



BACKTRACK BOYS

A FILM BY CATHERINE SCOTT

DISCUSSION GUIDE



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Introduction

This Discussion Guide is a resource for anyone hosting a screening of *BackTrack Boys*.

By organising a discussion, you can transform a great film screening into an engaging community event.

Discussions, panels and Q&As gives everyone the opportunity to learn more and share their perspective on the issues raised in the film.

Please see the **Backtrack Boys Screening Guide** to assist you when hosting your screening.

Thank you for your support for this important Australian documentary.

If you have any questions or need any support at any point, please contact us at info@backtrackboys.com



A bit about...

The film

Wild boys and the dogs that tame them.

Backtrack Boys tells the honest and inspiring story of the challenges young people face as they try to find their place in the world.

Bernie Shakeshaft runs the youth program BackTrack Youth Works from a shed on the outskirts of Armidale, NSW. Bernie and the BackTrack team take in troubled kids, giving them a place to feel safe, learn to support each other and pursue their dreams.

Zac (17), Tyrson (18) and Rusty (12) are part of the BackTrack program, where they train dogs and hit the road with Bernie's legendary dog jumping team and travel to rural shows across NSW.

The dog shows started out as a way to teach kids self-discipline, calm their emotions, build trust, and boost their communication skills. They have since won many dog-jumping titles across the country.

In the last ten years, over 1000 kids have been part of BackTrack and in that same time juvenile crime rates in the local town have dropped by about 50%. It's an alternative to detention and succeeds where others have failed.

The documentary tells the story of the boys, Bernie and BackTrack – as they face past trauma and work to overcome it.

Armidale

BackTrack is based in Armidale, a regional town in NSW.

Armidale has a significant youth population, with people aged 15-24 making up 20% of the population, compared to the NSW state average of 12%.¹

At the same time, youth unemployment in the region is at 16.6%, more than 4% higher than the national average.

Young people and the law

In 2017, there were 964 young people in youth detention in Australia on an average night. These young people, aged between 10-17, were detained because of their involvement, or alleged involvement, in crime.

The majority of young people detained were young men, making up 91% of all young people detained. Studies show that offending and reoffending typically increases from adolescence to early adulthood, then decreases.²

¹ Armidale Youth Report 2014

² 'Measuring Juvenile Recidivism in Australia' <<https://aic.gov.au/publications/tbp/tbp044/measuring-juvenile-recidivism-australia>>



Post-screening discussion

Holding a discussion after the screening is a great way to engage your audience in the themes that are important to your community.

This discussion can help to deepen understanding, to share perspectives on the issues raised by the film and even inspire people to take action.

If you plan a discussion make sure you've got microphones (or the audience is small enough to hear without them) and chairs for guests. Set these out so the audience can see the guests and feel part of the discussion.



Types of discussions

PANEL WITH A MODERATOR

In this type of discussion, you can invite a number of different people to share their distinctive perspectives on the film and their own experiences.

You may want to invite 'experts' in your community, such as service providers, educators, youth workers, young people with lived experience, police, magistrates or local councillors.

The role of the moderator is to open up discussion (perhaps using one of our suggested questions) and to make sure that everyone on the panel is heard. If you like, you can also take questions from the audience.

Invite three or four panellists with a range of experience and knowledge of youth issues in your community. Include a young person and be diverse in your choice.

Provide them with information about the film - a link to the website and the press kit are a good start. Some may want to see the film in advance; in that case we can arrange a screening link.

Give them a briefing of the event; who will be there, how the night will run, how long the discussion will last and what questions the discussion is likely to focus on. Let them know if you need them to send an introduction for the moderator to read, and if you want them to make a short statement at the beginning of the discussion.

Choose a moderator who can keep the conversation moving. They should be well informed and a comfortable public speaker. Give them short biographies of each guest so they can introduce them and discuss in advance the areas you'd like to cover. Prepare questions in advance (see some suggestions in our Discussion Question section).

The moderator can **open the floor for audience questions**. If you would like to do this, it's a good idea to have a set window for audience questions e.g. 20 minutes at the end.



GUEST SPEAKER

You may want to invite just one speaker to talk about their experiences in relation to the issues and themes raised in the film.

We recommend that you keep the guest speaker's speech to 5-10 minutes, then open to the audience for questions (if the speaker has agreed to this).

Make sure the speaker is briefed on the film, expectations of their involvement and role and how the event will run.

Introduce the guest speaker with a short biography and let the audience know when they will be able to ask questions.



AUDIENCE DISCUSSION

The film will hopefully raise a wide range of emotions, questions, concerns and ideas from the audience. If you feel comfortable, you can act as the moderator to facilitate a healthy discussion with your audience. Alternatively you might like to ask someone else to moderate and help you navigate the discussion.

A good way to start the panel and audience discussion is with some specific questions for your speakers. You may like to prepare some yourself, or you can use some of the suggestions in the next section. The questions in this guide have been developed with a range of audiences in mind, so make sure you tailor the questions to suit your speakers and audience.



