Sparks of Change: Does Play Have a Role in Rebuilding Connections, Communities, and Modern Masculinity?

Exploring the Intersection of the Masculinity Crisis and the Importance of Playing in Public

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Abstract

This project explores the depth and urgency of the masculinity crisis and its far-reaching impacts on society. As rigid and harmful norms around masculinity continue to perpetuate emotional suppression, social isolation and gender-based violence, the consequences are becoming increasingly visible in the mental health struggles faced by boys and men. These mental health struggles are fracturing communities and at times leading to mass violence. Left unaddressed, this crisis threatens to deepen cycles of disconnection leaving especially adolescent boys, vulnerable.

Grounded in literature reviews and expert interviews, this research investigates the deep-seated societal myths surrounding masculinity and how these narratives affect boys, men and our communities. Through play exploration, surveys and a play participatory workshop with boys and their caregivers, the study highlights a critical need for community-rooted, child/youth-led interventions that challenge harmful gender norms.

We explore public play - particularly within urban neighborhoods - as a powerful tool for promoting connection, conversations, and alternate expressions of masculinity. Central to this approach is the father-son bond, whose influence can help reshape norms from within the family unit. Our research culminates in the development of *Play Sparks in a Cart!,* a neighborhood-based play kit designed to encourage meaningful play, spark conversations and build cohesion within neighborhoods. This initiative offers a playful, practical path toward mitigating the masculinity crisis and its impacts and supports caregivers in fostering healthier, more inclusive communities - one playful spark at a time.

Acknowledgements

Dedication

To our sons—

     Your curiosity, sense of wonder, and joy in play inspired every step of this work. As moms, we can only do our best to work towards a brighter future. Without you, this paper wouldn't exist. We dedicate our efforts to see you thrive in the future with your full potential- supported in an inclusive society.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Reflecting on the Current Problem Space

The tweet, "A whole generation worked to empower women, but forgot to teach the world how to live with empowered women" (@yourswriterly, 2023), resonated deeply with us. As advocates for women's empowerment, our initial research focused on exploring the successes and potential futures envisioned by feminist experts across various industries. Yet, as futurists, researchers, and mothers raising boys in Canada, we identified a critical oversight: How will our sons navigate and succeed in a society increasingly shaped by empowered women? This realization marked a pivotal moment, inspiring us to shift our research toward envisioning a future where boys can positively coexist and shape an inclusive society.

Exploring reactions to this tweet uncovered intricate narratives of discomfort and uncertainty among men. These complexities align closely with findings from Policy Horizons Canada's 2024 report, *Disruptions on the Horizon*, highlighting a growing crisis among men and boys characterized by educational disengagement, unemployment, and pervasive loneliness, intensified by shifting gender dynamics.

Through candid conversations with men in our personal and professional networks, we gained deeper insight into the genuine struggles they face in an era of heightened female empowerment and independence. Further, interviews with both male and female experts illuminated contrasting perspectives: while female experts generally expressed optimism about societal evolution, many male experts articulated feelings of marginalization and discomfort within what they perceive as an increasingly female-centric societal landscape. Recognizing this disparity urged us to expand our inquiry into gender dynamics, aiming to foster a more inclusive rather than divisive societal approach.

1.2. Purpose of the Research

This research highlights an urgent need to address rising gender polarization, where women's advancement has unintentionally created perceived threats among men, fueling unnecessary gender conflicts. Our objective is to explore proactive interventions aimed at creating

a cohesive society grounded in mutual understanding, support, and empathy. We seek to cultivate a future where our children, regardless of gender, can equally thrive. Our intervention focuses specifically on the masculinity crisis, positioning play as a gentle yet powerful agent for fostering connection for boys' inclusion, and mutual understanding—an effective "ice-breaker" to bridge divides and promote empathy.

1.3. Research Question & Report Structure

Our central research question is: **how might play mitigate the impacts of the masculinity crisis?**

This paper is a culmination of literature review of the systemic and societal problems around masculinity crisis and the impacts of play. Additionally, it is informed by expert interviews in the fields of child development, feminist-led initiatives, gender studies, male advocates and game designers and experts. Our approach to understanding the intersection of the topics of masculinity crisis and play is through our methodology of exploring play through games and involving caregivers and their son's (aged 6-8 years old) as participants to explore the concept through the design of our process. In Chapter 2, we examine the roots and broader societal implications of the masculinity crisis, addressing persistent myths and systemic barriers.

Chapter 3 emphasizes the essential role of public play within neighborhood contexts, highlighting its capacity to promote a sense of belonging, empathy, and community cohesion. Additionally, we explore how play-based strategies can directly address issues associated with the masculinity crisis, supported by comprehensive literature reviews and expert insights.

Chapter 4 expands our empirical research through game exploration, surveys, and interactive workshops designed to capture diverse perspectives. Surveys assess broader societal attitudes toward masculinity, while the workshop facilitates meaningful play-based interactions specifically between boys and their caregivers.

Integrating insights from these research stages, we narrow our focus to father-son relationships, within neighborhood settings. This choice is informed by emerging evidence demonstrating fathers' significant influence in shaping their sons' perceptions and expressions of masculinity, validated by existing literature.

Finally, Chapter 5 introduces our practical play kit, "Play Sparks in a Cart!" This intervention is directly informed by our research findings and aims to challenge existing masculinity norms by promoting healthier, inclusive behaviors through structured play experiences. Ultimately, our research and practical tools aim to stimulate meaningful conversations among caregivers, supporting collective efforts toward an emotionally resilient, inclusive, and deeply connected society.

Chapter 2: The Masculinity Crisis

2. 1. Introduction

2.1.1. What is the Masculinity Crisis?

Through our initial and personal understanding, the masculinity crisis refers to the challenges and struggles faced by men in contemporary society, manifesting across various aspects of their lives. In scientific medical journals, masculinity is defined as "a form of gender, variously defined as an identity, a social role, and a form of power and is typically, though not exclusively, associated with men". (Mankowski & Smith, 2016). The term 'masculinity crisis' refers to perceived challenges and transformations in traditional male roles and identities in society. The concept spans various social, psychological and cultural factors that contribute to feelings of uncertainty, inadequacy and confusion among men. (Way et al., 2014). The masculinity crisis refers to the idea that traditional concepts of masculinity need to be challenged and are even eroding, leading to confusion, insecurity and loss of identity for men in today's society. This crisis has come about with changing gender roles - as women have made leaps and strides in social, economic and political power, the "traditional" role of provider and protector no longer has the same relevancy (Rosin, 2012). Key aspects of the masculinity crisis pertain to changing gender roles, economic shifts, mental health concerns, the role of media and popular culture and social isolation. Notable critics of the masculinity crisis narrative include Judith Butler (2004) and Raewyn Connell (2005), who argue that masculinity is not in crisis but is evolving in response to broader social changes.

Policy Horizons Canada (2024) recently identified a "crisis among men and boys" as a key societal disruptor, citing evidence of rising educational dropout rates, unemployment, and loneliness as traditional gender roles are increasingly challenged. This disruptor suggests that while broader gender shifts are integral to understanding contemporary masculinities, there are also concrete, measurable impacts on the well-being of men and boys. As gender roles evolve and women's empowerment advances, the traditional gender hierarchy is being renegotiated and raising important questions about identity, belonging, and adaptation.

We recognized that the masculinity crisis has many facets, so we sought to understand what is/are the root cause(s) of the crisis? Who does the crisis impact, and how might we narrow the scope of those impacted to address early prevention and mitigation? What is the role (if any) of parents and primary caregivers in the crisis?

2.2. Methodology

2.2.1 Unpacking the Masculinity Crisis

i. Traditional Masculinity Posing Barriers to Gender Equality

In this chapter on the masculinity crisis, we employed research methods that include a literature review to synthesize existing knowledge and expert interviews to gather firsthand relevant insights. This approach allowed us to draw on established research and expert opinions to address the research questions noted above.

In literature, the key trend that surfaced multiple times was that masculine norms are posing barriers for gender equality. Our understanding of 'traditional masculinity' as stoic, self-sufficient and aggressive are keeping us from gender equality as a society (Thebaud & Pedulla, 2016). In examining work-family balance, Thebaud and Pedulla (2016) noted that normative masculinity ideologies impacted men's responses to policies on gender equality. Their findings show that men's responses were "highly dependent" on what their belief that their male peers wanted (Thebaud & Pedulla, 2016). While not the main point of his argument, social scientist, writer and policy analyst Richard Reeves (2022) argues that society should redefine healthy masculinity to emphasize responsibility, purpose and positive male role models.

ii. Toxic Masculinity as Harmful to Society

According to experts in the field of psychology, humans are inherently social creatures who depend on a variety of traits to find their place in this world. We are not wholly masculine traits nor

feminine traits, rather, we require both in order to be functioning humans (Way, 2024). An article

from the New York Post discusses quantitative data that illustrates how men can succumb to toxic

masculinity as a means of validating their gender roles. Toxic masculinity refers to "harmful,

narrow and repressive expectations of manhood that often lead to violence, dominance, emotional

suppression and the devaluation of women and femininity, ultimately harming both men and

society" (Foss, 2022). The reason is based on Richard Reeves' perspective, author of *Boys and

Men*. Reeves (2022) argues that boys are experiencing "a very different mental health story from

girls which is more about isolation and retreat." He believes that women have outsmarted men,

because of a decade-long work on female empowerment and that, somehow, has left males

behind. In an article by the Guardian, Simmons (2025) speaks about the emergence of male

coaches like Reeves and Bidwell gaining traction for advocating to support men who are feeling

isolated in today's society. Simmons also writes about men in crisis and how that impacts their

friendships and relationships, capturing statistics from UK and US articles that show how men's

social circles have reduced post covid. "This has been blamed on a complex set of factors, from

socio-economic and work pattern changes to the decline of traditional community structures – as

well as dominant masculinity norms, which don't encourage men to nurture friendships with other

men into adulthood. In the UK, research by Movember found that a quarter of British men had no

close friends." (Simmons, 2025) The lack of support and advocacy for men's issues has spiked

isolation in men and reduced their friends' circles. Drug overdose and the addictive nature that

stems from isolation have made men go adrift in society (Kahloon, 2023).

iii. Economic Shifts and Their Impact on Masculinity

Economic shifts have also left men in the lurch. In his book, *Of Boys and Men: Why the

Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It*, Reeves points to masculinity in

crisis as a result of social and economic shifts that have left boys and men due to systemically

structural challenges. Reeves (2022) proposes that we do not try to "fix masculinity" by making

boys and men more like women. With the rapid pace of technology and tech industries, the

traditional "male-dominated" labour opportunities have shifted overseas and generally have been

reduced (CNBC, 2024). Men are enrolling in and graduating from college and university at a lower

rate than women. In recent months, grey literature has highlighted the impact of the crisis of men

specifically on the economy. Several news articles highlighted that men in their prime working

years were not contributing to the economy citing numbers as high as 6.8 million men in the US who are not employed or seeking employment (CNBC, 2024). The articles focused on the impact on the economy and political system noting as well, that education and lower enrollments were leading factors. The solution, according to Reeves, lies in restructuring opportunities for men through policy solutions.

We also heard through subject matter that self-worth was frequently tied to productivity, with success primarily celebrated in career achievements. Jim Munroe, who facilitates and works with men's groups, discussed how men are "more prone to self-identify their worth with productivity and getting things done and making impact on the world in some fashion...[this] eclipsed a lot of other emotional relationships or connections or development that could have had during that time because it wasn't a balanced life." This cultural narrative that equates masculine identity with economic contribution exacerbates the psychological impact of economic displacement. When traditional markers of male success disappear, so does a clear sense of purpose for men (Reeves, 2022).

iv. Resurgence of Archaic Expressions of Masculinity

When we look at the masculinity crisis, what becomes most apparent to us is that negative aspects of masculinity are growing, and toxic masculinity is everywhere. In one of his most well-known quotes, the clinical psychologist, professor and controversial public figure, Jordan Peterson stated, "The idea that women are oppressed through history is an appalling theory". He justifies this by arguing that men and women have faced struggles but there has never been a situation where male dominance has existed over women. He goes on to argue that hierarchies are natural and necessary and a result of the need for social order. Peterson has amassed a substantial following with 8.6 million subscribers to his YouTube channel (vidIQ, 2025) and 8.8 million followers to his Instagram account (HypeAuditor, 2025). According to StarNgage, almost 80% of Peterson's Instagram followers are male. The largest age group visiting his official website fall within the 25-34 age range (Similarweb, 2025). His widespread following suggests that his critiques of feminism, gender issues and perceptions of hierarchy are not only broadly disseminated, but also potentially influential as his ideologies may align with the views of those within his audience.

v. Digital Masculinity and Misogyny: The Dark Side of the Web

Along with Peterson, social media personalities have had strong voices and opinions in the masculinity space. Ranging from positive masculinity - encouraging growth, responsibility and emotional well-being - to negative masculinity - promoting dominance, misogyny and rigid gender roles - there is no shortage of opinions on masculinity. The online world has been a source of much controversy with shifting broader gaming industry and societal changes. In 2014, the controversy of Gamergate sparked widespread online abuse, primarily targeting women in gaming. The discussions around unwanted interference in gaming culture and heavily misogynist discourse drew much attention. Alongside this, in the podcast, "Boys Like Me", host Ellen Chloe Bateman, dives into the experiences of young men navigating societal expectations, personal development and romantic relationships. It provides insights into how online communities, notably the Manosphere, have a strong influence on perceptions of masculinity. The Manosphere is a collection of online forums and blogs that provide a platform for people to discuss men's issues and carries an inherent anti-feminist viewpoint. One of the core concepts is the idea of being "red-pilled" or "blue-pilled" as derived from the film, *The Matrix*. The "red pill" symbolizes the awakening to the belief that society is biased against men and strategies and tactics are promoted to bring women down accordingly (Bateman, 2021). Most disconcerting for us is that bold-faced misogynistic sentiments are no longer a sub-culture in the dark corners of the internet. It has surfaced, it is pervasive, and it is now Culture. It is everywhere.

vi. How Politics Reinforces Masculine Hierarchies

While the influence of online personalities and the rise of the Manosphere highlights reactions to societal shifts, their increasing presence in politics signals the solidification of negative masculinity ideologies in society. In the most recent US election in 2024, Donald Trump won the popular vote against Kamala Harris. Politics has been a space that is historically dominated by men and in particular those who exhibit strength, dominance and assertiveness. Trump, in particular, has aligned much of his campaign and persona with unapologetic aggression and reinforcement of traditional masculine ideals, even embracing misogynistic sentiments. In these polarizing times, debates over gender and inclusivity, the vote for Trump in office signifies where Western society's priorities lie (Gilbert, 2025). An article in FiveThirtyEight highlights how Trump is projecting an image of himself as powerful, strong and dominant. The article cites that

many conservatives in the US "feel like outsiders looking in" and that "Trump invites those people to feel victimized" (Thompson DeVeau & Conroy, 2023). This pivotal moment makes it clear that the masculinity crisis is not simmering beneath the surface, it is erupting in full view, with political platforms serving to legitimize and amplify regressive gender norms.

vii. Positive Educational Reforms

While the masculinity crisis is potentially reaching its peak, raising concern all around, there does appear to be positive movement via educational reforms. Educational reforms have increasingly recognized the need to address masculinity in the classroom, moving beyond traditional gender binaries to create inclusive learning environments. Research highlights how dominant notions of masculinity—such as competitiveness, emotional restraint, and resistance to authority—can affect boys' engagement and academic performance (Lingard et al, 2009). In response, there is a movement to advocate for pedagogical strategies that integrate emotional intelligence, personalized learning, and critical discussions of gender. Rather than treating boys as a homogenous group in crisis, these proposed reforms ask to consider intersectionality, looking at how race, class, and social background can influence educational experiences. A key aspect of these reforms is the shift away from framing gender equity as a competition between boys and girls. Instead of reinforcing outdated narratives of boys falling behind due to feminist progress, more recent strategies promote equity by fostering supportive, adaptable learning environments. Lingard et al. (2009) argue that education should challenge rigid gender norms while encouraging boys to develop emotional literacy, collaboration, and critical thinking skills. Reeves (2022) also proposes a more supportive educational environment for boys by recommending increased male representation in teaching, expanding Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs and controversially, delaying boys' entry into kindergarten.

viii. The Domestic Impact of Masculine Norms

The masculinity crisis is affecting society, manifesting within broader societal trends. It has also taken a toll on the family unit where gender has a role in divorce rates as well. Although divorce is complex and a result of multiple factors, gender and the shifting views of masculinity have impacted the family unit. According to Progressive Legal Solutions (2024), 38% of marriages in Canada end in divorce, with women initiating divorces more than men ((Progressive Legal Solutions, 2024). The contributing factors to this include "unmet expectations and emotional

dissatisfaction". Economic independence also empowers women to file for divorce at a higher rate. Toronto's multicultural landscape significantly influences family dynamics, particularly concerning marriage and divorce. In this diverse urban environment, women from various cultural backgrounds often find empowerment through Canada's legal frameworks, enabling them to challenge traditional marital constructs and assert their autonomy (Clark et al, 2024). Women have also historically taken on more household and caregiver roles and dissatisfaction in these can also lead to divorce ((Progressive Legal Solutions, 2024). In opposition to this, men have been noted to hesitate more due to societal pressures and cultural norms that cause men to suppress voicing dissatisfaction ((Progressive Legal Solutions, 2024). Through this, we can see the shifting societal norms and gender roles impacting marriage and divorce rates, ultimately affecting family units.

