



HEROES
ACADEMY

BREAKING CYCLES OF VIOLENCE:

Why Investing in Boys Is Essential
for South Africa's Future



**It is easier to build
strong children than
to repair broken men.**

- Frederick Douglass



PROLOGUE



**Recognising
this reality
is not an
argument
against
investing in
girls.**

South Africa faces a crisis that cannot be solved through policing, legislation, or crisis response alone.

Despite decades of progress, South Africa continues to experience some of the highest rates of interpersonal violence and gender-based violence (GBV) globally. Violence affects homes, schools, communities, and future generations and remains one of the country's greatest social and economic burdens.

Research increasingly shows that **violence rarely begins in adulthood**. Many of the factors associated with later violence emerge much earlier through childhood and adolescence: exposure to trauma, chronic adversity, emotional dysregulation, harmful social norms, educational disengagement, and the absence of stable supportive relationships.

In South Africa, **approximately 42% of children experience some form of maltreatment**—including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or neglect. While childhood experiences do not determine outcomes, they significantly shape developmental pathways and increase vulnerability to poor mental health, school disengagement, behavioural challenges, and future violence.

Alongside this, South Africa faces another challenge that receives less attention: **many boys are struggling**.



Evidence suggests boys are increasingly falling behind girls educationally. Boys are more likely to repeat grades, disengage from learning, and leave school before completion. Although similar numbers of boys and girls enter school, by Grade 12 there are approximately 100,000 more girls remaining in the education system.

Recognising this reality is not an argument against investing in girls.

Sustainable gender equality and violence prevention require investment in both girls and boys.

This becomes more urgent when viewed alongside another defining feature of South African society: **father absence.**

According to the State of South Africa's Fathers Report, only



around one-third of children live with their biological fathers. Father absence does not mean absence of love—many mothers, grandmothers, caregivers, and communities raise children heroically. However, research consistently shows that boys benefit significantly from access to caring, consistent adult male figures who model emotional regulation, accountability, identity, and healthy masculinity.

If these challenges are so significant, why has government not solved them?

The answer is not lack of effort—it is complexity and scale.

Schools are expected to educate. Social workers manage overwhelming caseloads. Healthcare responds after harm occurs. Criminal justice intervenes after violence has already happened.



Prevention often falls into the gap between systems.

This is where civil society becomes essential.

Organisations can build trust, create safe spaces, work consistently with communities, and remain present long enough to influence behaviour and identity.

Heroes Academy South Africa was created to fill this prevention gap.

Our approach recognises that there are no quick fixes.



**Behavioural
change takes
time.**

**Generational
change takes
longer.**



For this reason, Heroes Academy works through three integrated pillars that address root causes rather than symptoms.

PILLAR 1: Mentorship Programme

Heroes Academy's mentorship programme is based on a simple principle:

Before we expect boys to become healthy men, responsible fathers, productive workers, and peaceful community members, we must help them develop the internal skills needed to succeed.

Through structured weekly workshops, boys build socio-emotional and cognitive competencies including:



These are not simply “soft skills.”

They are protective factors.

One of the strongest bodies of evidence supporting this approach comes from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, which followed more than 1,000 children over three decades.

Researchers found that childhood self-control was one of the strongest predictors of adult outcomes—including physical health, educational attainment, financial stability, lower substance dependence, and reduced criminal behaviour—even after controlling for intelligence and socioeconomic status.



Importantly, outcomes improved progressively: children with stronger self-regulation consistently achieved better life outcomes.

Researchers concluded that strengthening self-control in childhood may reduce long-term societal costs and improve public wellbeing.

This has profound implications for South Africa.

If violence, school dropout, substance abuse, unemployment, and instability are partly influenced by deficits in self-regulation and socio-emotional development, prevention cannot begin in adulthood.



It must begin while boys are still forming their identities.

At Heroes Academy, mentorship is not about keeping boys occupied after school.

It is deliberate developmental work.

