

# Bolstering Belonging in BAM and Beyond

## Executive Summary

### *Youth Guidance's Becoming a Man (BAM) Program Components, Experiential Processes, and Mechanisms*

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*At first, I was just using it to get out of class, you know. Then, I don't know, like, it became a part...because you could go in and express your feelings without having people laugh at you and stuff. That was the way it really impacted me and me stay in there. Having somebody to talk to about stuff that I wouldn't usually talk to people about.*

*Youth interview*

*The fact that you're being open, we're teaching them that it's okay to be emotional. It doesn't make you weak, it doesn't make you a punk. It makes you real. It makes you honest. It makes you able to talk in a situation versus grabbing a gun or else putting your hands on somebody or else cussing them out...*

*Counselor interview*

In 2001, Youth Guidance launched the Becoming a Man (BAM) program in one Chicago Public School to “help young men navigate difficult circumstances that threaten their future.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this qualitative study is to inform understanding about how youth development occurs in the context of BAM programming in Chicago Public Schools. Study findings illustrate that BAM is not a “one size fits all” program that focuses on building a single developmental process or skill. Nor does BAM work through the exact same combination of components for all youth. Rather, BAM is a comprehensive in-school program that supports normative adolescent developmental processes, builds new social and emotional capacities, and influences youth’s sense of control over their own lives. This summary reviews the motivation for the research; explains the study sample and the BAM program model; and presents key findings related to: 1) core components of BAM programming; 2) descriptions of youth experiences in BAM; and 3)

mechanisms by which BAM seems to be assisting youth development.

### **Research Motivation and Sample**

Youth Guidance’s BAM program has undergone randomized control trials designed to measure if the program is impacting youth outcomes such as academic achievement and delinquent behavior. These studies have consistently shown statistically significant, positive impacts on education outcomes and justice-system involvement (Heller et al., 2013; Heller et al., 2016). This qualitative study aims to illustrate *how* the program is working. Through the qualitative study, we bring to light the components of the program, show how they interact, and suggest possible mechanisms by which BAM influences youth development. The research involved semistructured interviews with a purposefully selected sample of 29 youth and 10 BAM counselors who participated in BAM during the 2014–15 academic year.

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<sup>1</sup> From Youth Guidance website, <https://www.youth-guidance.org/BAM/>, accessed on June 16, 2016.

## Program Model

According to Youth Guidance, all BAM counselors have either a master's degree in a clinical field, a background in education and social and emotional learning, or years of professional experience working with youth in underserved communities. Counselors meet with groups of youth weekly during a noncore class period. Most BAM groups convene in a classroom dedicated solely to BAM. In addition to the group sessions, counselors also engage with youth individually.

## Key Findings

### Core Components of BAM Programming

Five core components of BAM work together to foster youth engagement and positive development:

1. **Safe space.** Safe space is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for BAM's effectiveness. Youth referred to the BAM room as a place within the school yet also distinct from the school. Youth noted that the counselor created a space for group activities and individual meetings that was welcoming and respectful. Without establishing this safe space, none of the other aspects of BAM would be effective.
2. **Core values.** BAM's core values of integrity, self-determination, positive anger expression, accountability, respect for womanhood, and visionary goal setting are the framework of the BAM curriculum and provide a shared language for participants. All of the youth provided examples of how they use one or more of the core values in their life, although there was significant variation in how the core values were identified and defined by youth and counselors.
3. **Activities and missions.** The core values are introduced and reinforced through

Figure 1. BAM Core Components Model



activities and missions, which provide youth with ways to experience, reflect on, and internalize the values. Activities and missions also serve to generate a sense of camaraderie and build the sense of responsibility that youth feel to keep the space safe and supportive. Counselors said activities and missions helped youth see challenges in new ways, build communication skills, and foster group cohesion.

4. **Check-ins.** Check-ins occur at the start of every BAM group meeting. Each member of the group, including the counselor, shares how they are feeling, using the acronym "PIES" to structure reflection and sharing: physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Almost unanimously, youth reported that the check-ins were the most rewarding part of BAM. Many youth described the check-ins as the only place where they could be totally honest about the most challenging parts of their lives. Other youth reported that although they did not like to share their own challenges in the group, they felt relieved to know that others were feeling the same way about similar

challenges. Youth said that they felt vulnerable and emotional in the check-ins, and that they cared about others in the group and made an effort to support them.

5. **Relationships.** The relationships built by youth through BAM lead to a sense of belonging with a special group. “When we have a meeting, it’s just. . . seeing everybody around. . . like everybody’s doing this. It’s like I’m doing it for everybody, not just me,” said one youth. Trust is required to build relationships, given that youth experience and express emotional vulnerability in the group. All youth reported that they respected their counselor. Some youth reported that the consistency of their relationship with the counselor was essential to influencing who they want to become and increasing their self-confidence. Youth said other important aspects of forming this relationship included the counselor’s sense of humor, relatability, ability to model core values, expression of their own vulnerability, encouragement of youth developing their own interests, and their willingness to hold youth accountable and challenge them to grow.

- Counselors and youth provided many examples of interactions that take place outside of school hours. Youth noted that counselor accessibility is important to them and helps them feel their counselor cares about them. Counselors noted that this work outside of school is an important element of BAM programming, but they also highlighted the challenges of setting boundaries with youth.
- A key responsibility of counselors is developing relationships with a variety of personnel in the school. Some counselors reported that this is a challenging endeavor or they could use more support to prepare them for this aspect of their work. Counselors also reported that the amount of data and administrative work required of them is burdensome.

### **Descriptions of Youth Experiences in BAM**

Being a part of BAM comes with benefits and responsibilities. Youth are aware of the status and the opportunities related to being in BAM.

They also report a sense of responsibility to BAM. Some youth talk about not wanting to let down their counselor, let down other youth in BAM, or give BAM a bad reputation among school staff by misbehaving or not achieving academically.

**How youth perceive BAM’s impacts.** How youth talked about the ways their participation in BAM impacted them fell into the following categories: vulnerability, realization of wanting better for themselves, accepting and persisting through challenges, teaching others, core values, relationship with counselor, and staying true to who they are. Youth report four main ways in which they know BAM is working for them: (1) counselor and peer challenging and encouragement to live up to BAM values; (2) enacting the core values; (3) self-reflection; and (4) recognition of change from those external to BAM such as family, friends, and teachers.

### **Mechanisms by Which BAM Seems to be Assisting Youth Development**

BAM programming fosters a sense of belonging for BAM youth that influences positive identity development and, for some youth, extends to a broader sense of belonging in other prosocial networks in school and their communities.

#### **Three key mechanisms foster a sense of belonging in BAM:**

1. Behavioral habits related to the social norms of BAM: Youth strive to develop a social reputation through behavioral habits and adherence to the social norms of the BAM group. This often extends to other social groups such as school, sports, work, and family.
2. Agency (sense of control over one’s future) and decision-making skills related to the core values and activities of BAM: Some core values are expressed by youth as anchor points for decision making. Decision making is practiced through group activities and youth ownership over group processes. In cases where youth describe their counselor as fostering positive relationships with teachers or family members in ways that actively involve

youth in the negotiation process, youth express a sense of accomplishment and control that builds youth agency.

3. Emotional intelligence and empathy related to the personal storytelling in BAM: Youth noted that check-ins, the relationship with their counselor and others in their BAM group, and some activities are key drivers of increased knowledge of their own emotions, how to describe their emotions with language, and how to deal with their emotions effectively. Some youth also report feeling a stronger sense of empathy for others as members of their BAM group share their experiences and emotions.

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## References

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**Figure 2. Mechanisms of Youth Development in BAM**

