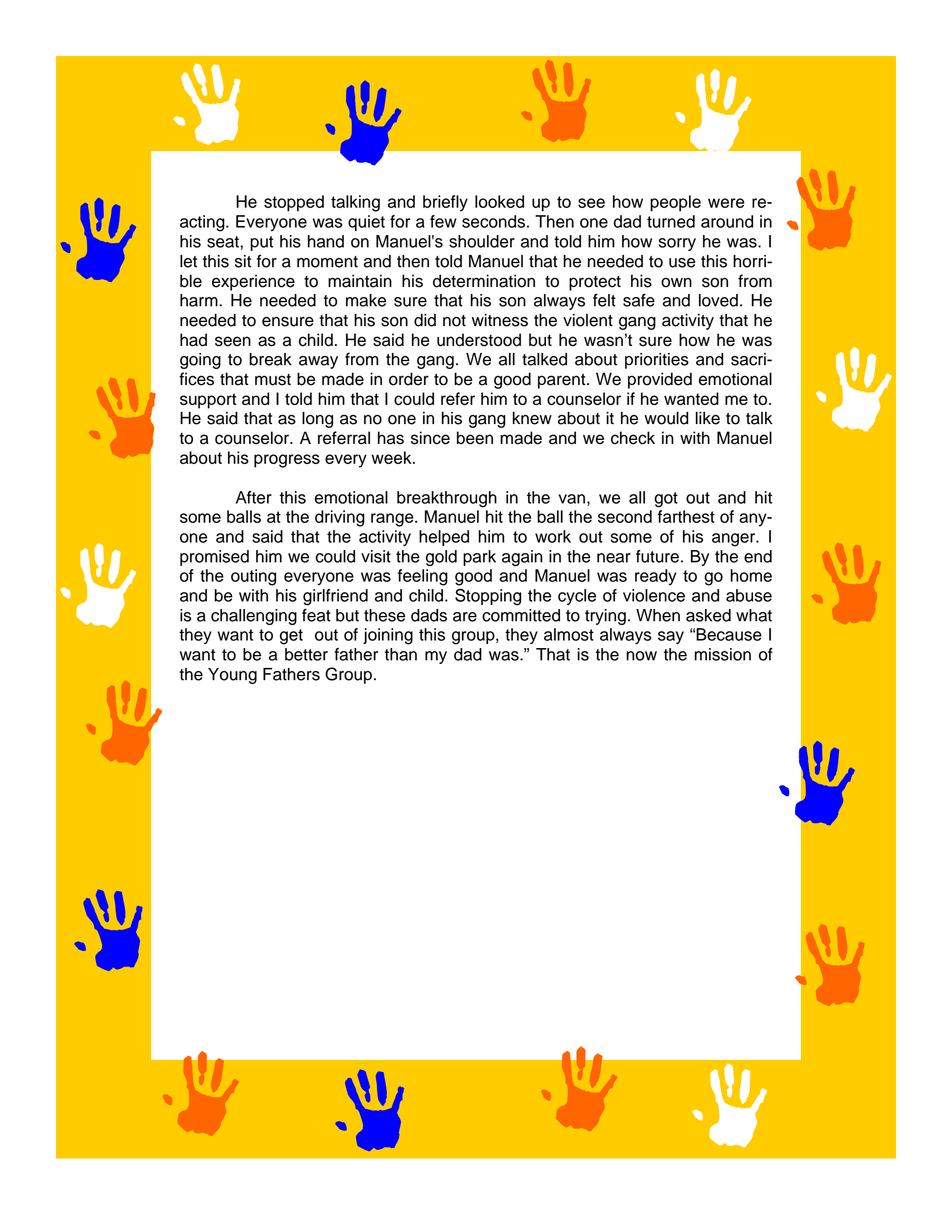




### A Vignette by Young Parents Support Services

We were running late for dads group one night because pickups were taking longer than expected. To make up for lost time we decided to have a discussion in the van on the way to our outing at the driving range. I was asking the dads to share methods that they use to relieve stress; healthy or unhealthy, legal or illegal. The dads were very open and honest, allowing for the discussion to be lead to yet another objective. We talked about how some of these behaviors could potentially impact their relationship with their children as well as the development of their children. We talked about the risk of impairment of good judgment as a result of drug use. We talked about the negative impact that witnessing violence has on children. One dad told the group that when he got angry at his girlfriend he wanted to leave the house to avoid getting violent with her. Everyone supported this idea. He was not satisfied though. He told us that he was afraid that if he left his baby alone with the girlfriend while he went to cool off she may hurt herself or the baby in order to punish him. I told him that if she ever hurts, or even threatens to hurt their baby he would need to report her to CPS. He looked at me and shouted "F\*ck CPS!" I asked him if he would like to share his feelings regarding CPS with the group. He was quiet for a moment and then proceeded to disclose an incredibly heart-wrenching story. Keep in mind that this young dad has been bragging about his dad since day one. Manuel is in a gang, as are all of his brothers, as is his own father. He has told the group how tough and powerful his dad is, how he wants to be just like him. But this day it became clear how hurt and confused this young man really is.

Manuel had himself tucked into a corner of the van. His body was turned towards the other group members but his eyes were focused on the hands on his lap. As he looked down he told his story in a quiet voice, timid yet angry. When Manuel was a child his father used to beat him up and throw him outside. Manuel put up with it for years. After one of the worst beatings he had received yet, Manuel walked himself across town to the police station. He walked in, bruised and bleeding. He told officers that his dad had beat him up and that he did not want to go back home. The officers told him that according to CPS, his only alternative to returning home was to stay in juvenile hall. So the cops drove him home and dropped him off. Manuel's dad threatened to have him "taken care of" by gang members if he ever pulled a stunt like that again. Even if CPS had followed up with Manuel, he would not have said anything. But they didn't. No one ever contacted him or checked up on him. He said that that was the time in his life that he learned that he had to give in to the gang in order to be safe in his world.



He stopped talking and briefly looked up to see how people were reacting. Everyone was quiet for a few seconds. Then one dad turned around in his seat, put his hand on Manuel's shoulder and told him how sorry he was. I let this sit for a moment and then told Manuel that he needed to use this horrible experience to maintain his determination to protect his own son from harm. He needed to make sure that his son always felt safe and loved. He needed to ensure that his son did not witness the violent gang activity that he had seen as a child. He said he understood but he wasn't sure how he was going to break away from the gang. We all talked about priorities and sacrifices that must be made in order to be a good parent. We provided emotional support and I told him that I could refer him to a counselor if he wanted me to. He said that as long as no one in his gang knew about it he would like to talk to a counselor. A referral has since been made and we check in with Manuel about his progress every week.

After this emotional breakthrough in the van, we all got out and hit some balls at the driving range. Manuel hit the ball the second farthest of anyone and said that the activity helped him to work out some of his anger. I promised him we could visit the gold park again in the near future. By the end of the outing everyone was feeling good and Manuel was ready to go home and be with his girlfriend and child. Stopping the cycle of violence and abuse is a challenging feat but these dads are committed to trying. When asked what they want to get out of joining this group, they almost always say "Because I want to be a better father than my dad was." That is the now the mission of the Young Fathers Group.