Every session is designed to strengthen the capacities that matter most across a lifetime: managing emotions, delaying gratification, thinking critically, resolving conflict peacefully, making responsible decisions, and building healthy relationships.

Because a boy who learns self-regulation today is more likely to become a man who contributes positively tomorrow.



“

Life outcomes are not determined by chance, but by the skills developed in childhood.

”

PILLAR 2:

Psychosocial Support

Helping Boys Move from Survival to Growth

There is a saying in trauma-informed education:



**You cannot learn
your times tables
while being chased
by a lion.**

For many children growing up in vulnerable communities, the lion may not be visible—but their brains and bodies respond as though danger is always nearby.

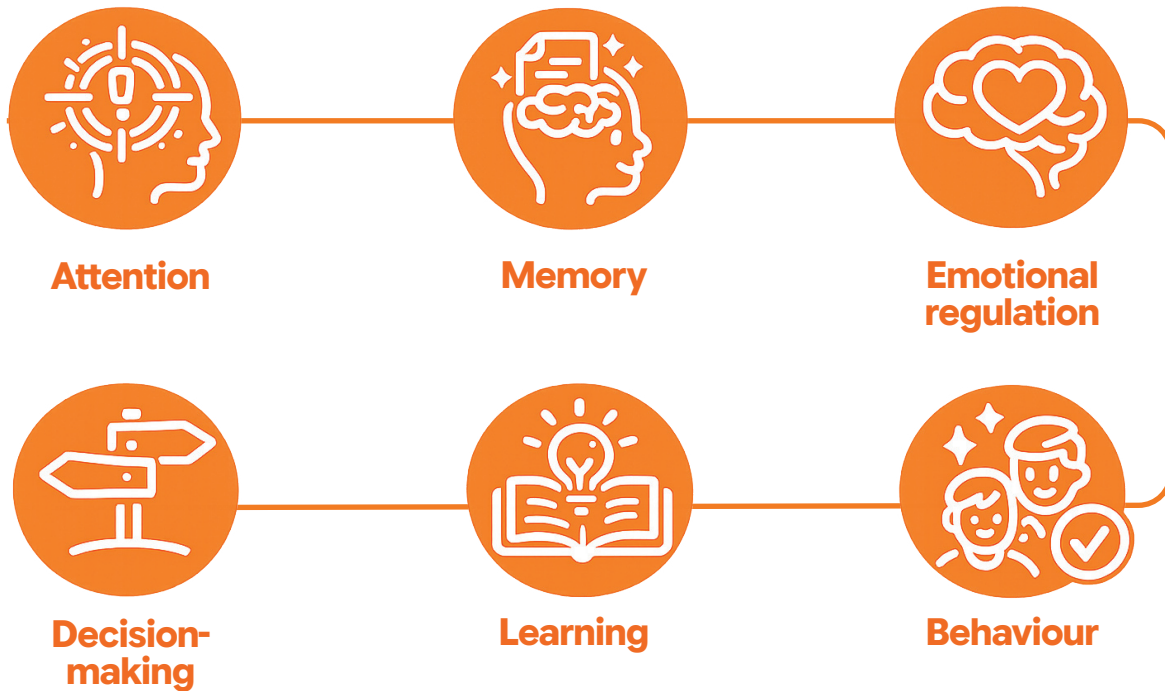
Exposure to violence, instability, neglect, chronic stress, grief, poverty, abuse, or uncertainty can keep a child's stress system in constant survival mode.

When this happens, the brain prioritises survival over learning.

Research describes this as **toxic stress**—prolonged activation of the body's stress response without sufficient supportive relationships to buffer its effects.



Over time, toxic stress interferes with:



A traumatised child may sit in class but struggle to absorb information—not because they are unwilling or incapable, but because their nervous system is asking a more urgent question:

“Am I safe?”

Research shows children experiencing trauma often struggle with concentration, organisation, emotional control, impulse management, and school engagement.

Their energy becomes directed toward surviving rather than growing.

This changes how we understand boys’ behaviour.

Disengagement, aggression, poor concentration, withdrawal, or academic struggles are often not signs of laziness or defiance.