Example discussion questions

ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE

- o Were the challenges faced by the young people in the film familiar? What are some of the challenges facing young people in our community? What are some of the opportunities that exist?
- o There are lots of stereotypes about young people. In the film, many of the boys speak about other people expecting them to be 'bad' or to end up in bad situations. Do you think the film challenged these stereotypes?
- o What are some of the stereotypes of young people in our community? How do you think these stereotypes affect how young people engage in our community?
- o In the film, Rusty says "where was that old me gonna get myself to?" as he reflects on his progress. After watching this film, do you feel that young people can change their path?
- o What are some of the people, services and support in our community who are helping young people change their path?
- o Do you think that the film has changed how you perceive young people? In what way?
- o As a young person, do you feel supported to follow your chosen path in this community? What do you feel could be put in place or improved to make the situation better for young people here?

QUICK OVERVIEW

Backtrack Boys provides a unique insight into youth at risk in rural Australia. The story looks at how the BackTrack program helps young people navigate their relationships, deal with personal trauma, take responsibility for their own decisions and gain practical job skills so they can create a sustainable life for themselves.

After ten years, the number of crimes involving young males in Armidale, where BackTrack is based, has significantly decreased rather than significantly increased (as it was prior to BackTrack starting up). The vast majority of kids who graduate from BackTrack do so in some form of education, training or employment, and with positive connections to their local community.



ABOUT BACKTRACK YOUTH WORKS

What do you think makes the BackTrack program so successful?

- o The people running it? The dogs? The community involvement? The long term or flexible approach?
- o What do you think is important about how these different elements interact?
- o Do you have anything in your community that is similar?
- o Who are the champions working for or with young people in your community?

BackTrack does not work in isolation, it is part of a whole-of-community approach.

- o How could Bernie's methods of working with young people be used in your community?
- o How do you think a community can come together to support their young people?
- o What would that look like in your community?



ABOUT THE LEGAL SYSTEM

There is a contrast between what we see of the boys' characters and how they are seen by the legal system. Bernie speaks about this in relation to Zac's sentencing.

- o What is your understanding of how young people interact with the courts? Do you think that they should be directed away from incarceration, where appropriate and possible?
- o Did you find it confronting that there was a risk that Rusty would have to go to juvenile detention at 12 years old?

A moving and powerful part of the film is when Rusty reads the letters of support that the community has provided for his hearing.

- o What do you think about this kind of community support?



ABOUT PATHWAYS

Bernie says that BackTrack has three jobs: keep the kids alive, keep them out of jail and help them to chase their dreams.

Statistically, youth unemployment has been a persistent problem across Australia.

- o What pathways do you see in your community for young people to gain skills and employment?

BackTrack doesn't just help the boys in the program; the boys also participate in helping other young people in the community. For example, the Barking Books program to help primary-school aged children read.

- o Are there any examples you can think of in your community of young people helping other young people?
- o What do you think about this kind of model, where young people are part of improving the situation for other young people? Do you think it would be effective?

In the program there is a strong sense of the older boys becoming leaders and taking on responsibility to help others in BackTrack.

- o Are there opportunities for young people in your community to take on these kind of leadership or peer mentoring roles? Do you think there should be more opportunities for young people like this?

In the film we see an alternative education model for the young people in BackTrack.

- o What education opportunities are there in your community for young people who fall outside of the standard schooling system?
- o Why do you think the mainstream schooling system is failing kids?"

QUESTIONS FOR PANELISTS WITH EXPERTISE

For panel discussions with 'experts' (e.g. service providers, educators, youth workers, young people with lived experience, police, magistrates, local councillors).

- o What is your role and how does it relate to the issues raised in the documentary?
- o What support and services are there for young people in this area?
- o How does the film fit in with your understanding of the challenges facing youth today?
- o What lessons do you think the film has for other people in your sector/position?
- o Do you think the film could be used in your own work? How?
- o Are there ways people can volunteer and help service providers in the youth sector?
- o Are the stories of the boys in this film familiar to you in your sector?
- o The BackTrack program offers an alternative model where other programs have not worked. What other options are there for youth who are having a tough time?
- o The film shows ways everyday Australians are offering practical help and support that can make all the difference in helping young people feel valued and worthwhile - What can individuals in the audience do, to better support young people? And perhaps more importantly, what can they do to positively influence people not in the audience tonight, to view young people having a tough time differently?
- o BackTrack is a different way of helping young people. What lessons are there for policy makers in the film and from the success of BackTrack?
- o This film looks at how young people interact with the justice and prison system - What, in your experience, is the best way to help and support young people who may be in a similar situation?

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY

- o Do you think a program like BackTrack would help your community?
- o What aspects of the program do you think would help young people in your area?
- o What kind of model do you think would work to help young people in your community?
- o Would you be interested in setting up a program similar to BackTrack in your community?
- o Is there anything you could start doing now to support youth in your community?
- o The film shows a lot of community involvement in BackTrack. What do you think you could start doing as a community to support each other to look after young people?
- o What do you think your community could start doing tomorrow, in a month and in a year to better support young people?



Find out more about supporting BackTrack

www.backtrackboys.com

Resources

Youth Mental Health

Mission Australia | [‘Lifting the Weight’ report into youth mental health in rural and remote areas](#)

Headspace | [Tools for schools and communities](#)

Reach Out | [Tools and apps for under 25s](#)

Funding for Rural and Regional Community Programs

[Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal](#)