These dynamics within marriages and divorces not only shape the structure of families but also reveal deeper emotional and relational challenges that men face within the domestic sphere. As men age, their social circles shrink, and emotional support increasingly comes from romantic partners or spouses. This means that as men age, self-worth is put into question and further exacerbated by diminishing emotional support. Unaddressed emotional pressure is frequently projected onto romantic partners or spouses, sometimes escalating into forms of rage or aggression (Williams et. al., 2002). From Adam Helfand-Green, who works in the Partner Assault Response (PAR) Program, we heard similar sentiments about men sent into this mandatory counselling program designed to help participants stop violent, abusive and controlling behavior against their partners. The interesting insight from Helfand-Green speaks to how best to reach the participants in the PAR program. Helfand-Green mentioned that in PAR, men "...they'll never say I wanna be a better partner, but they're always gonna say I wanna be a better dad... I think [it] is a great opportunity [to reach] adult men." Reeves commented in a recent article, "Families come in all shapes and sizes—I agree. But some of the villagers should be men...dads still matter, and we need to find policies and a culture and a way of talking about this that doesn't somehow see them as second-class parents who are somehow less important" (Whalen, 2025). This underscores how fatherhood can serve as a vital entry point for engaging men in emotional growth and accountability, suggesting that efforts to support families must also recognize and uplift the role of dads in exploring healthier relational dynamics.

ix. Crisis of Connection - The Underlying Root of the Masculinity Crisis

In her longitudinal research study of adolescent boys, psychologist Niobe Way (2024) reveals the profound impact of societal expectations on emotional expression, showing how boys are systematically socialized to suppress emotional intimacy. This emotional repression, Way argues, lies at the heart of the masculinity crisis, leading to widespread loneliness and significant mental health struggles. In our society, we look down on emotional expression and close male friendships, causing boys to struggle profoundly. Her focus is on the emotional and relational challenges that adolescent boys face. She argues that when boys are raised to reject intimacy due to societal expectations and norms, they are deprived of the ability to form deep and meaningful connections. She maintains that the concept of traditional masculinity is harmful because it discourages openness, emotional vulnerability and the development of close and deep friendships. Way contends that these deeply ingrained cultural values are detrimental to boys, particularly adolescent boys as they transition into adulthood because this is a critical period of identity formation. The idealization of stoicism, self-sufficiency, and aggression over emotional openness, empathy, and connection devalues traits that are crucial for mental well-being and human flourishing. This issue impacts all of society as we have gendered these traits and placed them in a hierarchy (Way, 2024). Way underscores that this cultural framework is reinforced by the broader societal forces. It shapes boys' identities during the critical developmental phase of adolescence and continues to influence them into adulthood. Transitioning into adulthood for these boys means becoming a man in a way that equates these outdated concepts of masculinity. Growing up and 'becoming a man' for boys necessarily means suppressing emotions and denying close male friendships (Way, 2024).

In her book *Rebels with a Cause,* Way quotes an adolescent boy who is transitioning to adulthood and shows his caution when speaking about his friends, "They are pretty cool. Just don't trust anybody, 'cause nearly everybody talks trash behind your back...A lot of them are dishonest in some ways. Like you can't trust them..." (Way, 2024). The boy continues on to reflect on distancing from his friend group by saying "...For me, so while I got closer to some people in the group, I got further apart from some of the others. And now, it's just like, I'm not close to anybody now." In a similar vein, we spoke to young men aged 24-28 in a participant group interview. Many of the men were grappling with these same issues as these adolescent boys being interviewed by Way. In our

participant group interview, the men mentioned that being tough was the "only way" because they felt that opening up about their feelings would not be well-received by other men. They also felt they could "not feel vulnerable in front of girls" because they did not want to burden women with their problems. They also highlighted the difference in their friends' circles as they grew up. In their minds, they felt that women had friend circles that were tied with emotional bonds whereas they felt their own connections with their male peers were not deep and oftentimes only bonded over "silly" and "mindless" activities.

In exploring the literature on the masculinity crisis, we identified the 'crisis of connection', which we saw as the suppression of emotional expression and denial of deep male friendships, as its core. To deepen our understanding, we consulted experts in the field, including those working with men's support groups and the Partner Assault Response (PAR) Program. Common themes emerged, mirroring those seen in adolescent boys, which included the need to normalize being 'soft', emotional vulnerability, supportiveness, and authenticity among men. Loneliness and alienation were recurring concerns, with experts emphasizing the importance of freeing men from rigid gender roles and societal expectations. A pervasive fear of judgment from other men keeps them guarded, creating a state of emotional repression that experts described as both "damaging and unnatural". As Jim Munroe, a facilitator in men's groups, put it: "We just need to take off that armor. You know, it's really hot in there. That's why you're mad all the time, right?"

2.2.2. Impact of the Masculinity Crisis

i. Men Being Othered

In a world where expression, empathy and human rights movements are the core human factors, men feel 'othered' because their traditional masculine traits hold less value. In their book, *Belonging without Othering,* Powell and Menendian (2024) calls for a rethinking of how we understand community, justice and inclusion. They establish a set of principles to move away from individualistic mindset and foster a more connected society. Powell & Menendian (2024) prioritize the creation of safe spaces for people to be able to express themselves authentically. According to writer, Michael Ian Black (2018), "Too many boys are trapped in the same suffocating, outdated model of masculinity, where manhood is measured in strength, where there is no way to be

vulnerable without being emasculated, where manliness is about having power over others. They are trapped, and they don't even have the language to talk about how they feel about being trapped, because the language that exists to discuss the full range of human emotion is still viewed as sensitive and feminine".

ii. Violence and Aggression

This suppression of emotions and denial of being authentic to oneself has its consequences that we see run rampant through many different streams of our society. Psychologist, Way (2024) directly addresses these with a chapter in her book titled, *Part Three: The Nature/Culture Clash*. In it she discusses the dire consequences where boys deny their natural instincts, social beings who need deep connections and friendships. She highlights that this can lead to suicide and mass violence. She weaves in the story of Troy, who committed crimes against humanity by succumbing to violence and targeted retribution. She sums it up by showing that Troy knows that "their violence seems to reveal a truth as they see it. The violence that arises in that they know they are acting out a lie deep within themselves" (Way, 2024). We drew similarities in the case presented in the podcast, *Boys Like Me*. In the podcast, host Ellen Chloe Bateman investigates the infamous van murders of 2018 in Toronto. She presents an extreme but relevant case of what happens when young men lack strong social connections and emotional isolation. Alek Minassian, the driver of the van attack, fell into radicalization into the incel (involuntary celibate) community and leant strongly into misogynistic ideologies. Bateman explores how the rise in incel-dom has been fueled in large part by emancipation of women and the belief that societal structures had kept women in need of men. In relation to this, she also unpacks the term "black pill", which refers to a nihilistic worldview that, unlike the "red pill", rejects societal norms and represents the point of no return. The belief is that nothing can be changed, and all efforts are useless. This mindset marks the most extreme version and is often associated with those who commit acts of mass violence (Bateman, 2021). When combined with deeply entrenched beliefs about gender inequality and personal failure, this nihilism can morph into violent ideology that specifically targets women (Bateman, 2021).

iii. Cultural Countercurrents: Women's Movements in the Wake of Masculine Change

The masculinity crisis does not only impact men and boys, it also affects all of society. We are seeing on the fringe, a rising trend of women's individual and collective reactions to the issue of masculinity. Noting that women are not just passive actors, but main stakeholders in this rising crisis, multiple movements and reactions are being seen. With the influx of content creators via YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, platforms have given power to individuals to launch subcultures that would not have necessarily been as prevalent. One of these is the rise of the 'trad wife', short for traditional housewife, where creators have millions of followers viewing their content (Miller, 2024). Their content promotes a lifestyle and nostalgic version of the past that values 'traditional' gender roles and values, where women's jobs are cooking, cleaning, mothers and wives. While some trad wives claim this is not a step back for women's empowerment because it is freedom of choice, the ideology they present is removed from reality and fraught with inconsistencies (Miller, 2024). In a highly politicized climate where Donald Trump is the current US president, trad wives' alignment with conservative political views has a strong impact on our society. They present themselves as "modern-day feminist rebels", which coupled with the conservative political force, could prove problematic for mitigating the masculinity crisis (Miller, 2024).

Another movement that has gripped the public's interest is known as '4B', which originated in South Korea and endorsed the complete rejection of heterosexual dating, marriage, sex and childbirth. The name which combines bihon (no marriage), bichulsan (no childbirth), biyeonae (no dating) and bisekseu (no sex), came about as feminism became a word that carried Western connotations and embraced radical viewpoints in South Korea (Rashid, 2024). Women in South Korea, in reaction to a gender-based hostile culture, compounded by many issues ranging from gender pay-gap, publicized gender-based violence, politics and low birth and fertility rates, have turned to this radical version of complete rejection of heterosexual relations. With Trump's election into power, the 4B movement has gained popularity in the recent headlines and has spread globally highlighting how the US women are now touting the same principles (Rashid, 2024). Given that this report is leaning into the crisis of connection and crisis of loneliness, both these movements could pose further obstacles to social cohesion between genders (Kim, 2024).
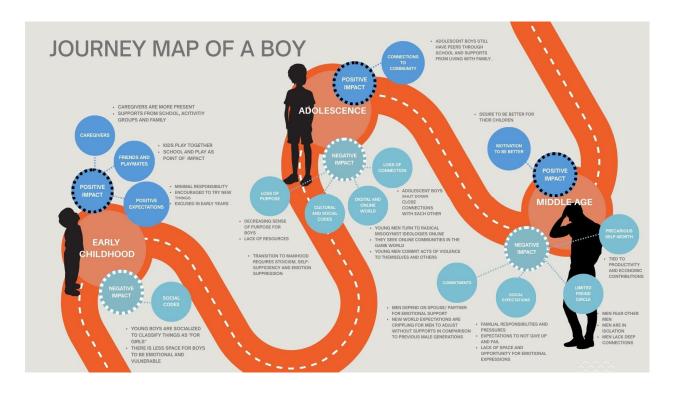
The rise of feminism and the wave of empowered women has undoubtedly provided women with more opportunities and rights but has not necessarily alleviated societal pressures and expectations that come with this advancement. It can be argued that women are bearing the brunt of men's weight alongside their rights. One documented phenomenon is the concept of the "second shift" which highlights the idea that women, even as they have increased entrance into the workforce, still hold much of the responsibility for domestic labour. According to sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1989), women have gained equal rights in education and employment, but still carry the burden of childcare, housework and emotional labour in the home. Alongside this, it has also been argued that women carry competing pressures to be "liberated" and "empowered" but still maintain the traditional roles of mother and caretaker. The stress associated with women's ability to "have it all" creates, at times, unrealistic societal expectations. This idea is prevalent amongst grey literature and was highlighted in Glamour UK questioning why we are still asking if women can have it all (Chappet, 2019).

2.3. Findings

Our findings on the masculinity crisis revealed a troubling pattern: as boys grow into men, they suppress their need for deep friendships with other boys, leading to a culture of guardedness and fear among men. Over time, their social circles shrink, and emotional support is increasingly limited to a single romantic partner or spouse. When coupled with pressures of life, such as loss of productivity and aging, we see patterns of intimate partner violence and other forms of aggression. These cycles need to be broken and reimagined so that boys can grow into adulthood with authenticity, happiness, and strong support networks.

To better understand the masculinity crisis, we developed a journey map illustrating the experiences of boys as they grow into adulthood. While gender influences childhood experiences, it is during adolescence that the effects of harmful masculinity become more pronounced. At this stage, boys encounter a range of escalating challenges, including a loss of purpose, rigid cultural and social expectations, the influence of digital environments, and a deepening sense of disconnection. The negative impacts during adolescence begin to outweigh any perceived positives. As boys transition into adulthood, the pathways toward toxic masculinity and radical misogynistic ideologies become more visible and entrenched. Without clear, alternative routes or

cultural support for healthier models of masculinity, this trajectory often continues unchecked into adulthood.
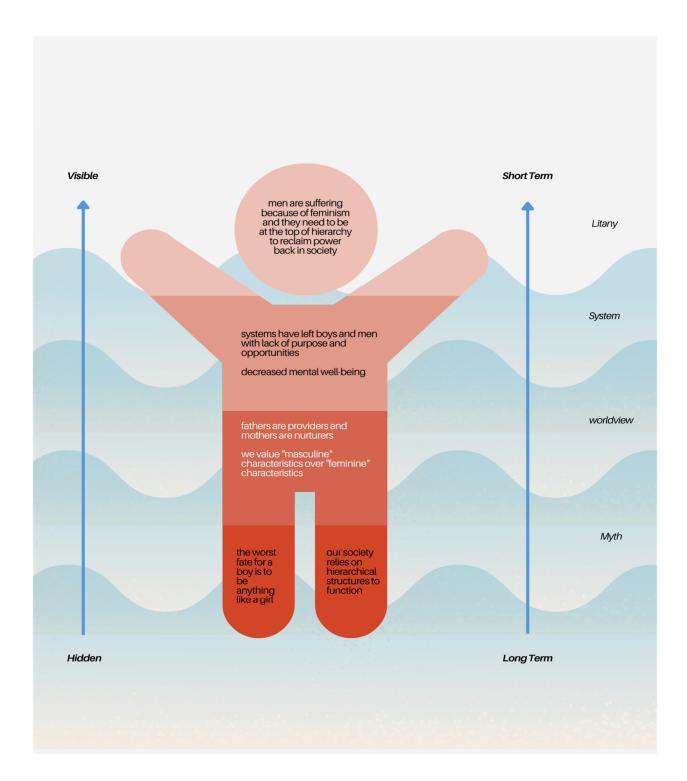
[Figure 1] Journey map illustrating the developmental stages of a boy through adolescence into adulthood in the context of the masculinity crisis. It outlines positive impacts in childhood, increasing emotional suppression and social disconnection during adolescence, and the potential progression into toxic masculinity or radical ideologies. The map emphasizes the absence of clear, healthy alternative models of masculinity across the lifespan.

