BOYS ADRIFT:
The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men

Based on the book by Dr. Leonard Sax, MD, PhD
www.boysadrift.com
The Problem...

- Growing gender gap in academic achievement (p.8)

- Boys are disengaging from school and are not bothered by this

- "Virus of Apathy" in which unmotivated boys grow into young men who are increasingly adrift

- ‘Virus’ is widespread; found within every sector / demographic of society:
  - urban, suburban, and rural
  - white, black, Asian, and Hispanic
  - affluent, middle, and low-income
The Problem…

• More and more able-bodied young and middle-aged men are out of work and are not even looking for work!
• Most are from white, middle class families, and have at least some college education
• Meanwhile, more and more young women are increasingly driven to achieve, going into professions such as medicine and law
• Men today are now significantly less likely than their female counterparts to attend college, earn high honours, or graduate.
Some frightening facts…

• These disengaged young men are not bothered by being ‘adrift’ and lacking in ambition or any real accomplishments.

• They don’t have much passion for any real-world activity and nothing really excites them.

• For many boys today, not caring about anything has become the mark of true ‘guydom’.
The end result...
The effects are widespread...

- **Marriage and family:**
  - Marriage rate is plummeting due to fewer accomplished, driven, and successful single women marrying (p.137)

- **Financial / economic impact:**
  - There is a shortage of ‘devoted’ male employees willing to put in an honest day’s work for pay (p.117)
What Is Going On With Boys?

- Five factors driving the growing apathy and lack of motivation in boys:
  1. Changes in Education
  2. Video Games
  3. Medications for ADD / ADHD
  4. Endocrine Disruptors
  5. Changes in the Cultural Construction of Masculinity
Factor 1: Changes in Education

- Acceleration in the pace of the curriculum, especially in the early elementary years
- Changes in behavioural expectations
- Shift in the balance between experiential and didactic / instructional education
- Shift away from competitive formats to ‘everybody wins’
Accelerated curriculum…

• K in 1978:
  – Emphasis on socialization and learning how to “do school”

• K in 2008:
  – Heavy emphasis on learning literacy skills

2007 K Curriculum
= 
1977 Gr. 1 Curriculum
Why the new curriculum isn’t a good fit for many boys…

- **Brain research**: regions of the brain develop in different *sequence and tempo* in boys versus girls.

  language areas of brain of 5 year old boy

  =

  language areas of brain of 3.5 year old girl

- Many boys are simply not ‘ready’ (developmentally) to learn to read at age 5
The result…

• Boys act out or are inattentive; results in:
  – Parent-teacher conferences / conflict
  – possible labeling (LD / ‘Slow’)
  – and possibly a misdiagnosis of ADD/ ADHD

• Boys are placed in the ‘not yet ready to read’ group; results in (long-lasting):
  – Feelings of inadequacy (feeling ‘dumb / stupid’)
  – Feeling disliked by the teacher
  – A growing dislike of school
Changes in Behavioural Expectations...

- Boys, especially young ones, tend to prefer action over sitting still
- But...Paying attention and being quiet is now demanded
- Most 5 year old girls can do this...many 5 year old boys cannot
Boys are more naturally aggressive than girls…

- They like to playfight, jostle each other, have snowball fights, etc.
Nowadays…

- Any form or suggestion of aggression on school grounds is increasingly prohibited

- Because boys instinctually need to express physical aggression, schools need to provide appropriate outlets for many behaviours that are currently considered ‘inappropriate’
  - Example: Establish designated snowball throwing areas (has been successful in many schools)
Shift in the Balance Between Experience and Instruction...

- “Knowing about something” (theoretical knowledge) vs. “Knowing by experience” (hands-on knowledge)

- Multisensory interaction with the real world is vital for normal child development

- Children need a rich, interactive sensory environment that involves:
  - Seeing, touching, smelling, hearing
  - All in the ‘real world’
“Nature-Deficit Disorder”


• Defines a constellation of symptoms seen in a child whose life has been largely spent indoors. Includes:
  – Diminished use of the senses
  – Attention difficulties
  – Higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses
Everyone needs experiential learning, but…

- Boys need it more than girls
- In boys, overemphasis on theoretical knowledge at the expense of experiential knowledge can seriously impair the development of a *lively and passionate curiosity* that will motivate them to learn
- They disengage when they don’t see the point of what they are learning
- Girls are motivated largely through pleasing the teacher, so they will not suffer as much as boys from such an imbalance
Blame technology…

• Before computers entered the school and home settings:
  – Teachers were more likely to take kids into the ‘real world’ to learn, or bring the ‘real world’ into the classroom to teach
  – Boys were more likely to spend time out of doors exploring, building, and interacting with other boys (p.30)
Shift Away From Competitive Formats …

• To ‘Everybody Wins’…

• Problem because:
  – Many boys thrive on competition!
  – Competition motivates them because they have the “will to win.”
Nowadays…

- Gym class offers little opportunity for boys to experience “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat”

- Zero-tolerance for violence in schools

- Huge student populations in many middle and high schools result in only the elite athletes getting to join competitive team sports
Team competition is good for boys...

