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## Engaging Boys in Learning

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Teaching and engaging boys is a mix of being an ace motivational coach with being an overly active events manager while being big-hearted while having the stern eye of a store detective. In short, not complicated at all!

Having a brother is like having a best friend who occasionally wants to kill you. For boys, having a best friend is a lot like having a brother. This means for most of the time, the social world of boys is fantastic but when things turn nasty they need lots of support and care. When a trusted mate turns on them, they feel betrayed, deeply hurt and overwhelmed.

At a minimum, they need to feel attached to and supported by at least one person at home, one adult at school and one adult in an area of their interest or passion.

### The Great Languishing

After a few disruptive years, too many of our boys have flopped back into school, listless and half-motivated, slightly dishevelled, sullen and if pressed upon, cantankerous. It is easy to point the finger at the likely causal factors. What is more difficult is to devise a remedy. This paper invites you to contribute your thoughts on this.

Re-engaging these boys back into learning is critical for their futures. This is not a matter of coercion or persuasion. It is a matter of re-enchantment.

### Boy smarts

Boys are the '*masters of minimalism*' and the practitioners of '*just-in-time*' management. Asked to do almost any task, their immediate response is 'later'. If they are asked to write a 50-word essay, they will count the words and if they write 51 words most of them will think they have overdone it.

If you have predominantly boys in your classroom there are several things that you can do to improve behaviour and learning. While there will be exceptions, these methods are likely to work with most boys.

### Respect

Boys are constantly checking to see if you respect them. They respond well to people who have expectations of them and respect them as capable of meeting those goals. If a boy has a sense that you respect him, he will walk over coals for you. If he thinks you disrespect him, he will shut down, dispute almost everything you say and dismiss anything you suggest.

The first way to increase respect is to know and use their name at every opportunity. Rather than asking, '*does anyone know the next step in solving this*' (a sure-fire way to be confronted by a stony wall of silence) instead use their names and say, '*Will, what do you think our next step in solving this could be*'?

Requesting specific boys to help with small tasks (handing out papers, moving chairs, explaining what's been covered to a later arriving student) builds connection and loyalty. Be careful never to turn a request into a demand. If you make a request and they decline it, move on (but don't give up requesting help from that boy in the future).

Never ask a boy who is a poor reader to read out loud in front of his peers. He will be humiliated and will never do anything for you ever again.

## **Feedback**

Effective feedback for most boys is like coaching. Direct your feedback towards specific next action steps. Notice two things you like, tell them you like them and then say, *'and the next step is to do...'*

Acknowledging the effort rather than person doesn't work. They just don't 'buy' it. Being seen as a 'try-hard' is tantamount to social sabotage especially in the middle teen years. Appearing to be effortlessly successful is much more prestigious.

Praising effort doesn't work because in reality, some of them don't make much of an effort. They know it (in fact some of them have perfected the art of minimal input) and they know that you know it too.

## **Learning Strengths Rule!**

Ask them to complete (with their parents, if you wish) an analysis of their learning strengths at [www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com) and ask them to share their findings with you.

Use these results to plan with them and their parents a strategy for building upon their learning strengths over the next term.

Use this in differentiated activities and acknowledge this when you can. For example, *'Alan I know you have learning strengths in spatial reasoning, what are your thoughts about...?'*

Helping boys to understand that different people have different learning strengths and therefore can make different contributions lessens the sense of a competitive hierarchy.

Have them repeat the learning strength assessment every 6 months with their parent(s).

## **Have clear signals about who is in charge**

Boys need boundaries, structure, and clarity. They need to know who is in charge here. They respond to adults who are fair, funny and respect their points of view and they generally do better with teacher led learning. Open spaced learning areas where no one clearly owns the space can be quite anxiety provoking for boys and that anxiety converts into expressions of low motivation and clowning type behaviours.

## **Use physical signals when you want silence**

Boys need more physical signals because they are less tuned into facial cues. Boys are more able to screen out white noise. (Teachers requesting quiet = white noise; parents providing pep talks = white noise).

