

**A conversation toolkit for
parents, teachers and youth workers.**

A resource from YMCA Cardiff:
Healthy Relationships Service (SHOT)



Supporting Boys and Young Men in the Digital Age

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Creating safe spaces for conversations

This toolkit is designed to help the adults in boys' lives — parents, carers, teachers and youth workers — better understand the pressures young men face today and how to support conversations about respectful relationships, consent, emotional wellbeing (such as anxiety and depression) and healthy masculinity.

Growing up has always come with challenges, but in today's society many boys are also navigating strong opinions on social media. Online platforms, communities and influencers can encourage misogyny and negative ideas about masculinity, success and relationships.

Equally, boys and young men often feel pressure to appear stereotypically masculine, i.e. physically strong, confident and unemotional; even when they may be struggling and are looking for guidance.

This resource is not about blaming boys and young men.

Most want to do the right thing but may feel unsure how to navigate the expectations placed on them. When given safe spaces to speak candidly, discuss and reflect, many are open to questioning harmful stereotypes and supporting one another in healthy ways, even encourage their peers to challenge negative opinions or unhealthy behaviours.

This toolkit aims to help adults have open, supportive conversations that encourage empathy, compassion, confidence and respect — helping boys grow into young men who feel comfortable being themselves and support their peers.

Creating safe spaces for conversations

Today, boys and young men are navigating complex expectations about masculinity, relationships and success.

Workshop discussions with boys aged 11–18 across Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan revealed that:

Online influencers shape negative attitudes about wealth, masculinity, and women.

Boys feel pressure to hide emotions.

Peer pressure discourages challenging harmful behaviour.

Many boys feel confused about respectful relationships.

Positive insight

When given safe spaces to talk, boys showed strong willingness to rethink harmful ideas and support each other, even challenge their peers opinions and behaviours.

Behind the behaviour: pressures boys experience

Many boys described:

Pressure to appear physically strong and emotionally tough.

Fear of being mocked for kindness.

Confusion about healthy relationships, romantic or otherwise.

Stigma around mental health.

Lack of empathy for girls' and women's lived experiences'.
Some boys said peers are called "simp", "cuck", "beta" "gay" simply for being kind or supportive.

Sometimes difficult language or attitudes may come from:

Insecurity

Fear of social exclusion

Repeated online messaging

Inability to appear vulnerable

Lack of support for open conversations



**Creating safe spaces
to talk helps boys reflect
on these pressures.**

Boy's voices

These quotes show what boys are hearing and repeating, not necessarily what they deeply believe.

Example quotes:

“Depression is not real. It’s like believing in ghosts.”

“Andrew Tate is my biggest inspiration.”

“Even if the woman earned more money, she should stay home with the kids.”

“Boys get called gay for being nice.”

“Women are more likely to cheat.”

“When I think about women, I think of OnlyFans.”

“Statistically most women want their husband to earn more money than them.”

“You don’t want your girlfriend going out in revealing clothing because other men will look at her.”

“Women are more emotionally intelligent but men are better at everything.”

“Men have to be in control of their emotions, girls are allowed to cry.”

Growing up online

Understanding influencer culture: Boys frequently encounter influencers through streaming platforms i.e. TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and various gaming platforms.

Influencers can shape beliefs about:

Success

Masculinity

Fitness / body image

Relationships

Views on women

Why is influencer content so powerful? Influencers often:

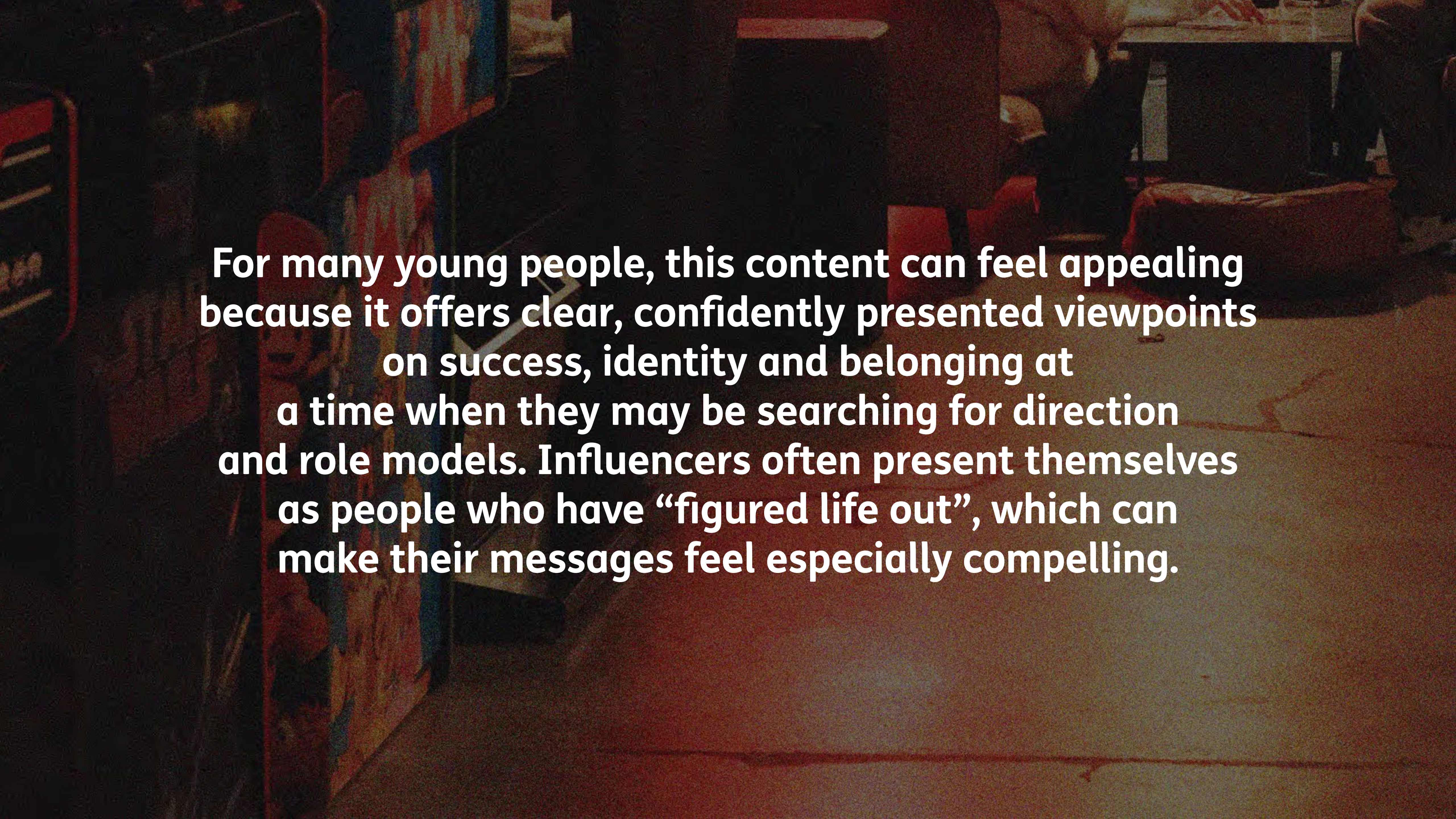
Speak confidently

Present extreme opinions as “truth”

Display luxury lifestyles

Mix motivational advice with controversial views

Promoting wealth and power

A dimly lit room with a red and blue striped wall. In the background, there is a table with chairs. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

For many young people, this content can feel appealing because it offers clear, confidently presented viewpoints on success, identity and belonging at a time when they may be searching for direction and role models. Influencers often present themselves as people who have “figured life out”, which can make their messages feel especially compelling.

Encouraging digital literacy

You don't need to know every influencer — focus on teaching critical thinking and reflection.

Encourage young people to pause and analyse what they see, how it influences and impacts their daily lives, rather than passively consuming content. Watch the content together so you can demonstrate this critical consumption and have active discussions about how it makes them feel.

“What do you like about that creator?”

“Do you think their life is realistic?”

“What do you agree or disagree with?”

“How does this content make you feel about yourself or others?”

“Who benefits if people believe this message?”