The impact of the masculinity crisis is staggering. We began appreciating the depth of the crisis and wanted to delve further into its impact on boys, before they hit adolescence. Through the lens of wanting to leverage this idea of reaching men through their role as parents, we also wanted to understand the impact of the masculinity crisis on boys, in order to understand early prevention and mitigation. We read and heard about the impact on adolescent boys and adult men, but we wanted to understand what happens in earlier childhood for boys. In speaking with family counsellor and leading parenting expert, Alyson Schafer, we heard how we socialize boys differently from girls from a younger age than adolescence. Schafer spoke about how boys are taught that their future role is to provide and protect and that expressions of emotion or expression of any "feminine characteristics" was unacceptable in our societal norms. "Being anything like a

woman" was the worst fate that can be assigned to a boy. From this early age, we learned that social codes are already ingrained in boys and that they are not allowing boys to live authentically. We heard that by 6 years old, children's personalities have been largely solidified and beyond that is social molding. In raising boys, we spoke about how boys' feelings should be taken as fact and that as adults, we are uncomfortable with boys resorting to tears. However, we should, as adults, need to address the conflicts in our deep-seated beliefs and hold space for boys' feelings.

To explore the depth and root causes of the masculinity crisis in society, we developed a Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) diagram. CLA dives into problems by peeling back four layers of meaning. It looks at surface level discourse, systemic and social causes, worldviews and at the depth, myths and metaphors. What we wanted to uncover is the myths and metaphors - the unconscious, emotional or symbolic stories that we tell ourselves as truths. At the surface level (litany), we noted that in public discourse: men are suffering because of feminism, and they need to be top of hierarchy and reclaim power back in society. Below this, at the system level, we heard: systems have left boys and men with lack of purpose and opportunities and boys and men have decreased mental well-being. We noted that at this level sits Reeves' arguments - advocating for institutional reforms to help boys and men succeed within existing systems and frameworks. Below this, at the worldview level, sit two thoughts: fathers are providers and mothers are nurturers, and we value "masculine" characteristics over "feminine" characteristics. Finally at the depth, the myths and metaphors are: the worst fate for a boy is to be a girl and our society requires hierarchical structures to function. It is the psychologist Way's arguments for cultural and social transformational change, supported by what we heard from the parenting expert, Schafer, that sit at this bottom tier highlighting the myths that we tell ourselves in our collective unconscious.

[Figure 2] Causal layered analysis diagram in the shape of a person showing the messaging that appears in litany, system, worldview and myth as it relates to masculinity crisis.

Recognizing that socialization - whether conscious or not - shapes children's understanding of gender from an early age, we decided to focus our research on boys. Caregivers, particularly fathers, are key stakeholders in this process, who have expressed a strong desire to "be a better dad". While the masculinity crisis is baked into our culture and therefore affects all of us, boys are the most vulnerable to the pressures of rigid masculine norms as they move toward adolescence and adulthood. For us, this shone the light on how influential it is on how boys are socialized, especially through the role of the parents and primary caregivers. In this polarizing climate where anti-feminism is on the rise, advocating for boys and men is a sensitive topic. Reeves has received criticism from all sides. From the more liberal side, there is an "uneasiness with Reeves's popularizing the idea of the beleaguered man in a climate of rising anti-feminism" (Whalen, 2025). In the group interview on discussions around masculinity, the men (aged 24-28) were open about their experience of crisis of connection and lack of deep and meaningful connections. They also acknowledged it with us and with each other. From this, we could decipher that men need that safe space to express themselves authentically. Through initiating the conversation and asking questions that potentially challenge traditional norms of masculinity, men were able to break down their walls with a facilitator and their peers to open themselves to being vulnerable.

2.4. Implications and Proposed Actions

Social constructs and ideologies are deeply embedded in our culture and as a society, we continually express them. With masculinity and male identity being thrown in the balance, it seems to have impacted all of us. The fact that we socialize our boys to believe that being a woman or having traits that are "feminine" are a negative thing, it feels almost inevitable that misogyny lies not too far down the road. Breaking this deep myth underlying our societal views would be the ultimate goal. However, we know breaking myths that are deeply embedded needs a multi-step, multi-action approach.

Men often face immense pressure to be stoic, self-reliant, and emotionally reserved, which can create barriers to seeking help or expressing their struggles. There is a critical need for societal change, promoting a healthier understanding of masculinity that allows for emotional expression and connection. Addressing this issue is vital not only for the well-being of individuals but also for dismantling the harmful stereotypes that contribute to the crisis. By fostering an inclusive dialogue

that includes the experiences of men, we can work towards a more balanced approach to gender equality. This means creating spaces where men feel comfortable discussing their feelings and vulnerabilities, and where they can find support without fear of judgment. Encouraging men to engage in conversations about masculinity and its impact can help break down harmful stereotypes and promote healthier, more open forms of self-expression. Ultimately, a truly equitable society is one where both men and women are empowered to reach their full potential, free from the constraints of outdated gender expectations. By embracing a more holistic view of gender dynamics, we can build a future where everyone, regardless of gender, has the opportunity to thrive.

We can begin with addressing the pervasive nature of the Manosphere and its growing popularity. We want to highlight the importance of monitoring and evaluating its impact, particularly on young men. Amplifying positive male voices in the masculinity space would be beneficial. Supporting voices such as Jonathan McIntosh (@radicalbytes) who analyzes and dissects popular media, especially the intersections of sociology, masculinity and politics and comedian Chris Fleming (@chrisflemingfleming) who uses humour to address issues of rigid gender norms could be a step to opening healthy conversations about masculinity.

We can also support efforts and launch similar initiatives to redefine masculinity. A key example of such initiative is the *Men Like M*e project where Mothers Matter Centre (n.d.) is "working to help newcomer men build community around positive masculinities" to mitigate gender-based violence. Through these advocacy programs and supporting new ways to verbalize and think about masculinity, we can begin to break the cycle.

In a recent article, Niobe Way was quoted as saying, "Boys have been telling us what's at the root of their problems and how to solve it for almost four decades now. And we're not listening. Masculinity needs to be reimagined? What the hell? No, humanity needs to be reimagined" (Whalen, 2025). As we digested this statement, we realized we could not disagree. Rather, we wonder if boys can be empowered to lead the way in redefining masculinity first and followed by humanity. As child-centred placemaking amplifies children's voices and ideas at the centre, future initiatives would benefit from placing boys' voices and ideas at the centre as well in discussions around masculinity. If boys understand what is at the root of their problems, they can also be the

way to guide us on how to carry that through to adulthood, especially for men and even more poignantly for their fathers.

We were curious about how men navigate the space of responsibility, particularly when they are seen as providers or caretakers. This raised deeper questions about what it means for men to pass down their experiences to the next generation. In exploring this, we focused on the relational space between men and those most closely connected to them—especially their most vulnerable dependents: their children. Extensive research has been carried out by experts on the importance of building bonds with children at an early age. In our interview with family counsellor and leading parenting expert, Alyson Schafer, she highlighted the importance of teaching and instilling good traits in children at an early age). An anthropologist from Oxford University, Dr. Anna Machin, highlights the importance of a father's role in a child's development and creating healthier father-child bonds with the significance of play. In the *Art of Manliness* podcast episode titled, "Dad's Essential Role in Making Kids Awesome", Machin (2023) highlights the significance of rough-and-tumble play in the bonding process between fathers and their children. She explains that such forms of play stimulate the release of bonding hormones including oxytocin, dopamine, and beta-endorphins—chemicals that are essential for fostering emotional closeness and trust. Importantly, Machin differentiates the role of fathers from that of other caregivers, suggesting that play acts as a powerful bridge that not only connects the father and child but also fortifies their relationship. Her work encourages a deeper exploration into the distinct social, physiological, and psychological benefits of play. It raises critical questions about the broader implications of these findings: Why is play such a vital part of a child's developmental journey? And how does it shape the emotional fabric of a father-child relationship? More provocatively, can this form of bonding help address aspects of the masculinity crisis—offering men new pathways to connection, empowerment, and emotional resilience?

In chapter 3, we explore in detail the impacts and relevance of play, keeping in mind the lens of the increasing concerns around male loneliness and social disconnection.

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Chapter 3: The Importance of Playing in Public

3.1. Introduction

3.1.1. Problem Space and Play

As foresight practitioners, our approach to imagining futures begins by centring communities whose needs and perspectives have been overlooked in specific contexts—in this case, men and boys in relation to defining masculinity. Building on our analysis from Chapter 2, which examined the systemic roots and broader societal implications of the masculinity crisis, we now shift our attention toward practical interventions. Specifically, we envision alternative narratives of masculinity through a speculative lens—imagining futures where men engage in meaningful relationships with their most emotionally significant counterparts: their children. This framing enables us to explore masculinity through lenses of care, vulnerability, and connection fostered by play.

What stands out most in our exploration of the masculinity crisis is that it will not resolve on its own. The growing unease must be addressed, and we believe that multiple avenues for intervention are needed. Among various intervention strategies, play emerges as uniquely powerful due to its capacity to create environments conducive to vulnerability, emotional openness, and social connectedness, directly challenging traditional masculine norms. Before delving into how play can dismantle myths, metaphors, and worldviews supporting misogynistic structures, we first examine play itself, including its benefits and the detrimental impacts of play deprivation. We hope to identify key areas of intervention and determine the most impactful spaces. Our focus is on neighbourhood play as we recognize the critical role of play spaces in urban environments, particularly sidewalks and streets, in restoring the social fabric of communities and nurturing connection in these urban spaces.

3.1.2. Free Play

i. Why is Free Play Important and its Advantages

Play is a word that holds for us specific meanings. It is defined as a "... word used commonly to refer to children's preferred activities and to some adult activities, and it is often said that play promotes learning." (Gray, 2017). According to psychology journals, play is "defined as activity that (1) is self-chosen and self-directed, (2) is motivated by means more than ends, (3) is guided by mental rules, and (4) includes a strong element of imagination." (Gray 2017). Psychology places strong emphasis on development and skills-based learning through play.

Free play, defined as self-directed, intrinsically motivated, and unstructured activity, plays a crucial role in cognitive, social, and emotional development (Gray, 2017). Unlike structured play, which follows predetermined rules and adult guidance, free play allows individuals to explore creativity, problem-solving, and social interaction on their own terms. Research suggests that free play fosters adaptability, resilience, and emotional regulation, making it essential for healthy development (Ginsburg, 2007), in children.

The advantages of free play and its effects on children are extensive and the studies around the decline and deprivation of play is widely explored. The value of play in becoming a well-rounded adult has been highlighted in various studies and literature. Peter Gray in his research paper notes, "Historians of play have contended, with good evidence, that the high plateau in children's free play in North America encompassed the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, in his book on the history of play in America, Howard Chudacoff refers to this period as 'the golden age of unstructured play'" (Gray, 2012).

ii. Declining Free Play and Its Social Implications on Children

Peter Gray (2012)'s research examines the decline of free play in the United States and its correlation with rising rates of depression, suicide, and social disconnection. Gray (2012) points out that there has been a notable reduction in children's play over the last fifty years, largely due to the rise of technology, video games, and television. Research by Rhonda Clements (2004) attributes the decline in outdoor play among children to increased use of electronic media, safety concerns and shift from traditional outdoor games to structured indoor activities. According to Clements' findings, 85% of the surveyed mothers cited their child's television and computer usage as the primary reason for reduced outdoor play. Moreover, 82 identified crime and safety concerns as obstacles to outdoor play. (Clements, 2004) The research also indicated that 77% of today's parents feel they lack sufficient time to spend outdoors with their children, while 61% noted a lack of adult supervision and fears about physical harm as reasons for decreased outdoor activities (Clements, 2004). Gray (2001) references studies demonstrating the negative impacts of this decline, stating, "It makes perfect sense that play deprivation would lead to an external locus of control. Children who do not have the opportunity to control their own actions, make and follow through on their own decisions, solve their own problems, and learn to follow rules during play grow up feeling that they are not in control of their own lives and fate". According to a post by the Recess Guardian (n.d.), the impact of declining recess time on children means less free play and is prohibiting children from becoming confident adults. Unstructured outdoor play has been in steady decline for decades (Zappe, 2020), and increasingly replaced by scheduled and structured activities. This shift reflects broader cultural values that prioritize productivity and efficiency over spontaneity and leisure. In an information-based economy that increasingly requires soft skills— such as collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence (Holmes, n.d.)—the diminishing role of play raises concerns about its long-term social implications. While play serves as a natural means for developing these skills, its diminishing presence in childhood risks depriving individuals of crucial developmental experiences that extend into adulthood.

Beyond individual development, play is deeply embedded in social learning processes. Through games and unstructured interactions, individuals learn critical life lessons—such as patience, adaptability, and fairness—that are essential for navigating complex social dynamics (Higbe, n.d.). These lessons are embedded in the interactions that happen during play, yet as unstructured play declines, so do these opportunities for social development (Higbe, n.d.). Play is a

fundamental aspect of human development, shaping cognitive, social, and emotional skills from an early age. One of the key insights from research in play from a psychology standpoint is that play deprivation highlights in young people "...increased narcissism, decreased empathy and decreased creativity..." (Gray, 2017). Furthermore, research suggests that play deprivation has serious consequences. Dr. Stuart Brown (2018) linked a lack of childhood play to emotional isolation and, in extreme cases, violent behavior. His interviews with homicidal men revealed a common theme: a lack of childhood play experiences, leading to emotional suppression, isolation, and, ultimately, rage and destructive behaviours. This suppression mirrors patterns observed in the masculinity crisis, where emotional expression is discouraged, friendships dwindle, and isolation deepens over time.

This decline in play is particularly relevant to the ongoing masculinity crisis. By examining the intersection of play, emotional development, and social conditioning, it becomes clear that play is not merely a pastime but a crucial mechanism for developing connection, resilience, and adaptability in children. Addressing the masculinity crisis requires a cultural shift that repositions play as essential rather than optional—challenging traditional narratives around productivity and redefining what it means to thrive in contemporary society. Current social conditioning often associates male self-worth predominantly with productivity, leaving minimal space for activities perceived as non-essential or recreational (Kimmel, 2018). Repositioning play as vital for personal, emotional, and professional growth could challenge these entrenched perceptions, ultimately fostering enhanced individual well-being and promoting broader societal cohesion.

3.1.3. Research Questions

We mapped the journey of boys as they moved into adulthood and saw the severity of the masculinity crisis. We wanted to understand: how might we leverage playing in neighbourhoods to challenge traditional notions of masculinity and foster alternative expressions of identity, connection, and emotional openness? What are the key areas of intervention that we can introduce play, in order to mitigate the impact of the masculinity crisis? Do caregivers recognize the depth of the masculinity crisis, and how does this impact their approach to play, socialization and emotional development in their children?

3.2. Methodology:

3.2.1. Can Public Play Serve as an Intervention?

Play, in its many forms, has long been recognized as a fundamental aspect of human development, socialization, and identity formation. Researchers across disciplines have explored the ways in which play can shape individual and collective experiences. A review of existing literature reveals the importance of play, particularly in public spaces, to enhance connectivity, vulnerability and positive mental state. Expert interviews around placemaking, child development and play theory further highlight the potential of playing in public as a mode for challenging gender norms. By synthesizing these perspectives, we examine how play serves as both a reflection of societal structures and a site of resistance, offering pathways for reimagining masculinity and inclusivity in today's society.

i. Playing in Public & Sense of Belonging

Through our literature review, we explored the intersection of playing in public, social cohesion and sense of belonging. In Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1955), he emphasizes the role of play in creating a "temporary world" where social hierarchies can be suspended. He argues that play brings a sense of equality by allowing individuals to engage with one another outside rigid societal structures, encouraging spontaneous interaction and mutual respect. This perspective aligns with more recent studies suggesting that public play spaces serve as "democratic arenas" where people from diverse backgrounds can interact on equal footing (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This idea of suspending social hierarchies can be leveraged for inclusivity and connectivity in playing in public spaces.

