



## **Sheltering Teenage Males**

Some shelters have age limits for male children and do not make exceptions. This is another situation that should be addressed individually rather than with a set of rigid policies. Battering is a learned behavioral choice. Children from violent homes learn that violence works as a means of control and to get what one wants. The intergenerational pattern of violent behavior is clear in males. Because of male role modeling, boys have a much greater chance of using these learned behaviors in their own intimate relationships. Studies indicate that 70% of males who are abused or witness abuse as children will choose to use abusive behavior as a control mechanism with their families or intimate partner. By the time a boy reaches adolescence, these behaviors can be well-entrenched. Adolescent males are maturing physically and can present a legitimate safety concern in a communal living situation. However, many male children are not violent and choose not to use abusive behaviors. It seems unfair to force them to separate from their mother at the time when it is most important for the family to stay together. If you choose to incorporate a modified policy with respect to the age of male children in your shelter, the following guidelines can be used to assess each male child over a certain age and determine if you will accommodate him in your shelter:

### **Ask the mother:**

Has her son been physically or sexually abused or witnessed her abuse? Is her son sexually active? This can be an important factor if there is a sexually active girl in the shelter. If her son has been sexually abused and there are children at the shelter, this also can be an area of concern because the children are possibly at risk.

Has her son used physical force against or exhibited other violent behaviors toward her or her other children? If so, ask his height and weight. Some male children, if size appropriate, can be physically restrained safely if they become violent.

You can also have a conversation with the boy. Be honest and tell him the reason most shelters have an age restriction on male children. Ask him questions that can help assess his understanding of and experience with violence. Explain his rights and responsibilities when living in the shelter, and ask him if he believes he can accept these conditions. Make sure he understands that he must accept them if he is to be welcomed into the shelter. This can be empowering for the child and a new beginning of understanding and change for him.

If, after the initial screening or even after the boy has been admitted into the shelter, it is determined that his behavior presents a safety risk to residents or staff members, talk with his mother and explain the situation. Help her to devise an alternative plan for temporary placement for her son or for the entire family if she does not want the family separated. Resources to consider are a motel placement, other family members, supportive friends, transitional housing or temporary foster home placement. It is important for the woman to understand that she and her family are entitled to and will receive advocacy and related support services from your program even if she decides not to stay in the shelter. This includes devising a separate service delivery plan for her son, as well, that might include individual counseling, mentoring from a well-screened male volunteer and/or an adolescent support group.