- Team vs. individual competition motivates and engages boys (not restricted to sports only)
- In a ‘team’ situation, the outcome of the competition is uncertain, and that makes it exciting
- Girls value friendship over team affirmation; lack of competition less important for girls
What about self-esteem?

• Research demonstrates that:
  – Correlation between confidence in ability and actual performance in boys is zero \textit{at best}, and may even be negative (p.50)
  
  – For many boys, failure is a spur to work even harder, especially when they are part of a team
Factor 5: Changes in the Cultural Constructions of Masculinity

• “A boy does not naturally become a gentleman – a man who is courteous and kind and unselfish”

• Leadership from responsible adults (preferably other men) helps boys become (gentle)men

• Leadership can come from:
  – The home environment
  – The school environment
  – The culture at large

• Our culture has neglected to foster this important transition to adulthood
The result…

- Boys (and girls) are confused about what it means to be a man (woman) and, in the absence of pro-social models, have begun to construct their own models (often antisocial) of the transition to adulthood.

- Examples include gang initiations, street racing, and random acts of violence
The one thing all ‘enduring’ cultures have in common...

- The ‘elders’ teach the young the rules for what is expected of mature adults...AND...they do so in *gender separate* communities

- Boys need *male* adult role models (i.e. ‘examples of adults maleness’)

- Not all enduring cultures have ‘formal’ ceremonies, but all have leadership into adulthood by *same-sex adults*
What if no ‘community of men’ is available for leadership?

- Boys turn to the media for role models of ‘maleness’
- Today, this is what they will find…
AKON...
50 Cent...
Eminem...
Or, maybe they’ll look to…

The ultimate rude slacker dude of the new millennium…
American culture is toxic to boys…

• 2003 Dartmouth panel; an interdisciplinary perspective on the problems facing American children and teens (174)

• The good news:
  – Death rates due to cancer and unintentional injuries have dropped >50% over past 50 yrs.
The bad news... during same 50 yrs:

- Homicide rates among U.S. youth have risen by >130%

- Suicide rates among U.S. youth have risen by almost 140%

- Teenage boys and young men are far more at risk for suicide than girls (175)
Dartmouth panel…

- Children of new immigrants to the U.S. are ‘healthier’ than their U.S.-born counterparts

- Children of new immigrants are:
  - Significantly more likely to attend school regularly
  - Are more motivated and try harder
  - Are less likely to engage in risky behaviours like substance abuse, delinquency, violence
It doesn’t last…

- Dartmouth panel found that this relative advantage declines with length of time in the U.S., and from one generation to the next.

- “For the children of new immigrants, and for U.S. children overall, some of the basic foundations of childhood appear currently to be at best anemic, in the sense of being weak and inadequate to foster full human flourishing, and at worst toxic, inadvertently depressing health and engendering emotional distress and mental illness.”
Factor 2: Video Games

- The average boy in the United States spends 13 hours per week playing video games.
- Research has found that the number of hours spent playing video games correlates negatively with academic achievement (at any level) above the threshold of approximately 6 hours of video game play per week.
- The correlation holds regardless of the game’s content (i.e., violent or not).
The problem with video games...

- Time spent playing v.g. displaces time spent:
  - Studying
  - Sleeping
  - Playing with friends
  - Being out of doors or in the ‘real world’

- Video games shift motivation away from the ‘real world’ to the ‘virtual world’
The Virtual vs. The Real World...

- Virtual world is fast-moving, exciting, interactive, collaborative, and fun

- Plus...
  - In the virtual world boys have a sense of mastery and control (highly motivating)

- Real world of homework and textbooks seems boring and dull in comparison
Research Re. Violent Video Games

- Uhlmann & Swanson (2004) of Yale University studied the causal effects of playing violent video games and found:
  - A clear and unequivocal causal link between playing v.v.g. and increased violent self-image and violent behaviour

- Review of research on playing v.v.g. concluded:
  - Playing v.v.g. leads directly to increases in aggressive thoughts, mood, behaviours, and decreases in helping behaviour (p.67-8)
Factor 3: Medications for ADD / ADHD

- Past 30 yrs in Canada and the US:
  - a >10 fold increase in proportion of boys taking stimulant medications (Ritalin, Concerta, Adderall, Dexadrine, Metadate) to keep them focused and ‘still’

- Busy doctors often medicate as a ‘trial’ or as way to diagnose ADD / ADHD

- Not an effective strategy!

- Stimulant medications have been found to help ‘normal’ kids as much as or more than those with ADD/ADHD! (response to meds can’t be used for diff. diagnoses) (88)
If stimulants help, what’s the harm in trying them?