The socialization function of play has been widely explored in psychological and sociological research. Sutton-Smith (1997) in *The Ambiguity of Play* asserts that play serves as a primary means of communication and relationship-building, helping individuals develop a sense of belonging. Public play spaces, such as parks, playgrounds, and interactive urban installations, create opportunities for both children and adults to engage in cooperative and social behavior, reinforcing community ties (Brown, 2009). In a recent publication by The Bentway and Daily Tous Les Jours (2022), it was brought forward that we need play to "improve health and well-being, allow participants the freedom to take risks and experiment, enable communities to connect and

explore, address visible and invisible barriers to access, enable people to shape and model their environments and be a new form of community consultation". We can see here the concept of play for promoting community ties evolving to allow people to participate in placemaking and have the ability to impact their neighbourhood spaces.

Stuart Brown (2009) in *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* argues that play is not merely recreational but serves as a fundamental driver of social resilience. He notes that public play interventions—such as community-led play festivals, inclusive playgrounds, and interactive street art—can be used to promote inclusivity and challenge social norms. He suggests that play can function as a form of resistance against rigid societal structures, allowing marginalized groups to express identity and build solidarity in public spaces (Henricks, 2015). The Bentway and Daily Tous Les Jours (2022) discusses how for adults, play evolves from childhood games to more subtle expressions of playfulness. Yet, despite its many benefits—stress relief, risk-taking, community engagement—play is often sidelined in adulthood. The Bentway and Daily Tous Les Jours (2002)'s findings show a broader approach and highlight people as social beings with emotions that build up over time. Play can allow for the release of these emotions through release of stress and anxiety. In fact, active and passive participation in play can impact our mental state, and the ultimate state of play is coined in the concept of *flow*, put forward by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) to describe this positive mental state where you are lost in the moment of play.

Play has also been explored in literature in relation to its role in urban spaces. Jan Gehl (2011) in *Life Between Buildings* explores how urban design can facilitate public play and result in strengthening social cohesion. His research highlights that well-designed public spaces that encourage play—such as interactive sculptures, playgrounds, and open plazas—lead to increased social interactions among surrounding communities. When play is integrated into urban planning, cities become more inclusive and dynamic, allowing for interactions that might not otherwise occur in everyday life (Mehta, 2014). In Susie Wise's book, *Design for Belonging: How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities*, she advocates for re-evaluating spaces using various design strategies to create environments where communities can thrive. Space is represented as a lever of design that has subtle cues of belonging to encourage people to resonate with common objects. Play has been emphasized as an activity that can enhance a space where people can come together. Wise (2022) discusses how skating outdoors promotes inclusivity and

an environment of learning. She also highlights the work of social psychologist Claude Steele, who emphasizes the role of space in conveying cues for belonging (or othering), especially for underrepresented groups. Steele (2010)'s research illustrates how spaces can be made inclusive and welcoming by dismantling power dynamics among different groups and avoiding the emphasis on differences. He states, "If enough cues in a setting can lead members of a group to feel 'identity safe,' it may neutralize the impact of other cues in the setting that could otherwise threaten them" (Steele, 2010). *Play Provocations* from The Bentway and Daily Tous Les Jours (2022), explores how play allowed places to be seen as a "shared backyard". It transformed play infrastructures into places of familiarity and created community around it by allowing memories to be created and connections to be made (The Bentway and Daily Tous Les Jours, 2022). Play can "prompt a new sense of belonging" and we can build a strong sense of emotional attachment to this infrastructure and in essence, a sense of place.

ii. Playing in Public and Child-Friendly Urban Environments

That play and place are tied together is clearly highlighted in literature. We leveraged the idea of place and *topophilia* as attributed to geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, who defined it as "the affective bond with one's environment - a person's mental, emotional and cognitive ties to a place" (Heimer, 2005). Through some of our expert interviews around placemaking, we heard that ideal neighbourhoods for children and their families were those where caregivers felt safe, allowing their children to play and explore, places where community came together to look out for each other and where wonder and curiosity was allowed to grow unimpeded by fear of cars, traffic, strangers and unknown dangers. Related back to the loss of free play, overtaken by structured activities and sports, we also heard the desire to bring free play and with it safe places back to neighbourhoods. One expert in architecture leaned into this by expressing that neighbourhoods should be open for children to run through each other's backyards and play through combined spaces. A neighborhood is more than a collection of buildings and streets; it is a dynamic environment where play fosters interaction, collaboration, and a sense of place. Jane Jacobs (1961) emphasized how vibrant public spaces emerge when people engage with their surroundings—play reinforces this by activating streets, parks, and communal areas as sites for spontaneous social encounters. Public play structures, street games, and interactive urban design transform a neighborhood into a participatory landscape, encouraging individuals to shift from passive presence to active co-creation of their surroundings (Lynch, 1960). Playable neighborhoods foster placemaking, allowing

individuals to form emotional bonds with their environment through consistent, meaningful experiences (Silberberg et al., 2013).

The podcast episode, *The Struggles of Physical Activity while Distance Learning,* featuring Keisha Pollack Porter and Katie Esmond, focuses on the evolving concept of outdoor play in neighbourhoods and its crucial role in modern life. The discussion emphasizes how play contributes to physical, mental, and emotional well-being and explores innovative ways to incorporate it into our daily routines. Key takeaways include the need to broaden our definition of play beyond traditional activities to include digital, creative, and community-driven practices. The episode also highlights issues of accessibility and equity and the need to address barriers that limit access to play for marginalized communities, particularly children. Play is linked to fostering creativity, collaboration, and resilience—key traits for future leadership. Integrating play into structured environments like schools and workplaces was highlighted as a way to promote innovation and balance. Ultimately, the episode underscores the urgent need to prioritize play in the face of increasing societal pressures and the digital shift in how we interact. The episode shed light on play as a tool for building inclusivity, adaptability, and long-term personal growth, through neighborhood outdoor play.

The StreetPLAY pilot program was implemented in Toronto in 2017 where 7 street sections were temporarily closed to allow children's outdoor play to happen on the streets. The report on this pilot program stated, "The neighborhood survey results revealed a generally positive perception of StreetPLAY among both parents and non-parent community members. A significant majority (75%) felt more connected to their community due to the StreetPLAY program, and 92% agreed that it provided a safe outdoor play environment for children" (Abbassi, 2018). The findings highlighted the vital role of reintroducing play into the neighborhood, which enabled children and families to reclaim the streets and foster safer communities.

3.3. Findings

Addressing the Masculinity Crisis

In an interview with family counsellor and parenting expert, Alyson Schafer, we explored strategies for raising boys with a focus on early intervention and skill development. Our inquiry sought to identify the optimal age for introducing specific teaching methods that would equip

caregivers with effective approaches to nurturing well-rounded boys. Schafer emphasized the necessity of creating an equitable environment where boys are encouraged to express their emotions and are provided with the necessary support to expand their emotional vocabulary. A key insight from the discussion was the need for intentional efforts to help boys recognize and articulate their emotions in a manner that is factual rather than associated with gender stereotypes. Schafer underscored that fostering emotional intelligence in boys requires a societal shift in which adults actively validate and hold space for their emotional experiences. Incorporating play as a method of teaching boys about diverse expressions of masculinity can be highly effective. Engaging boys in playful activities allows them to explore concepts of vulnerability, empathy, and emotional intelligence in a natural and enjoyable way. Through role-playing games, for instance, boys can step into different characters and scenarios that challenge traditional gender norms, helping them to understand and appreciate a range of male experiences.

Games that involve teamwork and cooperative problem-solving can also create an environment where boys learn the value of support and communication. Activities that encourage them to express their feelings—such as storytelling through improvisational theater or creative arts—can promote emotional expression and connection with peers (Brown, 2009). Moreover, mentorship programs that incorporate playful elements can foster strong relationships between older and younger boys, enabling them to discuss emotions and experiences in a relaxed setting (Journeymen Triangle, n.d.). By utilizing play as a foundation for learning, we can nurture boys who embrace inclusivity and respect for all genders while dismantling harmful stereotypes. This approach not only cultivates essential life skills but also contributes to healthier relationships and a commitment to equality in a changing world (Gray, 2013). By integrating these concepts into learning methods, we can cultivate a generation of boys who appreciate inclusivity and respect for all genders. Encouraging them to explore different facets of masculinity not only helps dismantle harmful stereotypes but also equips them with the tools to navigate a world where gender roles are evolving. This proactive approach can lead to healthier relationships, greater emotional well-being, and a stronger commitment to equality.

3.4. Implications and Proposed Actions

Key Areas for Intervention

Through our literature review and expert interviews, we determined that play, for this research study, needs to be in public. It's not online. It's not in our private spaces, it's public. It hinges on the social aspect of public play and seeks to find ways to connect us together. Why? Because when we play together, we are "testing boundaries, experimenting, failing, being vulnerable, building trust - all in the safe space of play" (The Bentway and Daily Tous les Jours, 2022) and this is happening for us together. Only together can we address some of our deepest and darkest social issues.

Through our research on the multifaceted significance of play, we have also come to understand its value in environments with numerous stakeholders. We realized that play, in its unstructured form, must transcend the organizational hierarchies and policy barriers, returning to the children and caregivers in the community. The concept of play needs to be nurtured at the grassroots level, encouraging children and caregivers to interact with one another. This interaction fosters a sense of belonging and safety, as noted by previous researchers. In that, achieving a deep sense of belonging may help to mitigate problems of isolation and community disconnect, which may in turn address the underlying triggers of masculinity crisis.

Building on our research, we shifted focus to caregivers and their sons. Experts emphasized that caregivers are key stakeholders in neighborhood play. Recognizing this, we sought to understand their role in acknowledging, accepting, and preventing the masculinity crisis in their children. The next chapter explores the intersection of play and the masculinity crisis, with a specific focus on caregivers and boys.

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Chapter 4: Intersection of Play & The Masculinity Crisis

4.1. Introduction

As conversations around the growing crisis of masculinity continue to unfold, we wanted to explore how play can offer a powerful yet potentially underexplored pathway for fostering healthier masculine identities. We discovered that research on masculinity and play has examined its role in shaping gendered performances, from Hellman & Odenbring (2020)'s exploration of skateboarding as a challenge to urban spatial norms to Perry (2018) and Day (2006)'s analyses of how masculinity is projected and perceived in public settings. In digital spaces, studies such as Maloney (2019)'s work on *Reddit's r/gaming* and Taylor and Voorhees (2018)'s *Masculinities in Play* reveal how gaming culture constructs, reinforces, and occasionally subverts traditional masculine ideals. Yet, while these studies shed light on how masculinity is enacted and experienced through play, not as much attention has been given to the potential of public play as a tool for addressing the impacts of the masculinity crisis. Our research aims to explore how communal, visible, and participatory forms of play might serve as a transformative force—creating pathways to a healthier, more inclusive masculinity.

As we explored the intersection of the masculinity crisis and play, we identified several overlapping themes. Central to these themes were the concepts of social cohesion, belonging, and community-building. Both the crisis of masculinity and the deprivation of play share common pathways leading to isolation, deteriorating mental health, and, in extreme cases, the rise of anti-feminist rhetoric, aggressive behaviour towards women and acts of violence. With these insights in mind, our goal was to create, develop, and test games that would allow children, particularly boys, to explore values such as collaboration, emotional openness, compassion, and empathy. To ensure we were designing the most effective games for this purpose, we explored various types of games—game mechanics, place-based games, transformative games, and collaborative games—seeking to understand how these might best support children's development.

Through discussions with experts and through literature, we wanted to bring forward the idea of being 'pro-social', here defined as behaviour and attitudes that express doing something to benefit, help or care for others because you believe that other people's feelings and experiences are important. Our interview with Alyson Schafer, family counsellor and parenting specialist,

emphasized the importance of the "4 Cs"—connected, capable, count, and courageous—as essential traits of pro-social behavior (Bettner, 2023). We also explored traits as it relates to 'tenacity' as highlighted by Dr. Sam Goldstein, in collaboration with Dr. Robert B. Brooks. Goldstein and Brooks (2021) explore intuitive optimism, intrinsic motivation, compassionate empathy, simultaneous intelligence, genuine altruism, virtuous responsibility, and measured fairness as contributing to children's tenacity. Through these traits we saw a means of challenging the masculinity crisis.

What struck us most was the discourse around the masculinity crisis was not as prevalent as we might have expected. During a moment of self-reflection, we both recognized that before embarking on this research project, we, as caregivers, were unaware of the crisis's depth and urgency. This led us to a critical juncture where we felt compelled to explore caregivers' perspectives. We define caregivers here as those primarily responsible for the care and well-being of children, most often parents.

In the previous chapter, we identified primary caregivers as key stakeholders. We aimed to understand whether these caregivers saw value in fostering these traits and skills in boys within ages 6-8. To evaluate the potential effectiveness of future strategies for addressing the masculinity crisis, we sought to gauge caregivers' awareness of, and openness to, the issues. Additionally, we wanted to uncover any shared challenges primary caregivers faced in raising boys in the context of the masculinity crisis. Identifying common experiences would reveal opportunities for change and growth. As a secondary objective, we aimed to explore how boys felt about collaborative versus competitive games and whether we could create a space for curiosity and connection between caregivers and children through play. We believe that only through genuine curiosity about one another can we bridge gaps and build meaningful relationships.

4.2. Methodology

4.2.1. What Did Play Mean to Us?

To address these research questions, we delved into literature and spoke with expert game designers to gain deeper knowledge on game design, specifically place-based games, transformative and collaborative games. We also conducted surveys and a play-based workshop to gain insights from participants potentially impacted by the masculinity crisis.

i. Shaping Children's Development Through Play

Through our literature review, we recognized that raising well-rounded boys requires an environment deeply integrated with play. The existing literature on play highlights the numerous valuable skills that children acquire through engaging in playful activities. To establish a connection between play and the development of essential life skills, we identified the importance of raising boys with soft skills. This approach emphasizes the role of play in shaping emotional intelligence, problem-solving abilities, and social adaptability, all of which contribute to developing well-rounded individuals.

We interviewed Jennifer Murphy, an expert in future leadership and child development to examine the appropriate age for nurturing positive habits in children. Murphy emphasized that the period from birth to approximately six or seven years—coinciding with the early school years—is crucial for instilling fundamental values. During this developmental stage, children are highly receptive to learning, making it an optimal time for caregivers and educators to introduce and reinforce essential behavioral and moral principles. Murphy emphasized the significance of encouraging pro-social behavior in children through play-based learning, particularly by engaging them in imaginative play. Research in child development suggests that imaginative play is a critical component of cognitive and social growth, as it enables children to practice problem-solving, role-playing, and emotional regulation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Another key insight from the interview was the discussion on the 'anxious child' in contemporary society. Murphy highlighted that increased exposure to social media has contributed to shorter attention spans among children, a concern supported by recent studies on digital media consumption. Research indicates that excessive screen time, particularly passive engagement with fast-paced digital content, can impair children's ability to sustain attention and process information effectively (Christakis, 2019). Additionally, Murphy noted that parental over-involvement in problem-solving may exacerbate anxiety and limit children's capacity for independent decision-making. When parents frequently step in to resolve challenges, children may become overly reliant on external guidance, reducing their ability to develop coping mechanisms and self-efficacy (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009).