“How could the humour still be harmful?”

“How could we fact check what they are saying?”

Algorithms and media influence

Social media platforms promote content that gets strong reactions, sometimes exaggerating or distorting reality. Algorithms can gradually push more extreme or narrow views over time.

Encourage awareness that trending or frequently seen or 'For you page' content does not equal truth or popularity in real life.

Critical media skills:

Help them to fact-check information using reputable sources. Highlight the difference between entertainment, opinion, and factual content and help them recognise manipulative tactics, like exaggeration, fear, or peer pressure.

Role-modelling:

Share your own thought process when evaluating media ("I saw this video and questioned whether it was accurate because..."). Try to normalise changing opinions when presented with new information.

Language to listen out for

Certain phrases may signal exposure to harmful online narratives.

About women:

“Females should be submissive.”

“Girls shouldn’t do certain jobs or sports.”

“All girls do OnlyFans.”

“Women lie about rape.”

About relationships:

“A girlfriend shouldn’t go out without her boyfriend.”

“Men should control relationships.”

“Girls are more likely to cheat.”

“The more toxic the better.”

Language to listen out for

Hearing these phrases doesn't mean a young person is set in these beliefs but noticing them early gives you a chance to guide conversations and encourage healthier attitudes.

About masculinity:

“Real men don't cry.”

Calling someone a “simp”, “beta”, “gay” for being kind.

Belief that you have to be extremely good looking/strong/rich to find a partner.

About mental health:

“Depression isn't real.”

“Therapy is weak.”

“Boys can't talk about their feelings.”

Starting conversations

The goal is discussion, not confrontation.

About masculinity:

“What does being a ‘man’ mean to you?”

“What qualities are important to be a man?”

About influencers:

“Who do you follow online?”

“Why do you follow them?”

About relationships:

“What does respect in a relationship look like?”

“How can we help build respectful relationships?”

About mental health:

“Do boys talk about feelings much in your school?”

“Do you have a friend that you can speak to if you are feeling low?”

“Do you think your friend could speak to you if they were upset about something?”



Tip

**Listen first.
Curiosity builds trust.**

Positive masculinity role models

Boys benefit from seeing a myriad of ways to be a strong, supportive and compassionate man.

Examples:

Marcus Rashford – community advocacy and compassion

Stormzy – supports education and youth opportunity

David Attenborough

Dr Alex George

Jordan Stephens

Terry Crews

Joe Marler

Hank Green

Bukayo Saka

Local positive role models e.g. Boxers like Joe Cordinia, Lee Selby

A person is holding a smartphone in their right hand. In the foreground, a hand is holding a pen over a notebook. The background is slightly blurred, showing a person's face and another hand holding a smartphone. The overall scene suggests a focus on technology and communication.

Activity idea

Ask young people:

“Which men do you admire and why?”

“What makes someone a good role model?”

When concerning views appear

If a young person expresses harmful ideas:

**Avoid confrontation.
Instead ask...**

“Where did you hear that?”

“Do you think everyone would agree?”

“Could we find a reliable source of evidence for that?” Encourage critical thinking.

**Encourage empathy.
Ask...**

“How might someone feel hearing that?”

“Could that cause harm to someone?”

**Offer alternative perspectives.
Use examples from real life.**

When to seek support

Warning signs may include:

Extreme hostility toward girls or women.

Obsessive influencer content.

Rigid beliefs about male dominance.

Social isolation.

Conspiracy theory obsession.

Belief that they are 'owed' sex / sexual activity.

If concerns escalate:

1. Speak calmly with the young person.

2. Encourage discussion and early-intervention.

3. Involve school or youth workers.

4. Seek professional guidance.

Support organisations include:

YMCA Cardiff: Healthy Relationship Service (SHOT)

Sound

Children in Wales: Parenting support and services in Wales

Meic Cymru

Childline. Children's Rights Advice and Assistance Team.
Children's Commissioner for Wales

ManKind

Cardiff Youth Service

Samaritans Cymru

NSPCC

Ask a Mate

White Ribbon

Relate

Talk Listen Change

Vale Youth Service

Wales Without Violence

YMCA

CARDIFF