

LET BOYS BE BOYS

The title 'LET BOYS BE BOYS' is rendered in a large, bold, maroon serif font. The word 'BOYS' is particularly large. Integrated into the letters are black silhouettes of boys in various active poses: a boy jumping to catch a ball inside the first 'O', a boy with arms raised in celebration inside the 'Y', and a boy rappelling down a rope inside the final 'S'. A small 'TM' trademark symbol is located at the bottom right of the rappelling boy's silhouette.

3 WINNING STRATEGIES
FOR LEADERS OF BOYS

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine sending an army to war without the tools or training to achieve victory. That would be ridiculous. And yet we are sending boys, ill equipped, into a culture that has seemingly declared war on boyhood.

The results are tragic: According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, boys are almost twice as likely to receive special education,¹ and the National Institute of Mental Health reports that boys are three times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD.² Academically, boys underperform girls at every level.³ Meanwhile, women earned more than 52 percent of doctoral degrees and more than 57 percent of master's degrees in 2016.⁴

Diagnoses of ADHD increase steadily. Conduct that used to be considered typical boy behavior—running or climbing when it's not appropriate, or having a hard time waiting to talk or react—is now bulleted in lists of ADHD symptoms,⁵ as if boyhood is some sort of social disease that needs to be eradicated.

In a culture wary of “toxic masculinity” and bombarded with decades of secular media presenting fathers and husbands as buffoons, is it any wonder that psychologically damaging, unscientific gender-identification propositions find an audience? Boys are starved of moral direction and ignored in terms of academic struggles. They have no platform for their own defense because they've already been judged deficient.

The Challenge

As leaders of boys in schools, homeschools, churches, and youth organizations, we must recognize and affirm their unique strengths and challenges. We are positioned to instill the principles and character traits that can prepare boys to become successful, focused men.

But will we?

While we don't excuse the behavior of bad men, we must recognize that good men can be made from boys. Their unique makeup holds the potential for good men as much as the unique makeup of girls holds the potential for good women.

Engaging this potential will take some energy and strategic thought. Ideally, boys and girls would have separate learning environments in order to take advantage of their unique learning styles. Schools and organizations that take this approach are seeing great results. For example, Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis raised its graduation rate from 53 to 90.5 percent after converting to boys-only and girls-only classes.⁶

But recently, attempting to favor politically correct inclusiveness over serving boys, the Boy Scouts of America announced it will be allowing girls to participate in its youngest levels, and soon the organization will accept girls throughout the program. One of the first newspaper articles I read after this decision quoted a leader: "I have taught a lot of classes, and girls are always smarter. Also always neater and quicker."⁷

Well, in settings designed for girls, of course they excel. In programs and settings designed for boys, that same leader might say, "The girls are a little nervous in the room. They don't understand the changing rules and would prefer it to be a lot quieter."

Dear Leader of Boys, If the boy-only meeting you are holding looks anything like a typical classroom or Sunday school class, you've already lost.

Ready for the challenge? Here are some strategies for training and equipping boys for the cultural battle.

STRATEGY #1:

Embrace the Scientific Evidence of Physical and Psychological Differences

This foundational key is a politically incorrect but thoroughly defensible position: boys and girls are different.

There are certainly exceptions (the girl who'd rather climb trees and the boy who'd prefer to read). I get that. There are exceptions to every rule. But, in general, most engaged parents and attentive teachers would confirm that boys and girls are different, and their proclamation would be accompanied by anecdotes that ring true with most of us. Consider the story of the teenage boys and girls sent into the darkness, each with a pen, a pad, matches, and a candle to "think deeply about themselves and record their thoughts." The girls, of course, obliged and returned with pages of thoughts. The boys, not completely understanding the purpose of the assignment, threw their pads in a pile, struck a match, and had a great bonfire.

The anecdote is humorous, but is it surprising? Intuitively, we understand stories like this. If the sexes were reversed, though, we might think it quite odd. Not for the boys, though ... snips and snails and puppy dogs tails ...