Sam Goldstein, PhD, author of *Tenacity in Children: Nurturing the Seven Instincts for Lifetime Success*: states "Learning how to express your emotions is a step along the road to

learning how to become a functional adult." We further explored literature around what makes a child tenacious. What is a 'tenacious child' and what are the qualities of a 'tenacious child'? Goldstein & Brooks (2023) explores strategies for fostering tenacity in children to support their development into well-rounded adults. He emphasizes the importance of enhancing children's mental resilience, equipping them with the determination and willpower necessary to navigate adversity. According to Goldstein & Brooks (2023), caregivers play a crucial role in this process by employing specific language and tools to encourage children to persevere through setbacks. He advocates for allowing children to solve their own problems, thereby fostering strategic thinking and confidence. Additionally, he suggests assigning goals and tasks that enable children to utilize their abilities creatively, expanding their problem-solving capacities and preparing them to confront challenges effectively from an early age.

ii. Exploring Play Through Different Game Design Methodologies and Mechanics

We identified key skills such as problem-solving, perseverance, communication, self-awareness, emotional literacy and resilience as essential components of building confidence in children. This led us to question the extent to which caregivers are equipped to raise their children with the intentionality required to instill these attributes effectively. Our inquiry focused on understanding the role of caregivers in raising boys in today's society, with specific focus on how they perceive their responsibilities and approaches to nurturing well-rounded individuals capable of navigating the transition to adulthood. To explore this, we developed a methodology that centred on play and its potential as a tool for learning and growth. We began by exploring different types of games.

iii. Grounded in Place: Our Journey Through Place-Based Game Design

Place-based games are interactive experiences that engage participants with the physical environment around them, often using local landmarks, spaces, or community features as part of the gameplay. Giles & O'Neill (2019) discuss how these games encourage exploration, fostering a deeper connection to one's surroundings and promoting social interaction within a community. The benefits of place-based games include enhancing spatial awareness, encouraging physical activity, building a sense of place and belonging, and strengthening community bonds.

In order to invite neighbourhoods out to play, we believe that place-based play can deliver success. Place-based games support play structures and familiarity, community and neighbourhood belonging and action and investment (sense of ownership) that becomes tied to this location. We heard from an expert in game development about the success of place-based games such as *Animal Game*, which related children to place and had them invested in the ecological well-being and understanding of that particular environment. We were looking for a way to extend open invitations to engage, that could build social connections and therefore alleviate the 'stranger danger' concerns. The idea of place-based games tied strongly with our ideas around neighbourhood play and community cohesion. By leveraging the benefits of place-based games, we looked at exploring outdoor nature-based games such as scavenger hunt, obstacle courses and map-based games to funnel into the creation of our game.

iv. Designing for Change: Insights from Transformative Games in Game Development

To gain deeper insights into the significance of play, we consulted with transformative game producer, designer and co-founder of *Archipelago of Design*, Dr. Philippe Beaulieu Brossard. He introduced us to the concept and mechanics of transformative games, which he incorporates into his practice in professional development and in facilitated workshops aimed at developing team building and complex problem solving for corporate and government organizations, especially in human and national security. Transformative games are designed to create meaningful change in players, often focusing on personal growth, social awareness, or community engagement. These games encourage players to reflect on their experiences and challenge their perspectives, promoting empathy and understanding. By incorporating elements that stimulate critical thinking and collaboration, transformative games can facilitate deep discussions and lead to actionable insights.

During our discussion, we emphasized the value of engaging in strategy-based games designed to stimulate conversation. We were invited to playtest a game that was being developed by Brossard and his team, titled *Inner Alliance*, that he sought to test within focus groups. The game we played was a board game with a facilitator who provided players with minimal instructions, including rules and challenges. On the surface, the goal of the game was to strategize to better overcome challenges in rescuing civilians in a flooding scenario in 2040. Below the surface, the transformative goal is for players to learn how to seamlessly adapt to different

individuals, inside the team and in the area of operations, to develop self and team awareness. This experience ignited our curiosity, and the discussions that followed inspired us to consider integrating the transformative game approach into our future games for children.

The feedback we received from Brossard and his team was to introduce two or three games that we aimed to playtest to gather insights from the group we would be testing with. This approach would enable us to understand participants' perspectives regarding the games' nature. Additionally, these games provided a metric for success, allowing us to receive feedback continuously during the facilitation process. Our contribution will involve integrating elements of transformative games into the playtesting process to enhance the depth and quality of participant feedback. By engaging in these games, participants will not only provide insights into gameplay mechanics but also reflect on how the games align with their values and lived experiences. This dual-layered feedback—addressing both mechanical aspects and transformative potential—may serve as a critical tool for refining game design and maximizing their impact. For our workshop, the insights fed into the development of our game to further explore these pro-social skills and those related to tenacity.
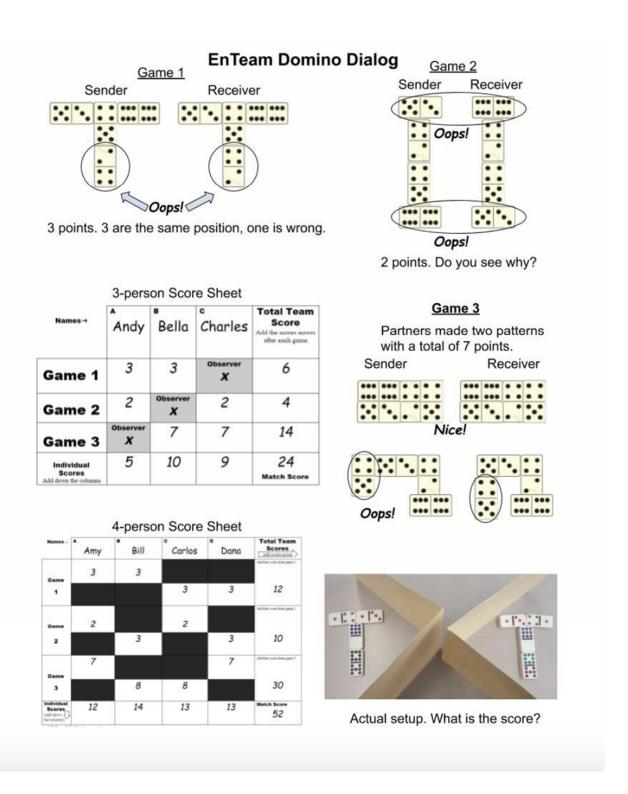
v. Collaborative Games: Exploring Cooperative Mechanics for Shared Play Experiences

In our exploration of the significance of play, we interviewed Ted Wohlfarth, the founder of Enteam Games, who has researched and focused on collaborative games. His organization focuses on collaborative games designed for children, which foster social skills, teamwork, and academic productivity. Enteam's mission is to promote a win-win philosophy in games, moving away from traditional win-lose scenarios. This win-win approach to collaborative games highlights how cooperative efforts stimulate competition against impersonal challenges, like time and distance, rather than competing against individuals. (EnTeam, 2022)

The significance of introducing collaborative concepts in games lies in challenging the traditional mechanics of winning and losing. During our interview with Wohlfarth, he shared insights on the effectiveness of games where he has designed rules to facilitate collaborative tasks. He emphasized that creating rules that eliminate competition and position participants as allies— rather than opponents—encourages teamwork to overcome challenges and enhance scores together, fostering a more inclusive approach to gameplay.

Similar to transformative games, we explored collaborative games and participated in a workshop facilitated by Wohlfarth, where we had the opportunity to play a game that he and his team developed. One of the games we played was *Domino Dialog* (Figure 3). Each player was asked to draw 5 selected domino patterns on cards. One player arranged their cards in a specific formation without showing this to the other players. Using only verbal instructions, the player guided the others to try replicating the formation. After 2 minutes, the original formation was revealed, and the players saw how closely they matched. This game highlighted the importance of listening capacity and the depth and clarity in articulating and directions.

EnTeam Domino Dialog

Game 1

Sender   Receiver

Oops!

3 points. 3 are the same position, one is wrong.

Game 2

Sender   Receiver

Oops!

Oops!

2 points. Do you see why?

3-person Score Sheet

Names→	A Andy	B Bella	C Charles	Total Team Score Add the scores across after each game.
Game 1	3	3	Observer X	6
Game 2	2	Observer X	2	4
Game 3	Observer X	7	7	14
Individual Scores Add down the columns	5	10	9	24 Match Score

Game 3

Partners made two patterns with a total of 7 points.

Sender   Receiver

Nice!

Oops!

4-person Score Sheet

Names→	A Amy	B Bill	C Carlos	D Dana	Total Team Scores Add com xxxx
Game 1	3	3	3	3	12
Game 2	2	3	2	3	10
Game 3	7	8	8	7	30
Individual Scores	12	14	13	13	Match Score 52

Actual setup. What is the score?

[Figure 3] *EnTeam. (n.d.). Domino Dialog. From: https://www.enteam.org/game/domino-dialog-online-version/*

Infographic showing arrangements of dominos, score sheets, set up and information on how to play and score the game.

The second game introduced to us by Wohlfarth was *Keep on Track*. Wohlfarth spoke about the success of this collaborative game and how it was positive in terms of instilling the win-win concept. (Figure 4). According to Wohlfarth, his work and analysis examine the importance of tweaking the game objective so the competition of the game would not occur between participants. The main objective of the game is to maneuver a ping pong ball on a track and balance the tracks, so the ball falls in a basket. The tracks are held by each participant who are required to stand in a line and balance their tracks as bridges. These tracks connect to each other and balance the ping pong ball until the last player makes the ball fall in a basket. All teams must beat their collective score in the next round. In this way, they are working together to compete against time rather than each other. This game was later used in our workshop.

[Figure 4] *EnTeam. (n.d.). Keep on Track. From: https://www.enteam.org/game/keep-on-track/#post/0*
Photograph of children playing the collaborative game holding tracks with a ping pong ball on it.

vi. Board Games as Design Reference: Structure, Interaction, and Strategy

Building on our understanding of transformative and collaborative play, we sought to explore additional forms of play. This led us to examine the emerging trend of board game cafés in Toronto, which integrate social gaming with dining experiences. Board game cafés create

communal spaces where people gather, connect, and engage in shared play, fostering a sense of belonging and social interaction. This plays into the idea of reclaiming streets for play, potentially transforming public spaces into hubs of community connectivity, encouraging spontaneous interactions and collective experiences. Sleight (2019) highlights that board game cafes are often seen as spaces catered to adults and are more structured, whereas reclaiming streets would be primarily for children with adults as secondary.

Given the growing popularity of this concept, we selected Juju Café in downtown Toronto for our study. At Juju Café, the board games were systematically categorized by genre, including collaborative and strategy-based games, and further ranked by difficulty level. Drawing from our prior exploration of transformative and collaborative games, we aimed to analyze whether existing board games incorporated elements of cooperation and win-win strategies.

To investigate this, we engaged with *5-Minute Mystery*, (Figure 5) a fast-paced, cooperative board game designed to challenge players' problem-solving skills within a limited timeframe. The objective of the game was to uncover a mystery using provided clues and identify the antagonist within five minutes. The gameplay experience was engaging and required teamwork, mirroring the principles of collaborative play and the win-win strategy discussed with Wohlfarth. The structured nature of the game encouraged players to work together efficiently, reinforcing the notion that board games can serve as an effective medium for fostering collaborative strategic thinking and social interaction. We indulged in another board game that was a strategy-based game by one of the leading entertainment industries, based on well-renowned characters. The game in contrast with the *5-Minute Mystery* proved to be complicated and extremely difficult to follow. It was based on the win-lose objective and our difficult experience with it was reflective of how much we enjoyed the collaborative game as a team and suddenly felt disjointed with the new mechanics of the game.

[Figure 5] Wiggles 3D. (n.d.). 5-Minute Mystery, From:https://wiggles3d.com/mystery

Game set up showcasing all the pieces of *5-Minute* Mystery.

This exploration of board game cafés provided valuable insights into how traditional forms of play continue to evolve within contemporary social settings, offering players opportunities for meaningful engagement through cooperative and strategy-based gameplay. We recognized that there are board game mechanics that foster collaboration and teamwork spirit that we wanted to explore.

vii. Game Design and Development

Through these exploratory exercises, we sought to develop our own game to assess our understanding of play and examine how various game mechanics can facilitate skill development among players. According to a blogpost by Board Game Geek (2024), board game mechanics are explained as "the rules and actions that govern how you play a game. They dictate when you have a turn, what you can and can't do in that turn, the outcome of your actions, and what are the consequences, positive and negative, of those outcomes. They also work, together with the specifics of the rules, to govern the routes open to winning and the limitations placed on who can

when, when, and how." Board game mechanics pointed us towards choosing mechanics of collaboration, cooperation and strategy-based games.

To gain deeper insights into board game design principles, we conducted an interview with an expert in board game mechanics, allowing us to refine our approach and enhance the effectiveness of our game. We were seeking insights into the foundational principles that shape effective gameplay. The discussion provided valuable knowledge on how game mechanics—such as rule complexity, player interaction, and decision-making structures—can be intentionally designed to promote engagement and skill acquisition. Additionally, the expert emphasized the role of game dynamics in fostering social interactions, reinforcing learning outcomes, and creating immersive experiences that encourage sustained participation.

Building on our exploration of play and its impact on skill development, we aimed to design a game that would serve as both a practical application of our research and a means to evaluate how different game mechanics influence players' cognitive and social abilities.We leveraged the idea of place-based games and used the mechanics around scavenger hunts for the basis of our game. Another key aspect of our game was emotional openness, so we made sure to include this throughout our game.

Further details of our game and photographs of the game are described in section 4.2.3.

4.2.2. Caregiver Insights: Surveys

We wanted to create an interactive play experience for the boys in our workshop so they could enhance their cognitive abilities and social competencies. Prior to our workshop we sent out a pre-workshop survey to the caregivers of the boys participating in the workshop. We received 7 responses with questions focused on games, outdoor play, collaborative play and gauging how caregivers felt raising boys in today's society.

A comment from the pre-workshop survey—where one participant expressed a desire for their son to 'avoid any gender-based role play, e.g., dressing or acting like a girl'—prompted us to explore caregivers' perspectives on masculinity. To gain deeper insight, we conducted a follow-up survey after the workshop aimed at understanding what masculinity meant to caregivers and the role of play in their children's daily lives. This anonymous survey was distributed to workshop

participants and also through our networks and extended networks, yielding 30 caregiver responses. Because we were aiming for a broader range of perspectives, we did not specify gender of children and noted the ages of the children could be under 18 as the restriction. Of the 30 responses, 75% of respondents identified themselves as mothers. The majority of the respondents (18%) identified their child as being 6 years old. The youngest child was 11 months and the oldest at 19 years old (the respondent with the 19-year-old also had other children under 18).

4.2.3 Our Participatory Play Workshop & Observations
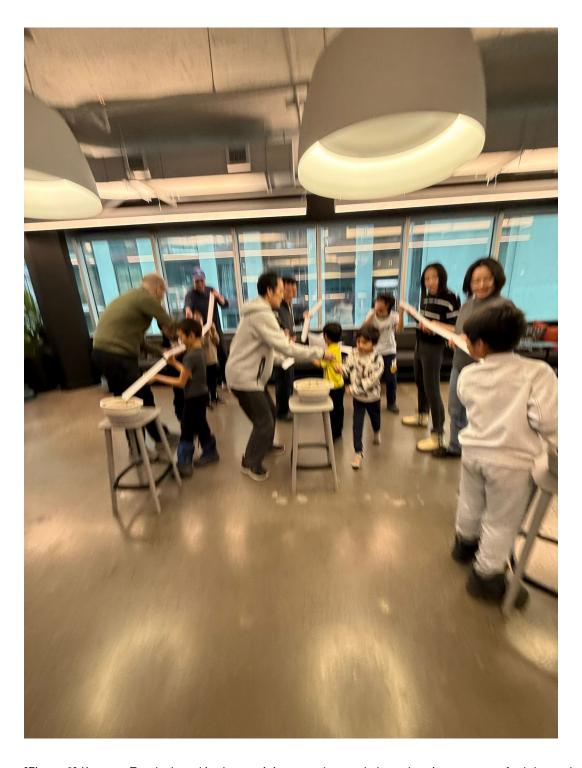
We conducted an in-person participatory workshop where the game we designed was implemented with boys aged 6–8. Caregivers were present throughout the session, which was designed not only for gameplay but also to instill dialogue and co-learning. An independent observer, Jim Munroe, was present to take structured notes on participant behavior, engagement levels, and group dynamics during the session. Munroe is the executive director of Game Arts International Network, as well as a facilitator for a men's group. The workshop created space for both spontaneous and facilitated reflection.

