

# Helping **BOYS** Learn

6 SECRETS FOR TEACHING BOYS  
IN THE CLASSROOM  
*Teacher's Guide*

By Edmond J. Dixon, PhD



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## FOREWORD

This book is for those who want to help the boys in their lives be successful. It is addressed to teachers because although a boy's first experiences in learning occurs at home, it is at school—in the classroom—where most boys begin to encounter difficulties. A better understanding of how the brain's natural learning preferences can be used to help males learn is important for both teachers to help them be more effective—and to make their lives easier! It's no secret that the vast majority of disciplinary problems and frustration that teachers encounter in the classroom comes from the boys they teach. If you are a teacher reading this book, you care about personal growth and excellence in the classroom. You know your curriculum and probably already have a bag of “tricks” to help foster learning among your students. Most important, you are always on the lookout for ways that can help you improve your own skills to help students develop confidence and independence.

So what “secrets” can this book provide, particularly to those who already have experience helping boys learn? A look at the table of contents will reveal terms with which you are no doubt familiar. How can they be secrets? I like to compare it to a game my siblings and I played as children during long car trips. Our parents would challenge us to try to spot the red model of the Volkswagen Beetle and keep tally of how many we saw. As we started to play the game, we saw many we had never noticed before. Even in the weeks following the game, the car seemed to be everywhere and we wondered why there were so many on the road lately. Of course, there were no more Beetles on the road than before, but now we were aware of them. The cars were the same, but we were different. Anaïs Nin wrote, “We do not see the world as it is, we see it as we are.”

Your view of the world of boys' learning will be different when you see it through the lens of these six pathways and discover the often untapped power they offer to parents and teachers. This book is informed by recent understandings in brain science along with my

30-plus years of experience as a teacher, principal, researcher—and parent of boys. I have found this approach particularly helpful in motivating males who struggle to be successful in school. You, too, should be able to use these six pathways to take what you already know and experience with these boys (or more correctly, their male brains) and arrange them into an understandable framework. It will provide you with both an “aha!” moment *and* concrete, definable ways to foster more engagement, achievement, and independent growth and success with boys.

The practical application of what you learn here cannot be stressed enough. The bane of education is proffering theories and concepts that do not translate into effective action. You will be given powerful knowledge and be encouraged to use it. A process will be highlighted to help you use what you learn with your students, and you will be supported by a range of online resources designed to help them grow stronger as learners. This support means that this book is not an end in itself, but the beginning of a journey. My commitment to you is that, at the end of this book, through the lens of which you can now view male learners, you will be better prepared to foster more learning, joy, and success for everyone in your class!

## INTRODUCTION

### What's Up With Boys in School?

*“Of all the animals, the boy is the most unmanageable.”*

—Plato

It's in the air: concern about boys and school. In the past 10 years, an ever-increasing amount of educational literature in North America has been devoted to the disengaged, low-achieving, dropping-out young males. An overview of the research indicates that girls outperform boys at every grade level. Boys make up more than 65% of the students in special education, are much more likely to be diagnosed with autism and attention deficit disorders, are more likely to be held back a grade, and are twice as likely to drop out of school. The problem is particularly acute in areas of poverty.

It is easy to test the findings of the research at the ground level. Ask any teacher you know to think about the four students who struggle most in his classroom and present him with the most challenges. Then ask how many of those students are male—I am confident you will find that at least three of those students are boys. It wasn't long ago when we were vitally concerned with the problem of girls learning in school. What happened to that problem? Did we solve it so well that we disadvantaged boys in the process? And what about the glass ceiling? Doesn't it still exist? Isn't it still a pretty good world for the boys? The 2011 Slate article, *Sex Is Cheap: Why young men have the upper hand in bed, even when they're failing in life*, points out that young men's lack of success in education and achievement hasn't hurt them with the opposite sex, the way it might have in the past. Is it right to be concerned or are we overreacting?

