

# BoysTown: A Systems Approach to Building Emotional Health

by Gayle Hardie & Malcolm Lazenby

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BoysTown, established in 1961 by the De La Salle Brothers, is a boy's residential school in Queensland, Australia. While it has changed how it delivers its care over the years, its commitment firmly remains to provide support for the most disadvantaged young people in our society. BoysTown's mission is to enable young people, especially those marginalised and without a voice, to improve their quality of life.

Global Leadership Foundation received a phone call from the director of one of their facilities where they were working with reuniting and reconnecting dysfunctional families (e.g., refugees where the children and parents had been separated for lengthy periods of time) as well as children who were not functioning well within general education, home, and community settings.

The director saw a real opportunity to build and strengthen emotional resilience with these children and their families in order to assist them in being able to more capably function in the broader community. In order to achieve that, the director believed that the entire staff also needed to build their own emotional health and resilience. It wasn't just the caregivers, psychologists, and counsellors she had in mind; it was everyone who came in contact with the children and families. So this included the gardeners, maintenance people, cleaners, and office staff as well. She wanted all of them to be in a position of being emotionally resilient, leading by example and also knowing what to do to actually help the children. Many of them were engaged in informal conversations with the children and their families during the day, so she considered their work just as important to the ongoing well being of the whole community.

It was very clear that many of the children were in the lower emotional health levels and were quite traumatised. The director and staff had a strong focus on getting the children back in touch with their "instinct" centre and had a number of processes to help them reconnect and "ground" themselves in their environment. She decided that it would be good for everyone to better understand how they could encourage movement for these children and their families into the average emotional health level range of emotional development, and she felt that using the Enneagram was the way to achieve that.

We were invited to work with all the staff, building their capability and knowledge related to emotional health and resilience and using the Enneagram as a basis for the workshops. It was amazing to see how well people responded. A man in his 60s (the maintenance man) said that he wouldn't have done this for himself; however, if it would help the boys, he would do it and he became absolutely committed to learning and better understanding himself. Another staff member (the cleaner), who herself had come from one of the domestic

violence units, was able to share stories from her own life that illustrated how she had allowed others to provide greater levels of support to her and how she grew stronger in her own confidence over time.

However, the most significant benefit of the 12 months we worked with the group was in the way the staff described what their own Enneagram journey meant for them and how they were able to use this knowledge to help the children and families. They were more able to understand others of all Enneagram styles and emotional health levels, and they were able to lead by example, demonstrating this through their own behaviours, their interactions with one another at work, and by their increased emotional resilience.