The primary purpose of the workshop was to understand if parents and primary caregivers see value in instilling collaboration and emotional learning in boys 6-8. Our workshop started with a group competitive game that was familiar to all participants, musical chairs. We then ran a collaborative game, *Keep On Track*, as developed by EnTeam games. The third and final game was the game we designed and play-tested. It is called The Great Circus Animal Rescue and was rooted in the game mechanics of a scavenger hunt. It consisted of multiple clue cards, obstacle cards, emotion cards that were tied to finding the lost animals and resource cards. Each game that was played was followed by a debrief period where we asked the participants questions as related to the games and their experience.

We recruited boys along with their primary caregivers through personal networks and word of mouth. Rather than focusing solely on fathers, we included all caregivers, recognizing that child-rearing also includes women. This approach allowed us to explore caregivers' perspectives on the masculinity crisis more broadly. For the workshop, we had eight boys attending who were aged 6-8, four fathers and four mothers. The workshop was held in downtown Toronto and all participants lived in Toronto or the Greater Toronto Area.

The workshop aimed to build a sense of community through shared play, exploring both competitive and collaborative games, and creating space for emotional discussions (using the lost animals). To encourage connection, participants were invited to arrive early for refreshments and to settle in, allowing natural interactions as they introduced themselves and mingled. While some participants knew each other, none were familiar with everyone. We intentionally started with a game that all participants recognized to ease the transition into play.

With musical chairs, we invited only the children to play. Since it is a competitive game, our prediction was that the parents would feel uncomfortable 'winning' against the children. By starting with the familiar, competitive game, we were able to discuss and debrief on what it felt like to play the game and the feeling associated with losing and winning. Immediately after, we played *Keep on Track* (Figure 6). For this collaborative game, we asked the children to grab their parents to join in the game. Each participant was given a track piece, and we presented the rules of the game. The first round we played, we separated the participants into three teams. The second round we played, we instructed the participants to decide for themselves how they wanted to formulate the teams, with the only explicit instruction being that it is a collaborative game, and they had to collectively improve their score. The opponent for them in this game was time. We debriefed after two rounds and the children voted for a refreshment break afterwards, before starting *The Great Circus Animal Rescue* game.

[Figure 6] *Keep on Track* played in the participatory play workshop showing a group of adults and children holding tracks aimed toward baskets. The groups are working together.

For *The Great Circus Animal Rescue*, we asked for three parent volunteers to read the clue cards and emotion cards to the children and to oversee each of the lost animals. The game's
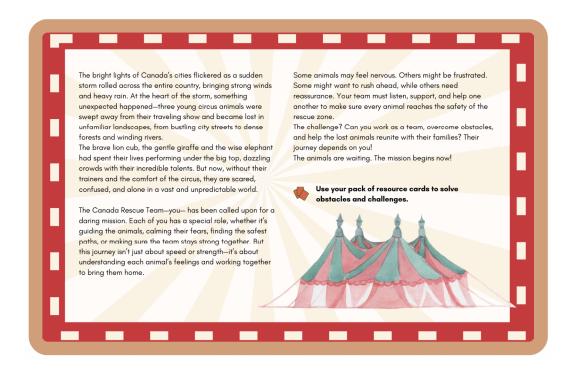
narrative explains that there are three young circus animals that were swept away from their traveling circus show and became lost in unfamiliar landscapes. The brave lion cub, the gentle giraffe and the wise elephant are now scared, confused and alone in a vast and unpredictable world. It is up to The Canadian Rescue Team - the participants - to find and guide the animals, calm their fears and find the safest path home. They must understand each animal's feelings and work together to bring them to safety. Through a series of riddles and clues, the participants are led through the game (Figure 7). The participants also faced challenges and obstacles that were designed for them to overcome together as a team (Figure 10). For example, one obstacle titled "Scaredy-Scaredy" was presented as their animal was hiding in a dense forest and too scared to come out. The participants were tasked with convincing it to come out, but they had to use all players' voices to be heard, and the animal needed to hear rhyming words to be soothed to come out (Figure 11) . Once the participants found the animals, they were dealt the emotions card. The emotion cards expressed how the animal was feeling. For example, the narrative for the elephant was "I've been lost for so long... I thought someone would find me, but no one came. My legs feel heavy, and my neck droops low. I miss my family so much. What if they forgot about me? What if I never see them again? I want to go home, but my heart feels too heavy to move. Can you help me feel hopeful again?" (Figure 12). The participants were asked to identify the emotion that describes how this animal is feeling and to come up with a plan to help make this animal feel hopeful. After finding all three lost animals, the participants returned to the starting line. A short debrief followed this final game.

[Figure 7] Photograph of a group of adults and children sitting by the window in an interior space. There is a screen above that reads 'Animal Rescue'. The children and adults are gathered together. The independent observer is on the left typing on a laptop.

[Figure 8] Front of an illustrated introduction card titled *The Great Circus Animal Rescue*.

The bright lights of Canada's cities flickered as a sudden storm rolled across the entire country, bringing strong winds and heavy rain. At the heart of the storm, something unexpected happened—three young circus animals were swept away from their traveling show and became lost in unfamiliar landscapes, from bustling city streets to dense forests and winding rivers.
The brave lion cub, the gentle giraffe and the wise elephant had spent their lives performing under the big top, dazzling crowds with their incredible talents. But now, without their trainers and the comfort of the circus, they are scared, confused, and alone in a vast and unpredictable world.

The Canada Rescue Team—you— has been called upon for a daring mission. Each of you has a special role, whether it's guiding the animals, calming their fears, finding the safest paths, or making sure the team stays strong together. But this journey isn't just about speed or strength—it's about understanding each animal's feelings and working together to bring them home.

Some animals may feel nervous. Others might be frustrated. Some might want to rush ahead, while others need reassurance. Your team must listen, support, and help one another to make sure every animal reaches the safety of the rescue zone.
The challenge? Can you work as a team, overcome obstacles, and help the lost animals reunite with their families? Their journey depends on you!
The animals are waiting. The mission begins now!

Use your pack of resource cards to solve obstacles and challenges.
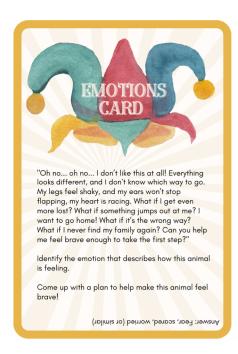
[Figure 9] Back of an illustrated card that introduces the story narrative of *The Great Circus Animal Game*. Players take on roles in a rescue team to guide the animals home by working together, understanding emotions and solving challenges using a pack of resource cards.
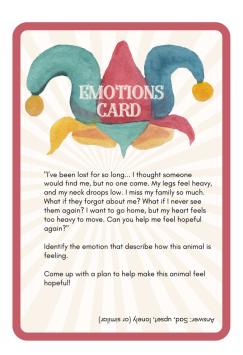
[Figure 10] Example of a clue card for T*he Great Circus Animal Rescue* depicting the front and back of the card. Text reads: Round 1, clue 1. I start in the hills, quiet and slow. Through valleys and plains, I steadily flow. I carve the land as I move along, But turn to ice if winter's strong. What am I? Answer River, Next Steps: Run to the blue spot to find the next clue.

[Figure 11] Example of an obstacle card for *The Great Circus Animal Rescue*

[Figure 12] Example of 2 emotion cards for *The Great Circus Animal Rescue*

Takeaways from the workshop, based on our own and Munroe's observations, were that participating caregivers valued collaboration and emotional learning for their boys.

4.3. Findings
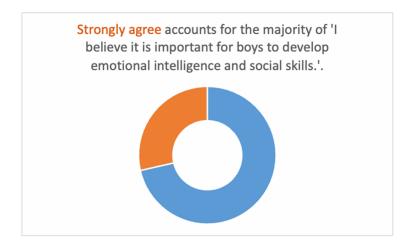
4.3.1 Participant Caregiver Survey Findings

The pre-workshop surveys were sent out to workshop participants. Out of the 7 responses, almost 80% of the answers by parents about the most loved games amongst their children were all online trending games. The 'device' seemed like the biggest concern amongst the caregivers as the children were spending a significant amount of time playing online.

Survey responses revealed that caregivers strongly supported the value of collaborative games for children (Figure 13) and most agreed that it was important for boys to learn emotional intelligence. (Figure 14). The most notable finding was related to caregivers' attitudes toward discipline. As shown in (figure 15) the survey responses show that many caregivers expressed a tendency to raise boys with a sense of toughness through discipline. However, when asked about concerns with boys conforming to societal pressure, most caregivers felt that they were not concerned (figure 16). Overall, the survey highlighted a generally positive outlook among caregivers
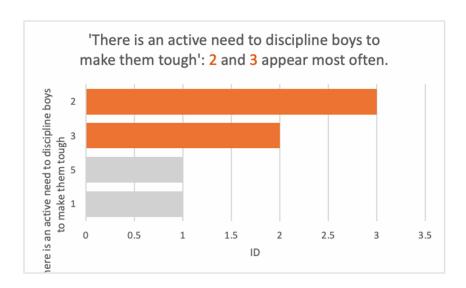
in raising boys. Most felt confident in their ability to support their sons and reported feeling well-equipped with resources and strong communication channels.
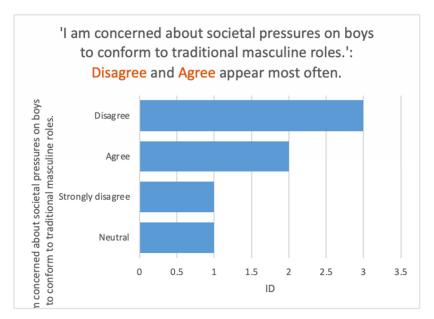
[Figure 13] Pie chart from the pre-workshop survey showing that 75% of the participants strongly agreed that collaborative games helped to build emotional intelligence and social skills in boys and 25% just agree on the same.

[Figure 14] Pie chart from the pre-workshop survey showing 20% of the participants strongly agree that boys need to develop emotional intelligence and social skills and the rest just agree.

[Figure 15] Bar graph from the pre-workshop survey showing that participants show more than neutrality towards needing to discipline boys and make them tough.

[Figure 16] Bar graph from the pre-workshop survey showing that the majority of responses are in disagreement about being concerned that boys would conform to societal pressure.

Caregivers strongly emphasized the challenge of balancing emotional nurturing with fostering independence in their sons. Survey answers revealed a disconnect in their responses, suggesting an underlying emotional conflict regarding their approach to raising boys. We acknowledge that our participant pool was relatively small and drawn from the researchers'

extended networks. However, this group appeared to be informed about contemporary parenting challenges and more aware of prevailing social norms.

4.3.2 Participatory Play Workshop Findings

Our workshop provided valuable insights, some expected and others surprising. The most obvious takeaway was that our game, *The Great Circus Animal Rescue*, felt too structured and adult-led for the children. Before the workshop even began, they naturally created their own game of hide-and-seek and tag while waiting. Munroe documented observations as we facilitated the workshop, noting:

> 'Before the game started, the kids ran around exploring, looking out the window, complaining about being bored, and asking when the game would begin. One boy suggested taking a vote to see if others wanted to play again, then proposed setting rules. Another boy contributed: "Don't eat while you're running." "Don't touch anything fragile." "Have fun."'

Although the workshop took place in a downtown Toronto office space, the children quickly made the space their own. Within minutes, they bonded and were seen running around, calling out, "Kid Meeting!" whenever they wanted to regroup. The freedom to create their own rules and games fostered a sense of connection and ownership over the space. In contrast, when playing *The Great Circus Animal Rescue*, their feedback was clear—it was simply "boring." This underscored the importance of giving children autonomy in play rather than imposing overly structured activities.

The children needed much less of an icebreaker than the adults. In observation, we noticed that the children bonded within a few minutes. Those that arrived later were quick to join the free play games. The parents who did not know each other, used the workshop and their joint connection in having boys of the same age to draw connections. They approached conversations politely, though with caution. Adults who knew each other gravitated to each other and spent most of the workshop together.

Through *The Great Circus Animal Rescue*, we observed that the children were quick to understand the riddles and challenges. They were open to talking about emotions and to show

vulnerability. Although for them the structured nature of the game was not exciting, they still engaged with the game and participated throughout. After we wrapped the final game, the children went back to their free play and continued a game of hide and seek.

While we noted that children were quick to bond, there was also a sense of hierarchy that was quickly created and clearly evident. Although the workshop was for boys aged 6-8, we had one boy aged 12 who tagged along (as the ninth participant). Given his age and height, he was immediately the head of the group. When asked during the third game who would hold the resource cards, all the other children pointed immediately to the 12-year-old citing that he was the most responsible because he was the oldest. The size and height difference between 6-years-old and 8-years-old children also played a factor. The children who were 6-years-old reported afterwards feeling left out of *The Great Circus Animal Rescue* game.

The deep-rooted nature of competition in our society was evident during the first game of musical chairs. When it came down to two brothers (aged 8 and 12), the game quickly turned physical, with both using force to claim the last chair, neither willing to concede. For safety reasons, we ultimately called it a tie and ended the game. Munroe noted in his observation notes:

> 'The larger boy in the last chair used his size to dominate the space. He was visibly annoyed by losing and sat apart from the group. The boy who beat him went to sit beside him. (They were brothers.)'

During the debrief following a collaborative game, the children shared that while they enjoyed aspects of cooperation and teamwork, they also found competitive games exciting and engaging. Their reflections highlighted the complex relationship between competition and collaboration in play.

One of the interesting aspects of running the workshop was to experience the concept of *flow* as noted by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. That ultimate positive mental state where you are lost in the moment of play for us was achieved during the game, *Keep On Track*. We, as facilitators, asked the children to grab their parents to participate in this game, and noted that the children were all eager to do so. Munroe noted in written observation,

"One kid said, "if they get a hundred we can combine!" "We're going to combine, right?" one asked for assurance once they had broken a hundred each. They added up the scores of the two to get 304! General applause broke out."

Experiencing that moment when all the participants were engaged collaboratively in the game, we saw the concept of *flow*. And even experiencing it as facilitators, we experience the joy of play just through observing.

4.3.3 Masculinity and Play (Caregivers) Survey Findings

When asked, "How would you describe or define masculinity," the majority of responses included the words "male", "identity" and "traits". What we found most notable were that the responses were split, where some indicated positive traits such as "confident", "strong" and "brave" (also courageous), while others noted traits that could be perceived as negative, such as "superiority", "rough" and "brash". A few responses noted that masculinity can be seen from both a positive and negative lens with the associated traits. One response, "Masculinity is a combination of strength, responsibility, and emotional intelligence. It is not just about physical toughness but also about integrity, leadership, and the ability to protect and provide. In today's world, masculinity includes being supportive, compassionate, and emotionally aware while embracing personal growth and self-confidence." Overall, this highlighted for us that masculinity's definition is in flux incorporating some of the traditional ideas of providing and protecting with a more rounded version that includes emotional awareness and personal growth. We followed this question with, "Do you think boys today are becoming less masculine than past generations? Why or why not?" We purposefully followed with this question to gain further insights on potential shifting of views on masculinity. Some responses (29%) noted this shift in perspective. Some of the responses included, "The definition is changing and losing meaning", "Yes because we are embracing non-toxic masculinity and breaking traditional cycles especially with emotions" and "I don't think it's that rigid; how we view masculinity has definitely become more expansive than previous generations". This for us further highlighted that notions of masculinity are already shifting.

The word "dominance" was noted as a trait tied to masculinity in 10% of responses. In these responses, there is no indication if the caregiver felt this was a positive or negative trait. For us, the conversations around the masculinity crisis and especially in relation to feminism and hierarchy, the word "dominance" feels problematic. There is a possibility that respondents were noting that dominance is a key aspect within a male-dominated society and diving into this word as it relates to masculinity could open new discussions in future research.

We recognize the limitations of our data, both in terms of sample size and the fact that the survey was distributed through our personal and extended networks. We are also aware that our own perspectives likely align with those of many in our network. However, even within the 30 responses we received, one stood out, dismissing the survey as a "waste of time" and claiming that "liberals are pushing less masculinity and more femininity." This highlights that, even in a small sample, discussions around masculinity and its crisis remain highly polarizing and sensitive.