I believe that the unease about boys and learning right now is well

placed. Indeed, their perceived problems may be much greater in the future than we realize. Girls' natural brain wiring ideally suits them to the challenges of an information-filled, collaborative, and post-modern society and places them in a learning "sweet spot" for our age. Supported by the policies that were put in place to help them succeed at school in the 1990s, they are more successful in school at every level. We will see females progressively mirroring this success in the 21st century workplace, breaking any and all barriers left in the glass ceiling. This is an obvious boon to them and to society.

On the other hand, the fact that many boys fall behind in school and fail to complete education at the higher levels required for effective future employment means they will be increasingly at a disadvantage to contribute meaningfully to society. And if history is any indicator, large numbers of unemployable and increasingly angry and frustrated young males are not good for any society. It can result, for one, in a violent and crime-ridden environment; it can also result in a culture of impoverished entitlement where males "play" all the time, but make little contribution—all the while being supported financially and emotionally by others. To a certain extent, evidence of this latter path is already appearing. Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men* is one book in a whole spate of what I would call "males are not fitting in" literature that is mirrored by the snowballing disengagement in school. In reality, both genders need to succeed equally in our educational systems for our social well-being. Addressing the present challenges that boys face in the classroom environment doesn't mean that girls will be disadvantaged. Indeed, finding true equity means recognizing what each child needs to learn. The issue of environment is at the core of what I will discuss in this book. Teachers create learning environments and have a tremendous amount of leeway in doing so. We know from neuroscience that the real learning happens when people are engaged and motivated to learn. How can we motivate boys to learn? I am convinced the secrets for this lie in channeling the strong tendencies that boys have developed through thousands of years to help them learn and survive in the world. When we create environments that do that, boys' learning becomes easier. They develop the confidence

and skills to use their talents effectively side by side with girls in ways that are positive for everyone.

Why focus on the classroom? Because despite all of the tremendous benefits a school can provide to boys in terms of athletics, social opportunities, and technological support, success in the traditional classroom environment has been the clearest indicator of success in both higher education and the broader society for the vast majority of males during past 50 years. Likewise, consistent failure in the classroom is the surest predictor of disengagement from school, disciplinary problems, dropping out, unemployment, drug use, and criminality in males. This makes sense. We tend to believe that education is the great equalizer, a pathway to help those from any economic or social background find a pathway to greater success and contribution to society.

As I argued in *KEEN for Learning*, despite the fact that the classroom is an artificial environment where we suspend the normal activities of life, we rely heavily on using this environment to help students learn. Look at almost any learning situation today for any age group; elementary or secondary school, college or university, corporate training, language instruction, driver's training, or hobby classes—the classroom is still the standard way for groups of people to learn. Even when students are working individually on computers, we often place them together in a classroom setting. It is true that online education is making impressive strides, but it is unlikely to replace the classroom anytime soon, especially for children. More important, the future potential of online learning will not help the boys in your life today when it is most important that they begin to experience success. Unless online learning meets males where their brains are, it will have no more success in fostering boys' learning than our present efforts.

One of the reasons people still go to school for classroom learning, despite the new learning opportunities available to individuals through the media and the Internet, is that most adults were taught in classrooms when they were young. It is so familiar that each of us feels that, in a sense, we understand the classroom because we have all experienced it. But for many boys, especially



those who struggle, the classroom is an alien environment that appears set up for one express purpose: *to keep them from learning*. A 6-year-old boy may not express this in words, but he knows it, feels it, intuitively. Some of you reading this will know a child who loves to learn yet hates school.

## The Fear Factor

Why doesn't a place designed for learning foster a passion for learning? Because we have failed to adequately answer this question in the learning environment of the classroom, a bizarre and ultimately heartbreaking thing occurs: A significant number of boys try and fail time after time. Remember the Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy pulls the football away every time Charlie Brown tries to kick it? Charlie wants to be successful; however, each time he tries, the ball is pulled away and he lands flat on his back. I have seen it repeated over and over in school: boys who want to believe that they can learn, but who, despite their best efforts, experience difficulties over and over again. Even worse, Charlie Brown has at least an inkling that it's Lucy's fault he's missing the ball, but a seven-year-old boy can't fathom that his parents or teachers would ever do such a thing. So he internalizes it. He begins to believe that he's the problem, he's defective, he's the failure. As we'll see, his brain has been wired by evolution in such a way that he must survive in a threatening environment. He will therefore increasingly exhibit "fight or flight" reactions, which can continue predictably for many years—until he can free himself of formal education and its constraints. But we know that such "freedom" actually imprisons an uneducated boy with the bondage of unfulfilled expectations, limited life choices, and self-loathing. Do you think I exaggerate? Talk to the guidance counsellor in any high school and you'll hear some unbelievably sad stories. Or ask those heartbroken parents who despair because their sons have grown into young adults with the belief that they cannot learn. This affects those young men profoundly, and is often reflected in self-destructive actions or refusal to pursue any positive pathways that might require a school-like environment.

