Making Connections: Houston



The Houston Health Department is one of the few local health departments in the country with an office focused on adolescent health. The Bureau of Youth and Adolescent Health operates to support positive youth development and focuses on the health and wellbeing of young men and boys of color in particular. Their work with this population takes many forms, including mutually supportive initiatives like Making Connections and My Brother's Keeper (MBK).

Making space for youth voices–their ideas, experiences, opinions, knowledge, and actions–has been a guiding principle of the Bureau since its inception. To the department, the Making Connections initiative is about helping young boys and men of color understand that they get to define what it means to be a man according to their own values, rather than having it defined by others or the culture at large. "Youth are the subject experts, they're living the topics, and they're aware of what's going on amongst themselves and amongst their peers," says Melissa Bing, Management Analyst at the Bureau.

Recognizing that adolescence is a critical time period where behaviors are formed that frequently carry over to adulthood, these initiatives meet the young men where they are, with the goal of instilling healthy norms. The Making Connections initiative in Houston embarked on a journey to develop and facilitate a series of conversations on the topics of healthy relationships, unhealthy norms around masculinity and alternative models for healthy masculinity, and teen dating violence. These conversations provided the young men and boys with an opportunity to explore these topics and voice their own experiences. While MBK focuses on entering school ready to learn, reading at grade level by third grade, graduating from high school ready for college and career, completing post-secondary education or training, successfully entering the workforce, and reducing crime and violence and providing a second chance, Making Connections explores the mental health and wellbeing of boys and young men. Taken together, these programs form the backbone of the Bureau's work with boys and young men.

Making Connections and MBK were further able to align initiatives through a focus on youth violence prevention. Through discussion groups with young men and boys of color, the health department noticed that conceptions of masculinity and the role masculinity plays in youth violence and teen dating violence was never discussed. While the department had success in

engaging youth on the topic of violence in general, youth engagement waned when it came to teen dating violence. This prompted the Making Connections initiative to ask: what does teen dating violence look like to a young man of color and what roles does masculinity play? Many of the young men in subsequent discussion groups lacked understanding and examples of healthy relationships and subsequently based their ideas on pop culture and media depictions that often portray unhealth relationship dynamics. While discussing the ubiquity of teen dating violence, many of the youth recognized instances of dating violence in their school. For many of the young men, this was an opportunity to make a connection between what they saw and experienced, which had been normalized at school and in other settings and often was not regarded as a form of violence.

The Making Connections team at the Houston Health Department wants to create a guide that other agencies and communities can use to facilitate open dialogues with young men around positive models of masculinity. The work in Houston has opened up conversations that enable young men and boys of color to delve deeper on topics that they often haven't had the opportunity to explore at great length. The Making Connections Initiative in Houston is providing youth with a solid foundation so that they can embrace positive models of masculinity that support their mental health and wellbeing, and build healthy relationships