In relation to connecting with their children, caregivers responded that bedtime and times that allow for one-on-one time are key. It was also noted that the times for connecting are very age dependent. When asked about outdoor play, 100% of caregivers noted that they considered this important. The reasons as to why echoed each other and included "fresh air, better mood", "mentally soothing" and necessitated for children to be away from screens. One response noted, "Yes. Getting outside and playing with friends is great because it gets them away from electronics and forces them to reconnect with friends IRL, the pull of the devices is so strong that the only way to separate is to literally physically move them away from the temptation. All of the exercise and whatnot is great, but I do think it just gives them the opportunity to be fully present." This sentiment strongly echoes what we heard from subject matter experts in different realms. One of the key responses we heard from 10% of those surveyed was that being outdoors allowed for risk-taking in a positive light. The idea that we need to allow our children to take risks resonated with us. This ties back to what we heard about the 'anxious child' from Murphy, one of our subject matter experts. In Murphy's opinion, we as caregivers and society have made it so kids cannot fail, and we have become more protective. As a result, we have taken away autonomy and decision making for children, leading to a rise in anxiety. The idea that we need to allow children to play outdoors and take their own risks coincides with this trend.

Alongside this, when asked about their child(ren)'s favourite playground and outdoor space, caregivers indicated that it is the social aspect and ability to connect with their peers that made these outdoor spaces special. Responses included "....because that is where their friends are and there is the opportunity for chance encounters with their peers from school" and "...the ability to connect and socialize with a variety of children made it a truly special experience for him". Overall, what we heard most from these surveys in relation to play and children through caregivers is that children need autonomy and space to take risks. It also re-affirms that children know how to be pro-social, desire being pro-social and pro-social play or activities are considered special.

4.4. Implications and Proposed Actions

Through this chapter, we highlight that the definition of masculinity is evolving, incorporating both traditional ideals of strength and protection alongside a growing emphasis on emotional intelligence and personal growth. While some respondents see this shift as a loss of meaning around the concept of masculinity, others view it as a positive expansion of masculinity's scope. The discussion remains polarizing, reflecting broader societal debates about gender roles. Additionally, our research underscores the importance of outdoor play and social connection for children, with caregivers emphasizing the need for autonomy and risk-taking in fostering resilience and emotional well-being. Although our sample size was limited, the responses reinforce key studies and expert opinions about masculinity, parenting, and childhood development, pointing to the ongoing transformation of these concepts in today's world.

Through our exploration, we also discovered an important realization: rather than trying to guide the process too much, we need to do less and let children lead more. In the realm of free play, children already possess a natural understanding of what it means to be pro-social, collaborative, and engaged. They know how to express empathy and emotional openness on their own, and what they need are opportunities to practice these skills. We realized that we were re-learning and deepening our understanding of what we had heard through literature and through expert interviews, but this time from children themselves.

As we explored the masculinity crisis through the lens of play, we recognized that it is rooted in broader systemic issues and deep-seated societal norms. Our intervention, which aimed

to address masculinity through play, appeared to be only a small piece of a much larger and more complex puzzle. Through this research, we uncovered that addressing the masculinity crisis requires efforts across multiple areas of the societal problem to create meaningful and lasting change. Playing together is one aspect of bridging the community together and bringing people closer. However, such interventions like education, communication and advocacy in all sectors are important. The impacts of the masculinity crisis are far too many to be substantiated by fixing one aspect in a boy's life. Hence, in order to address the urgency, everyone needs to work together to advocate for the cause.

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Chapter 5 - Research Findings and Proposed Intervention: The Play Kit

5.1. Introduction

We firmly believe that the masculinity crisis is a deeply rooted societal issue that intersects with multiple systems—including education, family, and urban life—and therefore requires a multi-faceted, collaborative approach involving diverse stakeholders. Our research embraced the power of play as a transformative tool for reimagining urban neighborhoods, particularly public sidewalks, as inclusive spaces where meaningful connection, emotional development, and community engagement can take place.

The central aim of this work is to bring community connectivity to the forefront by creating opportunities for fathers and sons to engage in play together. By introducing these experiences early in a child's life, we hope to intervene in the reproduction of restrictive gender norms and instead support alternative masculinities grounded in empathy and mutual care.

The insights gained through our participatory workshop affirmed the value of play—not only as an activity but as a philosophy for engagement and learning. We observed firsthand the benefits of emotionally expressive and collaborative play among boys and recognized a vital lesson: children must be trusted to lead. Their approaches to play revealed natural tendencies toward fairness, creativity, and emotional openness that are often overlooked in adult-centric environments.

To inform our final intervention, we examined global case studies of neighborhood-based play, sidewalk design, and child-led urban planning. Drawing from lessons in child-centered placemaking, we identified key principles for designing environments that allow children to lead while encouraging intergenerational connection. Finally, we turned our attention to the father-son dynamic, exploring how daily interactions serve as a powerful channel through which ideas of masculinity are either reinforced or reimagined.

5.2. Case Studies on Play in Urban Environments

Numerous initiatives around the world have demonstrated the transformative potential of play in urban settings, particularly through reimagining streets and sidewalks as inclusive spaces for community engagement and childhood development. In the United States, several non-profit organizations are leading efforts to transform everyday infrastructure into playful environments that ignite children's creativity and promote intergenerational interaction.

One such initiative is **Play Everywhere**, launched by *KaBOOM!* in partnership with urban design consultancy *Gehl*. This project champions the idea that play should not be confined to traditional playgrounds but should be integrated into everyday public spaces—such as sidewalks, bus stops, plazas, and street corners. The initiative demonstrated that incorporating playful elements like sidewalk games, mobile play kits, and interactive art installations could spark spontaneous engagement. According to the project's 2024 report, 60% of nearby residents actively interacted with these redesigned public spaces, highlighting the value of low-cost, high-impact design in building more connected neighborhoods (KaBOOM! & Gehl, 2024). The report advocates for reimagining streets as not solely functional transit routes, but as playful, safe, and inclusive environments. Through low-cost, high impact design, we can transform everyday spaces into places for creativity and connectivity.

Another example is the **Play Walk** project in Rochester, New York, introduced by the *Healthi Kids Coalition* in 2019. This project creatively connects urban trails from the library to the renowned Strong Museum, encouraging children to play, borrow books, and engage in games inspired by art that prompts participation in traditional outdoor activities. Healthi Kids emphasizes the importance of creating safe neighborhoods and implementing policies that encourage children to engage in unstructured play. The initiative promotes inclusivity among residents and advocates for learning through play in schools up to grade three. (Healthi, 2022). This project also engaged a youth design team from the Central Library in collaboration with local artists to create the Play Walk. The youth team supported community outreach gathering input, interests and desires from local residents (Healthi, 2022). One of the main project goals was to promote intergenerational interaction through the design of a space inviting participation from individuals of all ages.

A broader-scale national model can be seen in Australia, through the **1,000 Play Streets** initiative spearheaded by *Play Australia* with support from the national government and the Australian Sports Association. This campaign empowers residents to reclaim neighborhood streets for community-based play. The program provides toolkits that guide local residents in temporarily closing streets for recreational use—offering permits, signage, and resource packs to facilitate outdoor games and community-building activities. This initiative reinforces the notion that play can be a democratic, empowering force that supports mental health and strengthens neighborhood bonds (Play Australia, n.d.).

In addition to these global case studies, we also drew from insights gained through discussions with subject matter experts on child-centred placemaking. Rooted in principles of co-design and participatory planning, child-centred placemaking emphasizes amplifying children's voices and involving them meaningfully in shaping urban environments. It views children not merely as "future citizens," but as active stakeholders in the present (Iorio & Krechevsky, 2020). Initiatives such as *KidScore* by *Maximum City* exemplify this approach, as children were actively engaged in evaluating the child-friendliness of public spaces and contributing to urban assessments (Maximum City, n.d.).

These global models and expert frameworks strongly informed our intervention. They reinforced the idea that placing children at the center of public space design—and recognizing them as capable contributors—can shift social dynamics and enable systemic change.

This perspective became even more urgent when viewed in the context of the masculinity crisis. As boys approach adolescence, they are at risk of losing meaningful emotional connections. In a recent study by Parker & Hurst (2025) on the gender gap in teen experiences, it was noted that the majority - 58% - of teens say that "girls have it easier when it comes to having friends for emotional support". The gravity of conveying this issue to caregivers is significant.

Our proposed **Neighborhood Play Kit** is designed in direct response to this need. By inviting fathers—who themselves may be navigating emotional restraint and societal pressure—to engage in collaborative, creative play with their sons, we offer a new framework for relational connection. Through hands-on, pro-social activities, fathers can model emotional intelligence, empathy, and care. This not only strengthens the parent-child bond but also contributes to reshaping gender norms within the broader community. Through collaborative, pro-social play,

fathers can model care and consideration for others, amplifying emotional intelligence, empathy, and social bonds.

5.3. Our Concluding Contribution: A Neighbourhood Play Kit

Through literature and through our workshop, we discovered that play can truly provide a safe space. In a society where caregivers are shifting their viewpoints on masculinity, we still want fathers to feel safe to navigate their own struggles while connecting with their sons. In a study conducted in Australia in 2023, researchers set out to find "do young men "copy" their fathers' masculinity?" (Kuskoff et al., 2023). Their findings show "that young men whose fathers support more traditional forms of masculinity are more likely to do so themselves. This highlights the critical role fathers play in steering boys towards healthier ideas about masculinity" (Kuskoff et al., 2023). Through this research, while fathers are not the only influence on their sons' ideas of masculinity, they are a pivotal factor and more importantly, we now have empirical data to show this. The key indication is that breaking the cycle constraining masculinity norms requires "bringing fathers into the mix" (Kuskoff et al., 2023).

We tied this back to our preliminary findings through our survey amongst caregivers. As one father responded in our survey, "I try to evolve my views and be supportive but fully appreciate that I still have a lot of old school bias around masculinity/gender. I can't say for sure how I'd feel if my son were further from the traditional norms if I'm being honest." The honesty in the answer reflects for us the struggle that fathers, caregivers, and possibly society at large are experiencing. As evidenced in the *Men Like Me* project—where the Mothers Matter Centre is challenging why we associate masculinity with "strength" and "toughness" rather than "nurturing" or "caring"—we can see that society is beginning to acknowledge and appreciate the challenges and limitations of traditional views of masculinity (Government of Canada, 2023). In a study conducted by Equimundo (2022), parents identified being "emotionally strong" as highly important for their sons. At the same time, however, the report notes that boys are still expected to "fit in" and "act like a boy—not like a girl" (Equimundo, 2022). This highlights an ongoing tension between evolving ideals of masculinity and persistent traditional norms. For this reason, we believe that play can create space for fathers and sons to be vulnerable and open with one another. Through simple, connected moments, play can offer a powerful way to redefine what strength and connection looks like between males.

We have explored ways to encourage caregivers to embrace their children's imagination, creativity, empathy and connection through sidewalk play. We want the neighbourhood play kit to invite children to lead, to invent their own games and involve neighbours and passersby in spontaneous fun, transforming our sidewalks into playful community-driven environments. Our main goal was to ensure that the elements inside the play kit were not structured. We heard and understood the value of free play and that overly structured play was considered "boring" by children. In order to open a space for caregivers, we developed prompt cards that could spark play that embrace all the elements of being pro-social and builds tenacity for children. More importantly, these cards carve a space for caregivers to join in play with their children and provide opportunity to invite the neighbourhood outside.

We are calling our play kit, *Play Sparks in a Cart!*. *Play Sparks in a Cart!* captures the energy, spontaneity, and accessibility of play in everyday spaces. "Play Sparks" reflects the idea of igniting creativity, imagination, and connection—small prompts that lead to big moments of joy and collaboration. "In a Cart" emphasizes mobility, bringing forward the idea that playful experiences can happen anywhere—on sidewalks, in parks, or on neighborhood streets. The name also hints at the idea of a mobile play hub, where neighbourhoods can "pull from the cart" to spark new adventures, reclaim public spaces, and invite others to join. More than just a collection of activities, *Play Sparks in a Cart!* is an invitation to reimagine the world as a playground, fostering pro-social behavior, deeper father-child relationships, and a stronger sense of community.

5.4. Introducing *Play Sparks in a Cart*!

5.4.1. Value Proposition

In response to our research findings on the masculinity crisis and the role of play in fostering emotional connection and resilience, we developed *Play Sparks in a Cart!*—a neighborhood-based, mobile playkit designed to activate sidewalks as inclusive spaces for intergenerational play. The toolkit serves as both a tangible and symbolic intervention: it transforms public infrastructure into arenas of joy, care, and co-creation where free play is accessible to neighborhood children.

Our value proposition is simple but urgent: For fathers navigating the pressures of modern masculinity and seeking more meaningful relationships with their sons, *Play Sparks in a*

Cart! offers an accessible, easy-to-use toolkit that enables collaborative play. The kit supports pro-social connection and emotional literacy, encouraging boys to explore empathy, imagination, and mutual care from an early age—beginning as young as six.

By facilitating playful experiences that prioritize creativity over competition and connection over conformity, the kit creates opportunities for stronger family bonds, improved emotional intelligence, and deeper neighborhood relationships. Through low-cost, low-barrier design, *Play Sparks in a Cart!* invites communities to reclaim sidewalks not just as transit routes, but as platforms for belonging.

5.4.2. What's in *Play Sparks in a Cart!* ?

The *Play Sparks in a Cart!* playkit includes a carefully curated selection of tools and resources designed to activate sidewalks and neighborhood spaces as sites of inclusive, child-led play. Each component supports emotional exploration, physical engagement, and social connection. Based on workshop feedback, developmental theory, and principles of community-led design, the kit contains the following:

i. Play Sparks cue cards

These situational prompt cards encourage spontaneous sidewalk play and imaginative action. Designed to spark teamwork, creative thinking, and social bonding, the cards offer playful challenges such as:

- *"Declare a dance zone!"*

- *"Turn the sidewalk into a game board: jump here, freeze there, spin there."*

These cards that we designed are an outcome of our research and invite boys into neighborhood adventures that gently challenge traditional norms of masculinity through cooperation and joyful movement.

ii. Small Resources (Starter Set)

The play kit includes a variety of open-ended materials such as:

- Sidewalk chalk

- Skipping rope

- Pebbles

- Balls

These items support imaginative play and physical activity. Caregivers and neighbors are invited to contribute additional materials to customize the kit and make it unique to their community. The contents are flexible and adaptable, allowing families to engage with the kit as-is or to build upon it organically over time. [Figure 17]

iii. Collaborative Challenge Cards

A deck of challenge-based cards that invite participants to engage in team activities—like co-creating obstacle courses, building chalk cities, or designing their own sidewalk games. These cards promote shared decision-making and reinforce social skills like patience, cooperation, and leadership. They also allow boys to lead the way in inventing their own games [Figure 18, 19]

iv. Emotion Game Cards

These illustrated cards depict everyday scenarios designed to help children recognize, name, and reflect on emotions. Caregivers are encouraged to use these as entry points for emotional literacy conversations [Figure 20]. For example:

- *"You lost a game—how do you feel? What would you do?"*

- *"You made a new friend today—what do you want to share with them?"*

v. Play Sparks Guidebook

A practical handbook for caregivers, this guide includes:

- Tips for encouraging emotionally supportive play

- Guidelines for creating safe, inclusive play zones

- Reflection prompts to help children process their experiences after play

vi. Sidewalk Play Signs

Reusable signs are included to help designate portions of the sidewalk or neighborhood street for safe play. These signs serve as visual cues to passersby and help legitimize children's right to public space. [Figure 21]

Each item in the play kit was designed with the intention of nurturing relational connection, emotional expression, and public joy—creating accessible, neighborhood-level interventions in support of healthier masculinities.