There may be signs of overwhelm.

This is why psychosocial support is an integral part of Heroes Academy.

Our approach has two goals:

1. Stop the lion from chasing.

Through safe spaces, trusted relationships, early identification, referrals, emotional support, and psychosocial services, we work to reduce the pressures preventing boys from engaging fully in life and learning.

2. Teach boys how to keep moving when life remains difficult.

Through emotional literacy, coping skills, reflection, self-awareness, and self-regulation, boys learn to understand emotions, recognise triggers, manage responses, and recover from setbacks.

Research consistently shows that supportive relationships with caring adults are among the strongest protective factors against the harmful effects of toxic stress.



“

**A boy cannot
grow when he
is focused on
surviving.**

”



PILLAR 3:

Academic Support

Keeping Boys Connected to Opportunity

Academic support at Heroes Academy is not simply an education intervention.

It is a violence prevention and long-term development strategy.

While mentorship and psychosocial support are essential, sustainable upliftment becomes significantly harder when a young person disconnects from education.

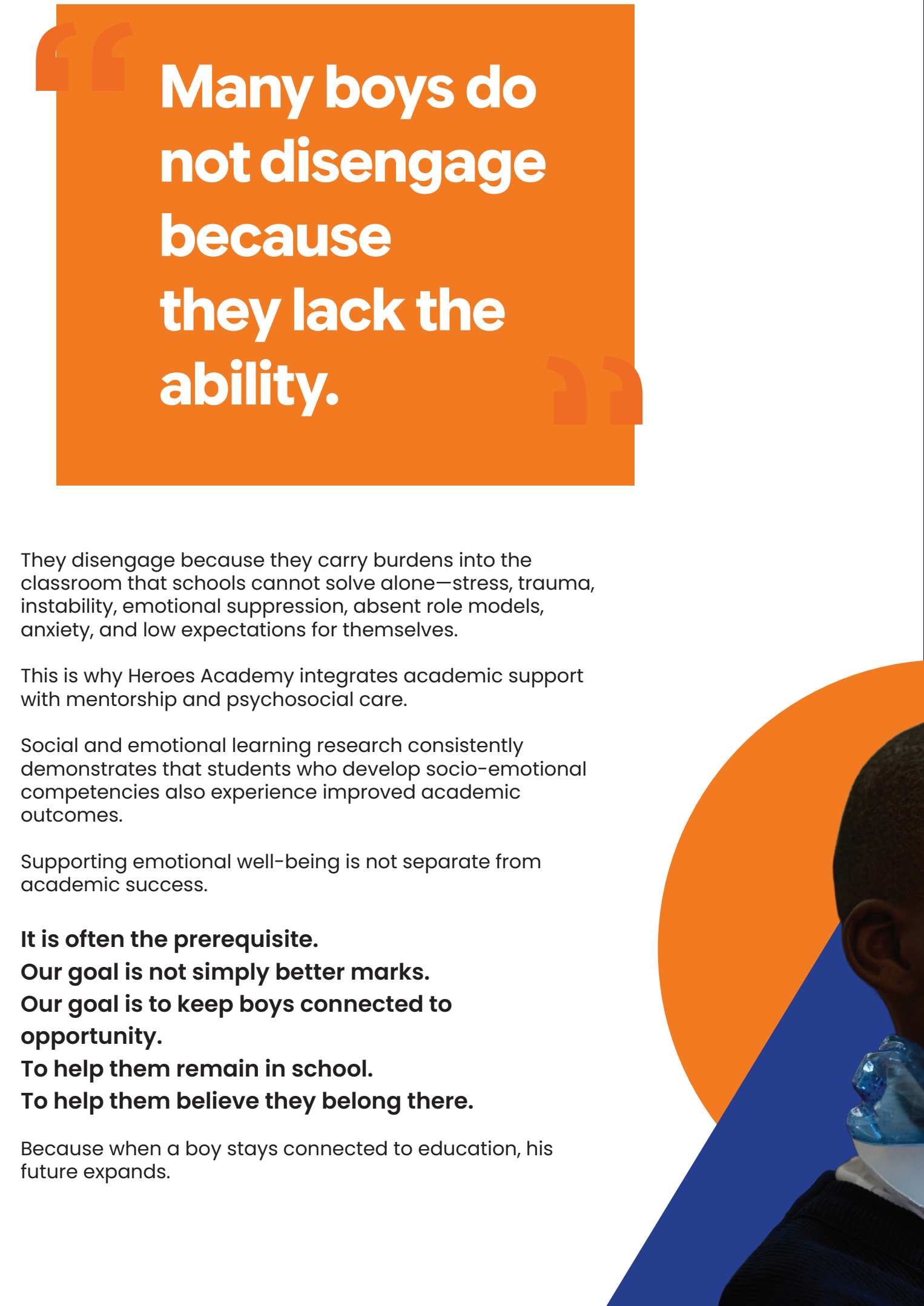
Education remains one of the strongest protective factors against poverty, unemployment, exclusion, and future vulnerability.

