



SV Prevention Innovation Grant 2017-2018

## Pink Snowsuit Project

### Project Brief 2017



### INTRODUCTION

Second Story Women's Centre in partnership with Be the Peace Institute has received funding from the provincial Sexual Violence Prevention Innovation Fund for the project to engage parents in small, informal but purposeful group conversations about:

- How the role of gender dynamics and socially constructed gender perceptions and norms influence child-rearing.
- How mass culture creates restrictive, hypersexualized notions of masculinity/femininity that impact both healthy esteem and identity in children and youth, and can influence sexualized violence (SV) prevention approaches.

### PURPOSE

The purpose of the project is ultimately to contribute to the development of healthy self-identities in children and youth, promote healthy friend and intimate relationships, equip parents with tools and strategies to guide their children honestly in these issues, and prevent sexualized violence among youth and adults. By addressing environmental and societal norms around gender and how it manifests in individual and collective perceptions, mass culture, and relationship dynamics, we will engage with parents to:

- Unpack gender norms, perspectives and dynamics and how these influence implicit biases in child-rearing decisions
- Gain a better understanding of the links between gender conditioning and healthy identity and relationships
- Expand perceptions of an acceptable range of masculine/feminine dynamics
- Nurture the self-esteem, confidence and compassion foundational for children to develop healthy relationships through a lifetime
- Build skill among parents in communicating effectively about these subjects with their children of various ages, and with one another without fear of blame, judgment or guilt

### THE PARENTS

While we might assume mothers will more readily gather for these conversations, the role of fathers in imparting values around healthy relationships and identity cannot be underestimated. Through active recruitment of fathers, either in male-identified groups or mixed-gender conversations, the project aims to increase the engagement of men and boys in SV prevention work. As parents gain confidence in talking with their children, youth in this region will be better equipped and more inclined to be leaders in their schools and communities in SV prevention, including understanding the parameters of consent in intimate relationships.

Parents who feel marginalized from the mainstream will be actively sought and be integral to the effort to gather in safe spaces for conversation. These may include LGBTQ+ parents, and those from Indigenous, Francophone, African Nova Scotian, immigrant communities, as well as single parents, and those with lower literacy or income challenges. Assistance with transportation, child-care and

refreshments will contribute to accessibility in engaging a diverse array of parents, as will collaborative efforts with supportive community organizations.

## **BACKGROUND**

Status of Women Canada states that “sexual violence is much more than an emotional or physical assault. It is deeply rooted in a history of gender relations and societal attitudes and beliefs”.

The family might be considered ‘ground zero’ of SV prevention work, the source of childrens’ first perceptions of gender. Because our society is steeped in conventional gender roles, families tend to reproduce traditional stereotypes that we all commonly learn. These are further reinforced as children grow and develop via peers, school and mass media. In the course of hundreds of micro-decisions parents make every day, gender constructs are often invisible, implicit and/or unexplored, yet profoundly formative for children.

Children who feel pressure to conform to gendered social expectations and denial of true identity, can lead to compromised mental health, lack of confidence, isolation, and potentially violent/dissociative/reckless behaviour. This early learning about gender, their supposed place in society and how they should navigate relationships ultimately affects their ability to develop meaningful, trusting relationships with others and can lead to delinquent/divergent behaviour including potential for engagement in sexualized violence. Identifying with roles only associated within a narrow and hypersexualized range of gender stereotypes, not only limits opportunities in life, but may also condition them for perpetrator/victim relational dynamics. Aggressive, hyper-masculinity without connection to emotion, compassion or consequence, coupled with models of passive, hypersexualized femininity is a recipe for sexually aggressive and accommodating behaviour among youth.

As children enter pre-teen years, the complexities of social and intimate relationships increase exponentially. Parents may find themselves overwhelmed by the highly sexualized on-line, social media world their children inhabit and searching for accessible tools and useful resources for navigating this territory among peers and with their children. Yet parents may also be reluctant to discuss these topics openly for fear of judgment, criticism and a lack of safe, supportive venues to open these conversations. Offering parents safe circles in which to develop language, confidence and strategies for grappling with gendered expectations is a gap this project aims to fill.

While progress has been made within certain communities in understanding how gender socialization informs power dynamics inherent to sexual violence, there is a gap in knowledge for parents on this issue, particularly those of very young children. Daily parental decisions about toys, books, clothing, media, extracurricular activities, even rules, rewards and encouragement, influence how their children self-identify and behave. The project goal is to help bridge this gap in knowledge and foster a community of support for critical, honest, curious, supportive conversations that may continue beyond the funding period.

The more we can engage parents in preparing their children to recognize and think critically about how constructs of gender influence their behaviours, the more capacity all will have to recognize it, intervene and work toward preventing violent behaviour. Fostering a broader and healthier range of masculinity and femininity can influence a next generation of young people who will alter the culture of sexualized violence for the better.

## **THE GAPS**

While parenting advice literature and its related products and programs has become a multi-billion dollar industry, access to practical, local, real-time opportunities for honest discussion of parental

concerns, strategies and critical thinking is rare; particular focus on the discussion of gender roles and the development of navigational tools in sexual violence prevention, even more so.

Many people feel alone in dealing with the demands of parenting amidst the myriad social and economic pressures of life. The project aspires to serve parents with opportunities for connection, open discussion, inquiry and capacity building in supportive environments, filling a gap in knowledge about gender conditioning and the link with healthy self-esteem and relationships. Opportunities for all types of parents including rural and isolated parents is critical in making genuine in-roads in sexual violence prevention work in this province at the very earliest (and possibly most powerful) point of influence.

### **ORIGIN OF THE “PINK SNOWSUIT” PROJECT NAME**

A conversation with a mother searching for snowsuits for her young sons at Frenchy’s unearthed a surprising revelation for her. A snowsuit was found that was perfect in every way-- size, construction, quality, warmth – everything. Except it was pink. Her first thought was to offer it to a friend who had a daughter of about the same size. And then a realization that she herself was reflecting the unconscious biases born of the gendered conditioning we all are subject to. This led to some interesting conversations, and the idea for this project was born.