- The Nucleus Accumbens = part of brain responsible for translating motivation into action.

- Harvard Medical School researchers found exposing young lab animals to even low doses of stimulants can cause permanent damage to the NA and leads to decreased motivation and learning.

- Is this effect found in humans?
  - We don’t know yet…
Factor 4: Endocrine Disruptors

• The effect of plastics…
  – Clear plastic bottles, pacifiers, baby bottles, etc. contain plasticizers called phthalates – ‘polyethylene terephthalate (PET)
  – Also contain Bisphenol A (BPA)
  – Both BPA and PETs leach into the beverage
  – Both mimic the action of female hormones; are “environmental estrogens”
The effects of “environmental estrogens”...

• Differ in boys vs. girls, and men vs. women:
  – **Girls**: accelerated onset of puberty
  – **Women**: increased risk of breast cancer
  – **Boys**: disruption / delayed onset of puberty; lower bone density
  – **Men**: lower sperm counts; lower testosterone levels; increased risk of prostate cancer
Testosterone...

• Research shows that testosterone drives motivation in males

• Average testosterone level in males has dropped by over 50% in past few decades…

• Is the concurrent drop in male motivation that surprising?
DETOX!

• What can we, as educators and parents, do?

• As educators, our sphere of direct influence rests largely in the areas of the first and fifth factors:
  – Education / curriculum
  – Culture of manhood

• We can also work to educate parents on these factors and the ones they have influence over
Possible solutions within the education system...

- Make Kindergarten more ‘boy friendly’:
  - Push the teaching of literacy back to 1st Grade and make K a place where kids learn to socialize
  - Include lots of opportunity for ‘action’ and movement (e.g. allow boys to sit or stand at desks)

- Relax behaviour expectations:
  - In-bounds vs. out-of-bounds snowball fighting
  - ‘Controlled’ play fighting activities (?)
Possible solutions within the education system…

• Encourage team competitions within the classroom or through team sports

• Re-establish a balance between teaching information and teaching through experience (e.g. Waldkindergarten, 189)

• Re-introduce single-sex classrooms / schools:
  – *With good leadership*, found to foster a culture in which it is ‘cool’ to study and do well (e.g. John, 213)
Providing models of manhood…

- Create separate-sex classrooms / schools with positive male leadership
- Explicitly teach what it means to be a man through providing examples of honourable men with strong positive values and character traits
- Provide opportunities for service; can even make this mandatory esp. in Gr. 5-7 (e.g. ‘Somos Amigos’ 181)
Providing models of manhood…

- Actively work to debunk destructive cultural idols (tell their story, get kids to do projects on them, etc.)

- Create a boys club and encourage / force participation

- Encourage participation in ‘Boy Scouts’

- Arrange an all-boy / male retreat (e.g. camping)
Possible solutions within the home setting…

- **Ensure video game playing is appropriate:**
  - **Monitor content:**
    - Don’t allow games in which the player is rewarded for killing police officers or non-combatant civilians (Especially games rated ‘M’)
  - **Limit time spent playing video games to:**
    - No more than 40 min per school day and one-hour per weekend day
    - Allow playing v.g. only after homework and chores are done
  - **Reinforce appropriate prioritizing:**
    - Family first, school second, friends next, video games last
Possible solutions within the home setting...

- Professor Craig Anderson (chairman of Dpt. of Psychology, U of Iowa) suggests, based on available research, that parents should play the games themselves or watch them being played and ask themselves the following:

  - Does it involve some characters trying to harm others?
  - Does this happen frequently (> 1 or 2x per 30min?)
  - Is the harm rewarded in any way?
  - Is the harm portrayed as humorous?
  - Are non-violent solutions absent or portrayed as ‘less fun’?
  - Are realistic consequences of violence absent from the game?

- If ‘yes’ to > 2 then probably best to not allow the game.
Possible solutions within the home setting…

- Protect your children from environmental endocrine disruptors:
  - Avoid soft vinyl toys or pacifiers that contain phthalates
  - Don’t microwave food in plastic containers
  - When reheating food in microwave, use a bowl with saran wrap on top but don’t let it touch the food
  - Avoid plastic food containers / bottles
  - Ensure that any sealants your child’s dentist puts on his teeth are phthalate-free
Possible solutions within the home setting...

• Provide positive male role models
  – Exposure to a variety of male relatives and adult friends
  – Organizations such as Big Brothers or other mentorship organizations
  – Involve boys in team sports

• If ADD / ADHD is suspected or diagnosed, be very careful and become informed regarding possible pharmaceutical interventions. Use these as last resort.
At the VERY least...

As educators and parents, we must strive to understand and respect the developmental and inherent differences between boys and girls and create home and learning environments that reflect this understanding and respect.