

At Arm's-Length

about platonic physical contact

between men and boys

for the Golden Cobra Challenge 2017

by Tayler Stokes

At Arm's-Length explores the poverty of intimate physical contact between men and boys. You and four other players will play a sequence of twenty short scenes divided into different life chapters: boyhood, guyhood, manhood, fatherhood, childhood, and brotherhood. Each chapter views common experiences any boy or man could have at that time in their life, and which many boys and men often do experience. This scenario explores physical contact between boys and between men explicitly, and asks players to reflect on how that informs their own relationships, and visa versa. The final chapters, Brotherhood and Fatherhood Part II, offer an alternative to the masculinity we've come to know.

Though *At Arm's-Length* is a game about boys and men, it is not intended to be exclusively for boys and men only. Players of any gender are welcome and encouraged to play.

Play

One player - presumably the one reading this text - will be the facilitator. The facilitator introduces the game, conducts the warmups, checks in with the players periodically during play, and opens and closes scenes. The scenario will take under two hours to play, requires no materials other than this text, and benefits from a private space. The facilitator should make these arrangements as well.

(If you have a ball or similar for the catch scene, great; but if not pantomiming the throws, catches, and misses will do.)

The rest of the players will take up roles A, B, C, and D. This is a roleplaying scenario in which players will portray characters through their words and actions. However, the player roles are not specific people because they could be anybody, and any boy or man could have been any or even all at them at one point or another. The characters and settings are deliberately left "thin" so that players must fill in the gaps with their own personal experiences.

Scenes

Each scene is given a premise that will be presented by the facilitator. Each player has their own instructions for the scene (following page, in sequence). There is no need for discussion; just jump right in following your instructions. The facilitator will close the scene as they see fit or after two minutes. Scenes are played back-to-back in rapid succession.

Thought Commands

Thought commands are a phrase that your character says to themselves in their head. This should inform your actions in the scene. Repeat the phrase to yourself three times while playing the scene at minimum. Thought commands are indicated by quotation marks.

Physical Contact

This is a full-contact scenario that employs a large degree of physical touch in various contexts. Instructions are intended to be taken literally. While in many cases this is nothing more than being in close proximity, handshakes, and the like, some scenes this involved roughhousing, shoving, wrestling, and gently holding one another. Discomfort is expected. Players unwilling to engage in physical contact in play should consider playing something else.

Physical Communication

During Father/Son scenes, players will be instructed to perform specific physical actions. Use this as a means of communication in addition to whatever is being said.

Warmups

1. Body Language: Move around the room. Think about something you are excited for (30 seconds for each prompt). Show this in your movement. Now show something you are worried about. Now, show the phrase I whisper to you. I'll give you each two phrases. "I'm such a screw up." "I'm in love." "Please help." "I don't want to talk." "Nobody likes me." "I'm so relieved." "Try me." "I'm awesome."

2. Moving Touch: Move around the room playfully. Allow about 20 seconds for each of the following instructions. Give others light touches. Keep doing this, but ask first. Avoid touches you don't want. Now give handshakes. Now, ask first. Now give hugs. Now ask first. Now extended hugs (wait for someone to end it). Now ask first.

3. Wearing a Coat: Two players take the role of the other two players' coats while they have a conversation about their day. To be a coat, hug the player from behind in a way that holds their arms. Use your weight to influence their body language and mood.

4. Standoff: Stand in a circle. Through eye contact alone, convey the phrase I whisper to you. "I'm going to hurt you." (Whisper this to each player.)

Debreif

After play, leave the play space and have a discussion about your play experience, and how it reflects upon your lived experiences and relationships.