We know from research that learning is the result of neural

pathways in the brain. We also know that the brain creates those pathways by paying attention to the experiences each of us have—in school and out. But it does not pay the same degree of attention to every experience. There are too many things going on around us. In his book, *The Mind's Past*, neuroscientist Michael Gazzinga estimates that 99% of the sensory data that comes into our brains is discarded. That is why you can sit at a city café near traffic and after a while not really “hear” it anymore. You can hear it in reality, but your brain has decided it’s not important enough to pay attention to on a conscious level. If we didn’t have this filtering ability, we would never really free our minds to focus on anything, and we most likely would never have grown into the complex learners that we are. But the filtering system is very sensitive: If you were in the café and heard a loud screeching sound, you would immediately direct your attention toward it. This is because the brain’s primitive warning mechanisms are kicking in to keep you safe, telling you to direct your attention toward something that might threaten your safety. In other words, the traffic sounds now mean something to you. But this meaning is based on fear.

Fear is a good way to create neural pathways that keep you safe in the jungle or in traffic, but it is not effective in school—particularly in our modern world. In boys in particular, it is processed in the primitive parts of the brain, including the amygdala, which evolved to prepare our bodies for fight-or-flight danger. This region is larger in boys and causes fearful emotions that shut down the frontal lobes, the exact parts of the brain needed for success in learning. This reversion to the ancient fight-or-flight approach happens often when boys face what they perceive as overwhelming odds. In other words, when they feel that “they can’t win.” Because fear causes such stress on the body, it can’t be maintained and is ineffective in motivating a long-term commitment to learning. Likewise, because fear is based on losing something, it focuses the mind on the immediate task of avoiding the loss and not the deeper understanding. Fear was a motivator for some learning in the past when if you didn’t learn a skill (spear throwing) you might not

eat, but the same threat is not present when learning fractions.

## A brain-friendly way for boys to learn

Because teachers appreciate clear and understandable writing, I have made a concentrated effort in this book to avoid jargon and unfamiliar terminology, but there are two new concepts that you need to understand if you want to use the 6 secrets to the best effect with boys. The first is *motivated engagement*. While fear will not create the neural connections in the brain necessary for school success, motivated engagement supercharges learning because it uses joy to connect us with learning. Think of the smile on a young boy's face when he first learns to walk or discovers something new in the grass. Look at the gleam in his eyes when he scores a goal, plays a video game, listens to music he loves, or watches a favorite television program. That happiness comes from learning! It is the joy of growth and all humans crave it. It causes us to look toward the future, dream dreams, and imagine what could be. This type of learning feeds growth and pulls us toward our own potential.

It also brings forth a second phenomenon. *Discretionary effort* is used when we do things that we are not required to do. It's demonstrated when we work that extra bit, go that extra mile, or connect a part of our identity with what we are doing and, by doing so, make it our own. It places us within an activity, actively seeking to influence it. It's something we do, not something done to us. It leverages the creation of neural pathways in the frontal lobes and brings our creativity to any problem—and it supercharges learning! But as its name implies, it is controlled completely by the individual. It is easily withheld, even when it looks like someone is giving their best. It cannot be demanded or required—only invited. The most pervasive social media phenomenon of our era is totally built on discretionary effort. Facebook is an online platform which has minimal features and structure and has no meaning until we use our discretionary effort to fill it up with information about ourselves and our world. And why do we do it? Because we have *motivated engagement* with the joy that comes from sharing ourselves with others. It's very simple, really. But it's the secret to Facebook's