

Helping **BOYS** Learn

6 Secrets for your son's success in school

Parent Edition

by Dr. Edmond J. Dixon

www.helpingboyslearn.com

© Hawker Brownlow Education



Republished in Australia by



PO Box 580, Moorabbin, Victoria 3189, Australia
Phone: (03) 8558 2444 Fax: (03) 8558 2400
Toll Free Phone: 1800 334 603 Fax: 1800 150 445
Website: www.hbe.com.au
Email: orders@hbe.com.au

Code: KDL6616
ISBN: 978 1 76001 661 6
0815

© 2015 Hawker Brownlow Education

Printed in Australia

Originally published in 2013 by Edmond J. Dixon

Terms of use for this publication

This work is copyright. Apart from fair dealings for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review, or as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth), no part should be reproduced, transmitted, stored, communicated or recorded, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner. Any enquiries regarding copyright or permissions must be made to Hawker Brownlow Education.

You may be entitled to reproduce or communicate from this publication for educational purposes under Part VB of the Copyright Act, or for government purposes under Part VII Division 2 of the Copyright Act 1968, on the following conditions:

1. You are the purchaser, or the employee of the purchaser, of this publication, AND
2. Each copy is used solely for your teaching purposes

Except as permitted by the copyright law applicable to you, you may not reproduce or communicate any CD, DVD or downloadable content purchased with this work without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Table of Contents

Forward

INTRODUCTION

What's Up With Boys in School?9

SECRET 1 – BOYS LEARN WHERE THE ACTION IS

Movement for engagement and understanding.....20

SECRET 2 – BOYS LEARN IN THE GAME

“Playing” with knowledge.....36

SECRET 3 – BOYS LEARN WITH LAUGHTER

Taking humor seriously for male motivation.....55

SECRET 4 – BOYS LEARN THROUGH CHALLENGE

A test of skills in a worthy cause.....70

SECRET 5 – BOYS LEARN BY MASTERY

Ownership as the pathway to passion.....83

SECRET 6 – BOYS LEARN FOR MEANING

“What is it good for? What am I good for?”.....105

AFTERWORD

Helping Boys Learn for the 21st Century.....127

HELPING BOYS LEARN

6 Secret Strategy List.....133

FOREWORD

This book is for those who want to help the boys in their lives be successful. *Helping Boys Learn* will give you what you need to help that young man love learning and perform better at home, in school, and throughout life. Although this book is addressed to parents, it is also for you if you are a guardian, grandparent, aunt, or uncle—or just a friend to a boy. If you have known this boy for any length of time you are well prepared for this! You have already been a teacher to him in your various interactions, whether you realized it or not. You may have also used some of the “6 Secrets” with him, albeit unconsciously. Now you will gain a better understanding of how these secrets powerfully sync with the male brain’s natural learning preferences and how they can motivate a boy to unleash the tremendous potential he possesses.

Empowering a boy to tap into his own reserves of understanding, commitment and resilience is the key to life-long success and is what our education system is supposed to do. Lately, however, schools have had trouble fulfilling this mission for millions of boys. As a result, not only do many boys fail in school, but they fail to see themselves as learners in any context, cutting themselves off from the opportunity for better, more productive, and happier lives. Their failure to reach their potential affects not only their lives, but those of their families and friends as well as the very fabric of our communities.

It is because successful learning is so important that home and school need to be intertwined. With the right approach, success in one area can foster success in the other. But it is best done consciously, with attention to what actually helps boys learn. That is what this book will provide. It is based on the most recent brain research and my own 30-plus years of experience as a teacher, principal, researcher—and parent of boys. It is written in easy-to-understand language and designed to

provide you with tools that can help a boy learn more successfully at home and at school.

By reading this, you show your commitment to helping your son become a happy and successful learner. Perhaps he has not been successful in school; perhaps he was an enthusiastic learner before going to school, but is resistant to classroom learning. Maybe, when you hear from his teacher, it is about how he is having problems and is unable to focus. Possibly he has been identified as having “special needs” or has been recommended for testing and/or medication. These are all stressful situations for children and parents and you may wonder how you can help him to be the kid you know he can be. I am here to tell you that—no matter what the situation in school—you can have a profound and positive effect on that boy’s learning.

The first step is to create understanding based on the right kind of information. So what “secrets” can this book provide? A look at the table of contents reveals familiar words like *movement*, *game*, and *challenge*. How can these things be secrets? I like to compare it to a game my family played as 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 untapped power they offer parents to influence their son’s learning. My own experience has convinced me that these secrets are important to

all boys, but particularly important for boys who struggle in school. You, too, can use these six pathways to take what you already know and experience with these boys (or more correctly, their male brains) and put them to use daily. It will provide you with both “aha!” moments and concrete, definable ways to foster engagement, achievement, independent growth, and success with boys.

The practical application of what you learn here cannot be stressed enough. You will be given powerful knowledge and be encouraged to use it. A process will be provided to help you use what you learn with your son, and you will be supported by a range of online resources designed to help him grow stronger as a learner. This support means that this book is not an end in itself, but the beginning of a journey that will bring learning, joy, and success to everyone involved.

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 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 students who struggle most in class. Then ask how many of those students are male—I am confident you will discover that 75% of them 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 unease about boys and learning right now is well placed. Indeed, their perceived problems may be much greater in the future than we realize. The policies to help girls in school have had a strongly positive impact over the past 20 years. Yet the world has changed tremendously due to the Internet and our worldwide connectivity. 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 benefit 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 participate meaningfully. If history is any indicator, large numbers of unemployable and increasingly angry and frustrated young men 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 men “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 their snowballing disengagement in school.

In reality, both genders need to succeed equally in our educational systems for our social well-being. Addressing the challenges that boys face in school doesn't mean that girls will be disadvantaged. Indeed, finding true equity means recognizing what each child

needs to learn. And for you, as a parent, it is crucial: What does my son need to learn best?

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 answer lies 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. In school, it is important that boys see the classroom as a place where he can learn.

Why is the classroom so important? Because despite 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 men 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 because education has always been a great equalizer, a pathway to help those from any economic or social background find greater success and contribute to society.

As I argued in *KEEN for Learning*, despite the fact that the classroom is an artificial environment in which we suspend the normal activities of life, we rely heavily on this environment to help students learn. That may be changing with increasing online education, but it is still the way society expects children to learn in school. 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. 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 have a son who loves to learn, yet hates school.

The Fear Factor

When learning does not involve the six secrets I highlight in this book, a significant number of boys try and fail time after time in the classroom environment. 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? I have talked with too many heartbroken parents who now despair for their sons, who grew into young adults saddled with the belief that they could not

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