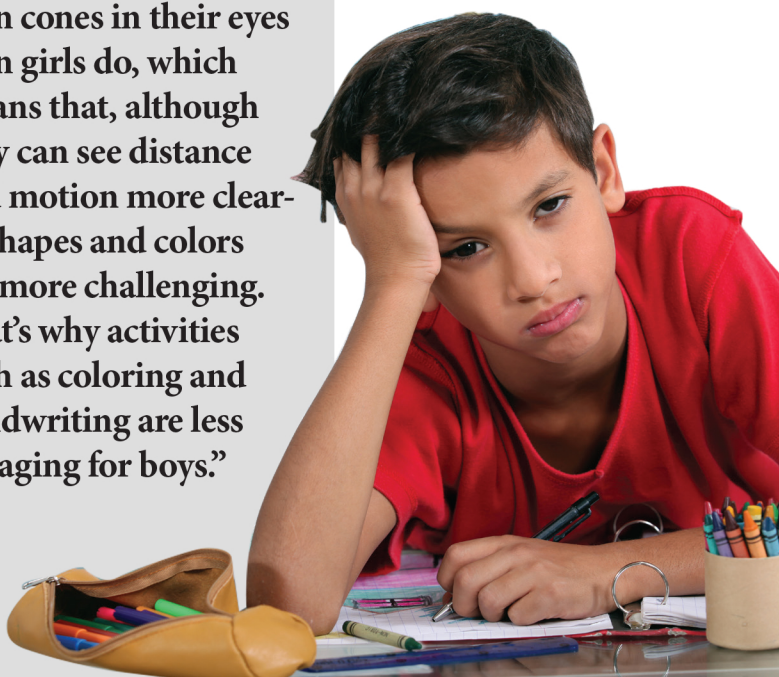
Boys have more rods than cones in their eyes than girls do, which

means that, although they can see distance and motion more clearly, shapes and colors are more challenging. That's why activities such as coloring and handwriting are less engaging for boys while objects in motion can distract them from an assignment—actions which can factor into an ADHD diagnosis.

Young girls can hear ten times better than boys,⁸ so a soft-spoken teacher may not be able to hold the attention of boys. When a boy's attention drifts, he is at an academic disadvantage. And it shows.

Boys think differently because their brains are different. While we've always heard that the left side of our brain is used for verbal processes and the right for art, that's only true for males. Girls can process verbally on both sides of their brain, making connections in a different way and giving them an advantage in a classroom setting that uses primarily verbal instruction.

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Implementing Strategy #1:

Accept and account for the biological differences in God's design of males and females. Engage boys in their learning environment with objects they can taste, touch, smell, see, and hear, rather than relying only on what they can hear.

At a minimum, use plenty of volume, lots of voice fluctuation, and hand motions to engage their visual and auditory senses, so more of their brain is active.

Rather than teaching concepts from a worksheet, make posters, drawings, or use large floor demonstrations, positioning object illustrations at varying depths through the learning area to interest them visually.

We used to say it was important to change topics every few minutes to maintain interest. Now it seems that boys are processing through many channels at once. Remember when seeing the scores of football games on the TV screen was a distraction? Not anymore. We now process so much more at one time. The clutter of images and information that appears on a screen during a game or news broadcast is astounding.

Our boys have grown up in a multi-channel world. Single-channel lectures won't work anymore. As best you can, communicate on multiple channels to multiple senses. If we are not engaging boys on a variety of levels, we leave channels open for distraction.

“ Competition is an extremely important part of their world that allows them to challenge and measure themselves and one another. ”



STRATEGY #2:

Risk and Competition

Girls are often satisfied by praise, whereas boys are strongly motivated by tangible experiences that relate to real life, have something at stake, and engage peers in a hierarchal sense. Thus, many boys see no point in developing skills that don't result in a winner. Competition with an element of risk is a motivator for boys and gives them an emotional lift while helping them perform better as adrenaline causes more blood to flow to their brain.

That's why participation trophies have had such a negative effect on the development of boys. The everybody-wins philosophy leads to the development of unproductive narcissists. They are unproductive because we haven't sufficiently challenged them, and they are narcissists because we haven't let them fail. Boys tend to overestimate their abilities, so they assume they will succeed. But if they aren't permitted to test that assumption, they don't experience the payoff from achieving something difficult. Neither is the reality of failure experienced. Perhaps that's why more young men live at home now than at any other time since the government census began. Boys have not been permitted to fully experience significant achievement and celebration or to fully experience failure and recovery.

As we remove the risk factors and competitive atmosphere from their learning spaces, we drive boys to the video-game world where they can compete, take chances, win, and lose. They excel at video games, which are designed for them, but instead of getting credit for

being a winner in that world, they're criticized for playing too many video games. It seems boys can't even win at winning!

Their rough-and-tumble play helps develop the frontal lobe of their brain. Competition is an extremely important part of their world that allows them to challenge and measure themselves and one another. Through competition, they find and extend their limits as well as find their place in social hierarchies.

The multi-faceted boy culture is at a severe disadvantage in a "sit down, be still, everybody-gets-a-trophy" artificial environment.

Boys are basically asking three questions in their social interactions:

Who's with me?

Who's in charge?

What's our mission?

When we fail to adequately address these questions, boys take action themselves in ways that can look like rebellion or apathy. Consider the boy who challenges authority in a classroom. He's labeled rebellious or disrespectful even though he may only be attempting to establish the rules. What about the boy who refuses to participate? He is labeled passive or indifferent when he is simply unsure of where he fits. Gangs do an excellent job of establishing this hierarchy and answering these questions for young men, which is why gangs are so successful in attracting, motivating, and keeping boys.