Young people who remain engaged in school are more likely to experience:

- **Better health outcomes**
- **Higher lifetime earnings**
- **Greater civic participation**
- **Lower criminal involvement**
- **Increased long-term stability**

But educational success is not driven by intelligence alone.

Research consistently shows that academic performance is deeply connected to emotional well-being, self-belief, relationships, and access to support.

A large orange rectangular graphic containing a quote in white text. To the right of the orange box, there is a partial view of a young boy's profile, showing his head and shoulder. He is wearing a blue shirt and has a blue, translucent, bubble-like object near his mouth. The background behind the boy is a solid blue color.

**Many boys do
not disengage
because
they lack the
ability.**

They disengage because they carry burdens into the classroom that schools cannot solve alone—stress, trauma, instability, emotional suppression, absent role models, anxiety, and low expectations for themselves.

This is why Heroes Academy integrates academic support with mentorship and psychosocial care.

Social and emotional learning research consistently demonstrates that students who develop socio-emotional competencies also experience improved academic outcomes.

Supporting emotional well-being is not separate from academic success.

It is often the prerequisite.

Our goal is not simply better marks.

Our goal is to keep boys connected to opportunity.

To help them remain in school.

To help them believe they belong there.

Because when a boy stays connected to education, his future expands.



Why Investing in Boys Strengthens Outcomes for Everyone

Investment in girls and women remains essential and non-negotiable.

But meaningful social progress is not achieved by supporting one side of society in isolation.

Healthy societies require both girls and boys to thrive.

Across South Africa, many boys are growing up at the intersection of poverty, violence exposure, educational disengagement, father absence, and limited access to positive male role models.

Too often, systems engage boys only once they become visible through behavioural problems, crime, or school failure.

By then, intervention is more difficult and more expensive.

If we want safer communities, healthier families, lower violence, stronger education outcomes, and more equitable relationships, we must begin earlier.

Research increasingly shows that boys who develop socio-emotional skills, supportive relationships, and healthy identity formation are more likely to:

- **stay engaged in school;**
- **complete secondary education;**
- **transition into work or further study;**
- **demonstrate lower levels of aggression;**
- **build healthier relationships;**
- **become engaged fathers;**
- **experience improved mental health;**
- **contribute positively to communities.**



The benefits extend far beyond individual boys.

When a boy learns emotional regulation, his future partner benefits.

When a boy stays in school, his future children benefit.

When a boy learns empathy and accountability, violence prevention becomes possible.

When a boy becomes an engaged father, an entire generation benefits.

Investing in boys is not an alternative to gender equality.

It is one of the pathways to achieving it.

At Heroes Academy, we believe prevention starts early.

A boy who learns emotional regulation becomes a man less likely to use violence.

A boy who remains in school becomes a father with greater opportunity.

A boy who experiences healthy mentorship becomes a future mentor himself.

