men admire male relatives, male relatives need to be cognizant of the example they set for the younger generation and the messages they send about what it means to be a man.**

Just over half of young men (52%) have been told to “man up” or “be a man.” Men—more so than women—relay this message to young men:

- **Father versus mother – 53% to 28%**
- **Male friend versus female friend – 36% to 13%**
- **Male coach versus female coach – 28% to 2%**
- **Brother versus sister – 19% to 13%**
- **Male teacher versus female teacher – 10% to 3%**
- **Grandfather versus grandmother – 6% to 5%**

Furthermore, young men see it as acceptable to mirror their father’s and male relatives’ treatment of women. **Over six-in-ten young men (62%) believe it is okay to treat and talk about women and girls the same way their father does, and 55% believe it is alright to treat and talk about women and girls the same way their male relatives do.** White young men—especially white junior high school boys—and young men living in more affluent households more readily condone other males’ treatment and tone toward women.

**While young men most often see fathers and male relatives as their male role model, there are celebrity influencers who can be leveraged in a campaign setting.** To maximize the resonance of the message and help promote an intersectional view of masculinity, a range of celebrities should be utilized, including celebrities, athletes, musicians, actors, and innovators. Some of the celebrities who garner the respect and admiration of young men include:

- **Athletes: LeBron James, Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Tim Tebow, Tom Brady, Stephen Curry, Anthony Rizzo, Clayton Kershaw, Pat Tillman (deceased)**
- **Musicians: Drake, Jay-Z, Chance the Rapper, Dave Matthews, Steve Vai**
- **Actors: Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, Michael B. Jordan, Robert Downey Jr.**
- **Male innovators and leaders: President Barack Obama, Elon Musk, Bill Gates, Neil deGrasse Tyson**

YouTube stars represent an emerging class of celebrity influencers with the ability to reach young men through non-traditional media and engage their attention longer than in a :30 or :60 public service announcement. While not as commonly mentioned as other celebrities, they have the ability to not only spark but also continue a conversation through their YouTube channels. Pewdiepie, Roman Atwood, Jacksepticeye, and MarkE Miller are among the YouTube stars mentioned. Through his channel, MarkE Miller has shared his experience coming out and his relationship.

Male celebrities must be more cognizant of the spotlight on them, as they help establish what is considered acceptable behavior toward women and girls. One-third of young men believe it is acceptable to treat and talk about women and girls the same way that male athletes (34%), male musicians (34%), male politicians (33%), and male celebrities (32%) all do. Nearly two-in-five young men (38%) find it acceptable to treat and talk about women and girls the same way that male business leaders do. Young men in high school are even more likely to see male celebrities’ behavior toward women and girls as appropriate to replicate (38% yes, it’s okay among high school boys compared to 32% overall).

By leveraging young men’s belief that women and others should be treated with respect, the importance young men place upon gender equality and intervening when they witness violence that stems from gender and sexual orientation, and the traits young men ascribe to good men and male role models, positive norms of masculinity can be promoted. **Building upon masculinity’s positive underpinnings by concentrating the definition of masculinity on aspirational and intersectional aspects not only maximizes the resonance of the campaign with young men, it can also help combat the dangerous perceptions young men hold to ultimately promote cultural change and end violence against women and girls.**

# METHODOLOGY & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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On behalf of the Joyful Heart Foundation, GfK conducted a representative online survey of 777 young men between the ages of 11 and 24 using GfK's KnowledgePanel™. GfK's KnowledgePanel™ is a probability-based panel recruited using address-based sampling (ABS). The sample was divided across the following life stages and includes: 257 junior high school boys, 262 high school boys, and 258 post-high school men. The survey was conducted from March 15-April 3, 2017. The data were weighted and scaled in accordance with national benchmarks. Please note, numbers may appear not to sum to 100% because of rounding.

The questionnaire was developed in consultation with the following organizations and individuals. Joyful Heart is grateful for their dedication, input, and feedback.

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