Implementing Strategy #2:

Provide a learning structure that answers the three questions.

Use challenges and create chances to be a winner. If you are concerned about some boys losing, vary the competitions to highlight different strengths, or use a competitive team format that allows all boys to be part of something bigger than themselves and to win as part of a team.

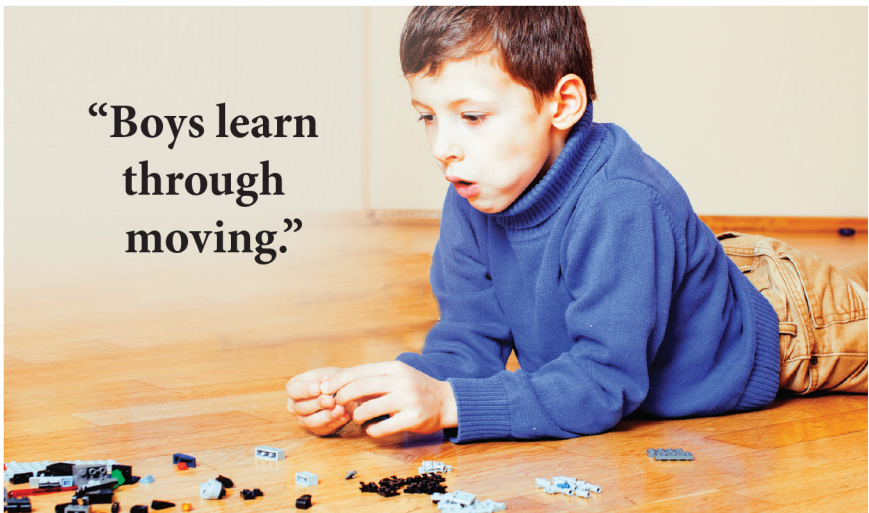
STRATEGY #3:

Physical Movement

Boys are holistic. Their whole being needs to be involved, so they thrive in kinesthetic learning environments—learning through moving.

Research shows boys need at least an hour of moderate- or vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per day.⁹ Boys know this intuitively. That's why it seems they cannot sit still. Our industrialized learning environments punish them for doing what they know they need to do to learn best.

“Movement activates all the brain cells kids are using to learn, it wakes up the brain,” says John Ratey, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.¹⁰



Implementing Strategy #3:

I advise leaders working with boys to spend as much time outside as they can. When that's not practical or possible, clear the room of chairs, then throw a bunch of Legos or fidget-friendly toys on the floor. If you must lecture, pepper it with questions, challenges, and rewards. If you expect boys to sit quietly and give you uninterrupted eye contact, you're in the wrong room.

Use short, intensive learning spurts interjected with rigorous physical stimulation. Plan your physical breaks as thoroughly as you plan your lesson because lessons and breaks work hand in hand to develop the boy. A weak or half-hearted attempt at giving them a physical break will frustrate them and make it difficult to re-engage them in the learning activity.

Help them understand and accept their need to move as normal so they do what they can to integrate it into other difficult areas of learning. After sitting in class all day (a place that often subtly shames them for their fidgeting), make your gathering a welcome and happy place for learning.

There is great opportunity for character growth as you can integrate their need to respect others' needs for space and quiet too. Use the setting to train boys to achieve moments of quiet, which will likely be demanded in an extended fashion in other settings.

Keep it cool. Because physical activity raises his body temperature, a boy's optimum temperature for learning is 69 degrees; a girl's is 74 degrees.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the goal is to win boys' hearts. Listen to them. Believe in them. Support them. Care about them.

We may not be able to win the war on boyhood, but we can give boys the confidence and skills to stand tall and win it for themselves.

END NOTES

- 1 https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp
- 2 <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd.shtml>
- 3 <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/04/girls-grades.aspx>
- 4 <http://www.aei.org/publication/women-earned-majority-of-doctoral-degrees-in-2016-for-8th-straight-year-and-outnumber-men-in-grad-school-135-to-100/>
- 5 <https://www.webmd.com/add-adhd/guide/adhd-symptoms#1>
- 6 <https://tennesseestar.com/2017/10/07/single-sex-classes-a-success-at-memphis-public-high-school/>
- 7 <http://www.hannibal.net/news/20180525/local-scouts-usa-ready-to-enroll-girls>
- 8 <https://arlenetaylor.org/sensory-preference-pas/7444-gender-hearing-differences>
- 9 <https://health.gov/paguidelines/midcourse/youth-fact-sheet.pdf>
- 10 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/well/family/why-kids-shouldnt-sit-still-in-class.html>

Mark T. Hancock is CEO of Trail Life USA, a character, leadership, and adventure organization that is both Christ-centered and boy-focused. Learn more at www.TrailLifeUSA.com or scan the code to donate to help boys.



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