**This is how cycles change.
One generation at a time.**

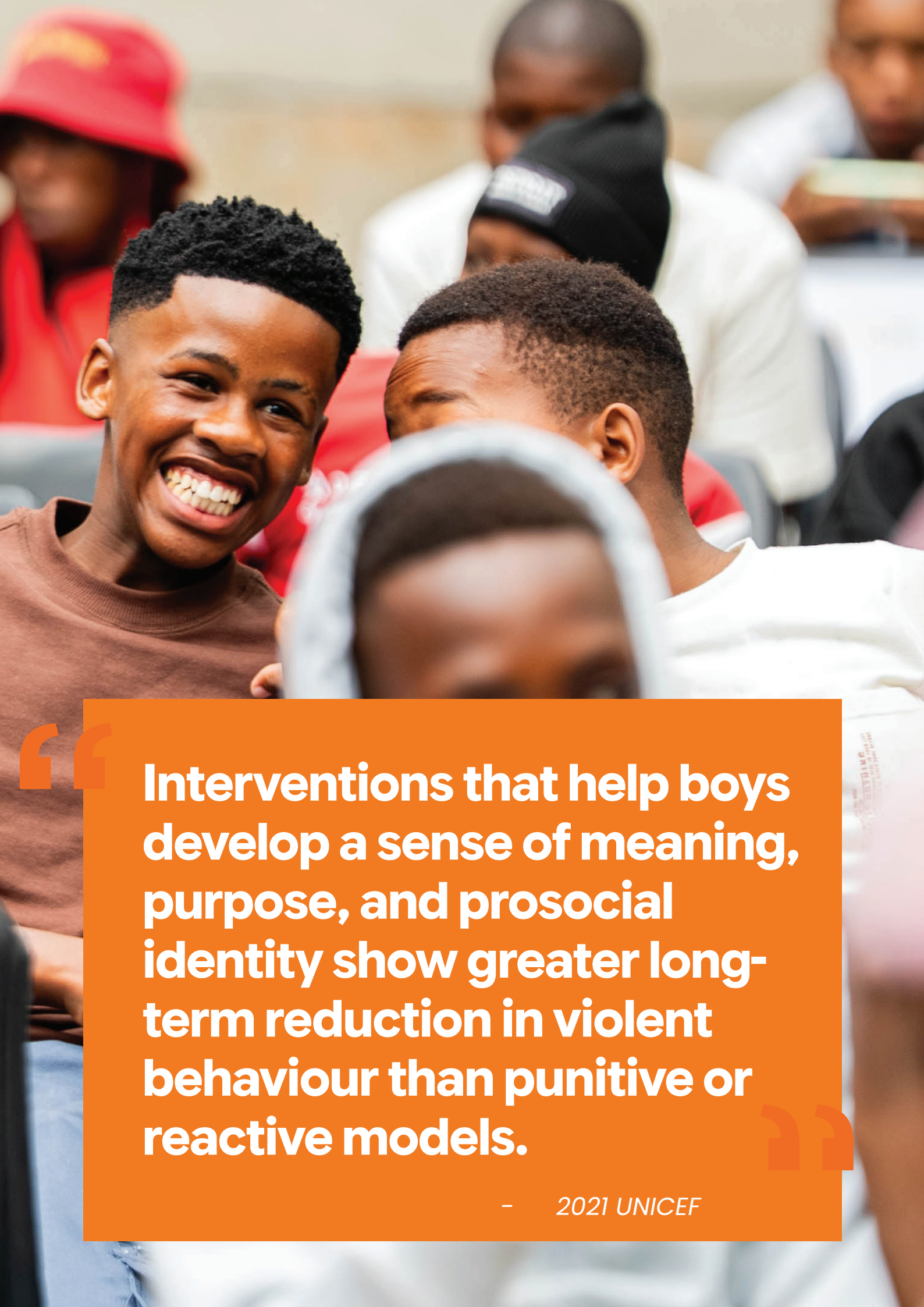


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“Interventions that help boys develop a sense of meaning, purpose, and prosocial identity show greater long-term reduction in violent behaviour than punitive or reactive models.”

– 2021 UNICEF



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