Scene List

- 1. Boyhood:** B "harmlessly" pesters (poking, messing-with) D in class, the rest join in with the pestering, laugh.
- 2. Boyhood:** A and C bully B, D on playground with shoves.
- 3. Boyhood:** B, D won the high-contact sports game, high-five and taunt A, C who lost.
- 4. Boyhood:** D picks a fight with A, gets up in his face, shouts. B and C don't intervene.
- 5. Childhood, Part I:** Father (A) plays catch with his young son (B) for the first time. Use catch to communicate.
- 6. Childhood, Part I:** Father (C) is angry that their son (D) was caught smoking. The father slams his fist on the table, wall.
- 7. Guyhood:** A is about to flunk out of school. He acts like it's no big deal. No touching.
- 8. Guyhood:** B has just lost his mother. Everyone knows, but nobody talks about it. No touching.
- 9. Guyhood:** D brags about how much money he's getting from his new job. No touching.
- 10. Guyhood:** C is moving out of state. Nobody will see him again. No touching.
- 11. Childhood, Part II:** Father (B) is meticulously cleaning his tools, and guiding his son (A) to do the same. Use a found object as the tools.
- 12. Childhood, Part II:** Elderly father (D) is having trouble moving around, refuses son's (C) attempts to help. D must lean on walls/furniture to move about.
- 13. Manhood:** A breaks a bone while doing a stupid stunt. The rest have to help him along.
- 14. Manhood:** Everyone is crowded on a couch; C worries that he's gay.
- 14. Manhood:** B finishes an interview for a job with the rest, they shake hands.
- 16. Manhood:** Everyone is drunk at the bar, D gets emotional and goes in for hugs.
- 17. Fatherhood, Part I:** New father (D) is cradling his newborn son (A) as he sleeps. Father speaks to his restless son about the future.
- 18. Fatherhood, Part I:** Father (C) is disciplining his young son (B) who is having an emotional outburst, tantrum. Father consoles his son.
- 19. Brotherhood:** B has just gone through a difficult loss in the family.
- 20. Brotherhood:** D shares the news of a huge professional success.
- 21. Brotherhood:** A confides that he's afraid of being dumped.
- 22. Brotherhood:** C is moving far away. This is goodbye.
- 23. Fatherhood, Part II:** Father (A) is wrestling with his young son (C). The Father let's his son win.
- 24. Fatherhood, Part II:** Father (B) is openly grieving, weeping, over the loss of his father. Son (D) tries to help his dad.

Player A	Player B	Player C	Player D
1. "I want them to like me."	1. "I'm nobody's whimp."	1. "I'll be next if I don't so it too."	1. "Just take it."
2. "Everyone does this."	2. "This is the last time."	2. "You aren't better than me."	2. "Don't make it worse."
3. "I always lose."	3. "Nobody takes me on."	3. "I'll show them."	3. "What idiots."
4. "I've got to be strong."	4. "Better him than me."	4. "He deserves a beating."	4. "Fear is respect."
5. Tell your son about an upcoming change at home (moving, divorce, pregnancy, etc.).	5. Don't tell your dad that this upsets you. Communicate you worry through catch.	5. (Just watch and listen.)	5. (Just watch and listen.)
6. (Just watch and listen.)	6. (Just watch and listen.)	6. You cannot reconcile your shame in him and your shame in yourself. Get a reaction out of him.	6. Wear a tough face and don't react you your dad's voice or violence.
7. "I'm a fuck-up anyway."	7. "Serves him right."	7. "At least it's not me."	7. "God, I'm screwed, too."
8. "I couldn't be that tough."	8. "This can't be happening."	8. "She was kind of a bitch, who cares."	8. "It happens, get over it."
9. "What a prick."	9. "I'm jealous."	9. "Just wait, I'll show him."	9. "What a bunch of losers."
10. "He was a good guy."	10. "It won't be the same."	10. "How will I make new friends?"	10. "Sucks to be you."
11. You want your father's approval, but you think he's overbearing. Show your effort or lack thereof.	11. Correct your son. Make him do it correctly. Don't accept a poor job.	11. (Just watch and listen.)	11. (Just watch and listen.)
12. You are disappointed in your son.	12. Speak with your throws and catches as well as your words.	12. (Just watch and listen.)	12. (Just watch and listen.)
13. "I've gotta show them I can take this."	13. "Take charge."	13. "I couldn't be that tough."	13. "He should have been more careful."
14. "Does he like this?"	14. "Am I enjoying this too much?"	14. "Don't touch, don't touch."	14. "Can he tell that I like this?"
15. "Does he think I'm weak?"	15. "Are they impressed with me?"	15. "Don't be too friendly."	15. "Out-do his handshake."
16. "Keep it together."	16. "Don't overdo it."	16. "Me, too."	16. "I'm afraid to be alone."
17. Trust your father absolutely. Fidget or relax as he speaks	17. (Just watch and listen.)	17. (Just watch and listen.)	17. Speculate about what the future holds for your son.
18. (Just watch and listen.)	18. You feel this is unfair. Throw a tantrum, stomp around. Make consoling you difficult.	18. Calm their outburst, help them understand and express their feelings verbally.	18. (Just watch and listen.)
19. "I care about him."	19. "My heart is breaking."	19. "I would cry too."	19. "Their pain reaches me."
20. "He earned it."	20. "That's incredible!"	20. "I'm excited for him."	20. "I've worked very hard for this."
21. "I don't know what to do."	21. "This sounds really difficult,"	21. "Let's face some hard truths together."	21. "You are not alone."
22. "We've made great memories."	22. "This doesn't have to be the end."	22. "I'll miss you."	22. "I'm sad, but excited."
23. Wrestle with your son. Have too much fun. Let him win.	23. (Just watch and listen.)	23. You decide who's winning or losing moment to moment.	23. (Just watch and listen.)
24. (Just watch and listen.)	24. Show your grief in as many ways as possible. Be difficult to reach, not impossible..	24. (Just watch and listen.)	24. You've never seen your dad like this. Try to console him in whatever way you can.