[Figure 17] Designed illustration explaining the contents of the Play Sparks kit. Text reads: "Every street boasts a play box stocked with fun-tatstic resources! Neighbours are invited to jazz up the play sparks with games and activity goodies for the neighbourhood boys"

The Lost Game

Pretend you just rediscovered an ancient sidewalk game that was almost forgotten. What was it called? What were the rules? Teach it to someone new!

Dad is Now the Mayor of This Sidewalk.

What new law or rules does he make? Do you follow it, change it, or break it?

Prompt cards

Prompts for Boys to Invent Their Own Game

Prompt cards

Prompts for Boys to Invent Their Own Game

How to Play

Grab the fancy deck of cards from the Play Sparks kit! These cards are crafted to coax the boys into neighborhood adventures. Each prompt is sneakily placed to spark teamwork, build strength, and forge awesome connections through play. Let the neighborhood fun begin!
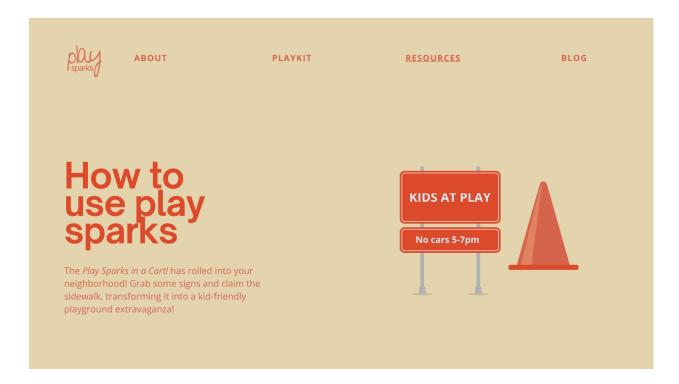
The Floor is...?

One person calls out what the sidewalk has turned into (lava, ice, a trampoline, jelly). Everyone must move accordingly—tiptoeing on lava, slipping on ice, bouncing on a trampoline. Keep switching!

[Figure 18, 19] Designed illustration explaining how to use the prompt cards in the Play Sparks kit. Text reads: "Grab the fancy deck of cards from the play kit! These cards are created to coax the boys into neighbourhood adventures. Each prompt is sneakily placed to spark teamwork, build strength, and forge awesome connections through play. Let the neighborhood games begin!"

[Figure 20] Designed illustration explaining how to use the prompt cards in the Play Sparks kit. Text reads: "Pick a spot and declare it a dance zone: Do a silly dance if someone joins, let them invent the next move. The sidewalk is a giant game board: Assign different squares special rules: jump here, spin there, freeze on this one. Play until the board is complete."

[Figure 21] Designed illustration showing the sidewalk display signs. Text on sign reads, "Kids At Play. No cars 5-7pm".

5.4.3 Integrating a Digital Platform

To effectively connect with fathers and caregivers in the neighborhood, we propose the creation of a dedicated digital platform designed to complement the physical *Play Sparks in a Cart!* play kit. This website will serve as an online hub for community engagement, offering resources, coordination tools, and reflective practices to extend the reach and impact of the play kit. [Figure 22].

Our digital outreach aims to empower fathers by providing a user-friendly space that promotes connection, play, and shared learning. The platform will include guidance on how to use the play kit effectively, offer downloadable versions of the prompt cards, and model how sidewalk play can be organized safely. By emphasizing interactive and relational play, the platform encourages parents to let children take the lead, while also equipping caregivers to facilitate post-play reflection and dialogue. [Figure 23]

Beyond practical tools, the platform will feature educational content related to parenting, emotional development, and the masculinity crisis. Articles, videos, and community stories will be curated to support fathers navigating complex emotional terrain and offer them tangible ways to support their children's emotional growth.

The site will also include features designed to cultivate hyperlocal community bonds. One such feature is a neighborhood directory, allowing users to connect with nearby families, schedule group playdates, and build a neighborhood culture around spontaneous play. A responsive interface will make it easy to browse, locate neighbors, and coordinate meetups. It will also aid as an accessible tool to download the play kit, act as a reflection corner for journaling, provide articles and educational material on masculinity and parenting and pose as a board for any announcements and events.
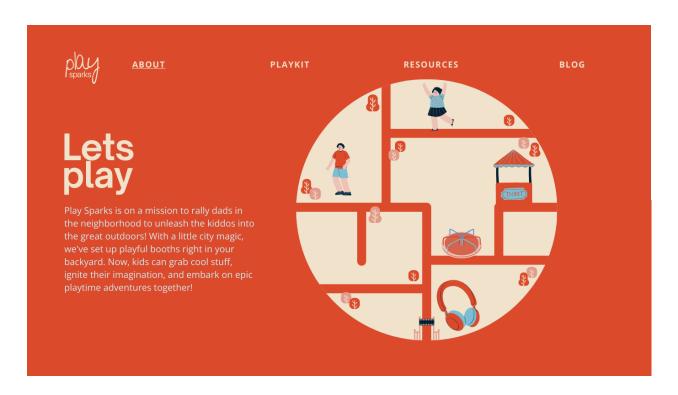
To support the unique needs of fathers, the platform will offer a scheduling tool that allows them to arrange playdates and find mutual times to meet with other neighborhood fathers. This feature provides a convenient, low-pressure way for fathers to connect, while incentivizing them to

take the lead in coordinating outdoor play. In essence, the platform reframes play as a form of "meeting booking"—empowering fathers to initiate and maintain social ties within their community.
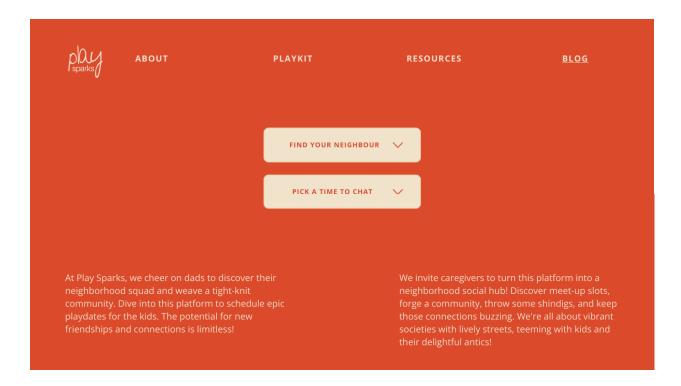
The following figures (Figure 22-24) are graphics designed by the researchers to show snapshots of the proposed website

[Figure 22] Designed illustration of the home page of the website. Text reads: Bringing back play in neighbourhoods.

[Figure 23] Designed illustration of the website explaining what Play Sparks is. Text reads: Play Sparks is on a mission to rally dads in the neighbourhood to unleash the kiddos into the great outdoors! With a little city magic, we've set up playful booths right in your backyard. Now kids can grab cool stuff, ignite their imagination, and embark on an epic playtime adventure together!

[Figure 24] Designed illustration showing a neighborhood directory for the website. Text reads: At PlaySparks, we cheer on dads to discover their neighbourhood squad and weave a tight-knit community. Dive into this platform to schedule epic playdates for their sons. The potential for new friendships and connections is limitless.") Text reads: We invite caregivers to turn this platform into a dynamic neighborhood social hub—discovering meetup opportunities, hosting playful events, and nurturing ongoing relationships. Our goal is to inspire streets filled with laughter, spontaneity, and the joyful chaos of boys at play, supported by a community that values connection, care, and emotional openness.

5.4.4 Distribution Channels

The intention of the play kit is a tool to bring communities together and while the value proposition highlights its role for fathers and sons, it is a tool that can be used by anyone regardless of age, background or socioeconomic status. It is meant to be available at no cost.

i. Social Spaces/Community Hubs

We believe that a collaboration with social spaces or community hubs, such as libraries can serve to deliver these play kits. Through these publicly accessible spaces, the toolkit can be both available to anyone with a library card and tracked for usage.

A more grassroots distribution channel would be the little free libraries. Aligned with community building, the network of little free libraries is an excellent initiative that has similar goals. The Little Free Library's vision is to have one in "every community and a book for every reader...believe all people are empowered when the opportunity to discover a personally relevant book to read is not limited by time, space or privilege" (Little Free Library, n.d.). Our vision is similar in that we want people to discover the joy of play and community connectivity.

ii. Online Neighbourhood Groups

Leveraging existing avenues for distribution would be key as well. Many neighbourhoods have both formal and informal groups established with online platforms. Sharing posts in local parenting, dad's groups and community forums could help launch these. There are also local Reddit communities, for example East York: (r/toronto), where we could introduce the project. Community newsletters and blogs can also be a good avenue.

iii. In Person Community Outreach

In-person approaches could also be an effective distribution channel. We could consider a pop-up cart in street fairs and local farmers' markets. Connecting and forming partnerships with neighbourhood associations, local coffee shops, indoor play establishments and bookstores could help launch our play kit. Focusing on spaces where there are potential father meet-ups would work well, especially for word-of-mouth.

5.5 Limits of Research and Future Direction:

5.5.1. Reflecting on the Journey

This research began with a question rooted in urgency and hope: *How might play help mitigate the impacts of the masculinity crisis?* Through a multi-method approach involving literature review, surveys, participatory workshops, and case studies, we explored how informal public play—especially between fathers and sons—can reshape early gendered socialization, support emotional expression, and create meaningful opportunities for community connection.

Our key finding is that play is not trivial—it is political, emotional, and profoundly social. When we allow children to lead in play and invite fathers into those moments, we begin to shift the cultural

scripts that define masculinity in limiting ways, which is also reiterated through our limited scoped workshop. Sidewalks, often overlooked in urban planning, became symbolic and literal platforms for emotional growth, intergenerational bonding, and neighborhood revitalization.

5.5.2 Designing with Intention

The development of *Play Sparks in a Cart!* and its accompanying digital platform is more than a toolkit—it is a speculative intervention aimed at transforming how we relate to gender, caregiving, and public space. It invites caregivers, particularly fathers, to engage differently with their sons, communities, and themselves. By activating sidewalks and everyday objects as tools for play, this project reclaims underutilized spaces and reimagines their potential for social transformation as well as putting meaning to mundane spaces and leverage them to build a well-connected community.

5.5.3 Limits of Reach

While our playkit and platform were designed with accessibility and adaptability in mind, we recognize the limitations in reaching all populations equally. The recruitment for our workshop relied heavily on personal networks, which likely resulted in a sample with shared socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. As such, our insights may not fully reflect the needs, preferences, or lived experiences of more marginalized or resource-limited families. We also recognize that the sample size was taken from the urban population of Toronto that further limits our scope.

Digital access is another constraint. Although the online platform is a key component of our intervention, it assumes access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy—resources not evenly distributed across all communities. This digital divide can prevent some caregivers, especially those from low-income or immigrant households, from fully engaging with the toolkit and the community-building features of the website.

Cultural differences in parenting styles and gender norms may also affect how play, emotional openness, and fatherhood are perceived and practiced. What may feel liberating and inclusive in one context could feel unfamiliar or inappropriate in another. Future expansions of this project must include culturally responsive outreach strategies and opportunities for community co-design, particularly with fathers, to ensure broader relevance and inclusion.

While our research draws from diverse sources and methodologies, there are inherent limitations. Our findings are based primarily on existing literature, subject matter expert interviews, case studies, and small-scale participant feedback rather than large-scale, long-term empirical studies. The small sample size and localized nature of our participatory workshop limit the generalizability of our conclusions.

Although this project centers on the role of fathers in encouraging pro-social behavior through play, further research is necessary to assess the direct impact of these interventions on mitigating the masculinity crisis. As highlighted by Kuskoff et al. (2023), engaging fathers is essential to addressing this issue, but there is still a gap in understanding how these engagements translate into long-term behavioral and emotional shifts. We believe that measuring the outcomes of pro-social behaviors through play will be instrumental in demonstrating how empathy, connection, and new models of masculinity can be developed across generations.

Moreover, cultural and socioeconomic differences may influence how caregivers engage with the playkit. Accessibility, cultural norms, and household structures all play a role in how well this intervention is received and implemented. For this reason, future iterations of *Play Sparks* should include localized adaptations, co-designed with community members from diverse backgrounds and tested out in various neighbourhoods. There may be a chance of new findings around various types of free play while co-creating with multicultural families.

To build on this initial research, future studies should include pilot programs in multiple neighborhoods, longitudinal data collection, and partnerships with local schools, libraries, and municipal bodies. Real-world testing will be critical in refining both the physical playkit and the digital platform, ensuring they meet the needs of families from various contexts.

By validating these tools through broader empirical research, we can continue to advocate for play as a vital strategy in shaping healthier, more connected masculinities.

For future areas of research, here is what we are putting forward:

- **Large-scale, long-term studies** on the relationship between outdoor play and its impact on the masculinity crisis

Investigating the role of fathers in play and how their involvement influences childhood development and perceptions of masculinity.

- **Understanding the barriers to father-child play engagement** across different socioeconomic, cultural, and family structures.

- **Determining critical age ranges, age-specific needs and vulnerabilities** in boys' development to better tailor interventions—particularly identifying when connections to fathers and community begin to strengthen, weaken, or shift.

- **Exploring shifting cultural views on masculinity** and their psychological and social effects on boys and men.

- **Assessing the long-term effects of digital media and screen-based play** on boys' emotional resilience, social skills, and identity formation.

  Conducting pilot programs and real-world testing of *Play Sparks in a Cart!* to measure its impact on family bonding, pro-social behavior, and community engagement.

  Examining the role of public spaces in impacting positive masculinity and whether access to unstructured, collaborative play environments affects boys' self-expression and relationships.

- **Exploring community-based models for sustaining play initiatives** and scaling play-based solutions to reach more families.

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Chapter 6: Conclusion - Towards a Brighter Future

Through this project, we investigated the depth of the masculinity crisis and came out knowing that we needed ways to spark meaningful discussions around healthy masculinity. Awareness of the depth that the crisis reaches and its impact on our boys is a key priority for us. With the release of Netflix's *Adolescence* co-created and written by Stephen Graham and Jack Thorne*,* we are optimistic that awareness is being brought to the forefront, especially for caregivers. Culture writers Aramide Tinubu and Amil Niazi raise the following points about *Adolescence*, "...what is so important here and what really lends to the tension, but also the range of emotion that you feel, is because you have to empathize with this young boy and his family. You have to see him as normal. You have to see him as someone that could be your child in order for you to understand the gravity of what's happening to these young men...No, they're trying to tell you: adults are not in the know. And I love that, from the cops to the dad to the mom, none of the adults are aware of what's going on in these kids' lives. And I think that's very accurate" (Wex, 2025). This sentiment echoes what we feel is most urgent about the masculinity crisis - that as caregivers, we need to be more aware and that this is happening to so many boys in our society.

The need to speak about building communities, where every gender is respected and thrives, has started to surface in many conversations. The Democracy Exchange 2025 session workshop was held in Canada, bringing together professionals from diverse backgrounds for a co-creation session focused on envisioning Canada's democracy in 2035. The central theme focused on empowering people at a community level, building meaningful relationships to mobilize knowledge and creating spaces where communities can thrive. One key topic that emerged was the rise of male groups forming within communities, as more men actively seek out connection and belonging. These discussions highlighted a growing desire to mend the social fabric by addressing its missing links. Overall, the conversations reflected how Canadians are imagining a more inclusive, cohesive future where voices are uplifted, and communities are strengthened.

Through the questions we asked and the insights we gathered from caregivers, the most notable issue is that while we are beginning to recognize the crisis many boys and men face, we are collectively called to imagine a better, more inclusive future for all children. Awareness is growing—but awareness alone is not enough. We must go deeper, interrogating and dismantling the roots of the problem. Only then can we approach solutions collaboratively and intentionally.

Neighborhood play offers a meaningful entry point—bringing communities together, strengthening connections, and empowering those who often have the least formal power, yet the greatest potential to shape change. But to truly shift the system, efforts must extend across every level of society. As researchers, parents, and community members, we are left with one essential question: *how might we listen more deeply to our boys—and let them lead the way?* The path forward starts not with answers, but with our willingness to listen, stay curious and co-create ways of being together.