Deliver most instructions in silence. Use visual cues, raising a hand, turning lights off and on, and moving to a particular part of the room. Never, ever yell.

When you make an instruction, use a backup visual that you can point to for boys who have difficulty attending.

## **Fewer rules and fewer words are better**

Have a couple (no more than three) clear principles that you apply fairly and consistently. Have a couple of core values (e.g., kindness, generosity, being part of a team). Live by them and insist upon them. Base your classroom management on the idea of, *"I won't let this happen to you and I won't let you do it to anyone else"*.

## **Value them and they will be heroes**

Help boys to learn that they can be heroes and victorious but that winning doesn't mean someone else has to lose.

Great men make other people feel bigger.  
Lesser men make other people feel small.

## **Use knowledge from computer games as an inspiration for learning**

Today's boys belong to the Fortnite generation. Their attraction to competitive games will override almost any disadvantage or loss of motivation. They love competitive games especially when there is not an ultimate winner. This creates surges in their dopamine pathways.

Quick fire quizzes with several rounds are a successful way of engaging boys.

Computer game designers have cleverly used the principles of engagement to captivate boys:

- \* Make success challenging but attainable by breaking it down into stages.
- \* Make success more likely than failure, The most motivating games have players succeed about 80% of the time initially before building up to 100% before moving to the next level
- \* Give them the opportunity to try again.
- \* Try to create a sense of moratorium where they can try to out new activities in a setting where there are no consequences.
- \* Use lots of movement. Rhythmic movements increase dopamine.

Pay attention to less competitive, sensitive boys. Assisting them to attain personal bests can be useful.

Give boys more time to answer and to assemble the words and give them a chance to phone a friend (the friend cannot answer the question but can make helpful suggestions).

## **Move regularly.**

Teaching and motivating boys is like being a cross between a matador and a traffic cop. Keep on the move and mingle with the crowd.

Don't give them 'brain breaks'. Keep them on-task while being active.

Boys see things best in motion. Use visuals and animations as often as you can. Boys love targeting. If you have ever watched boys place rubbish into bins you'll notice that they don't place it, they take a shot. For this reason, movement and aiming to achieve a set target are powerful strategies with boys.

## **Control where they sit**

Move boys who do not appear to be paying attention to the front. Proactively shift the seating of boys who seem unsettled or distracted. They will often be playing up to impress their local audience.

## **Boys need quiet times**

In order to reflect and re-energise, boys need quiet times to think, read and at times quietly chat with others. Arrange schools so that there are quiet spots for thinking.

## **Know about anger**

Anger and shame can stop boys learning and once boys are angry, it is harder for them to get over it. If they feel you are going to shame them in front of their peers they will fight you tooth and nail. Most boys will do silly, self-defeating things rather than lose the respect of their peers.

Take your sail out of their winds. Deal with issues at a time of your choosing not when the boy wants to deal with it. If you really must pick a battle with a boy, see him after class (for your own protection, always keep doors open when you see them in private).

## **Teach boys how to contribute to great conversations**

While there are some incredibly articulate boys there are also those who think that shuffling their feet, avoiding eye contact, and mumbling monosyllables such as 'what' and 'dunno' is a sufficient level of social contribution.

Model to boys how to create and expand on a great conversation. This is something that is best learned in school.

## **Boys are loyal and funny**

Boys love the 'inside word', the cheat sheet and they love to score. Giving them hints suggestions and a way to succeed builds their loyalty to you. Boys buy popularity through achievement, jokes, and skills. Humour is an essential quality. Make it smart to be smart.

## **Boys generally learn through doing- thinking- talking**

Boys like movement and activity. They are also concerned with performance. While some boys will be inherently interested in the material, almost all boys engage when there is a competitive spirit. The more that you mimic a game show format the more boys will be engaged.

## **Get the Neuro-mix right and they will learn**

Many of the actions of students are not driven by conscious thought. While this is true for all students, it is especially true for those boys who are not naturally self-reflective.

Behind motivation, task orientation and engagement lie a mix of neurochemicals- dopamine, cortisol, adrenaline and serotonin.

When schools and teachers know how to raise and lower these at various stages of a lesson, they are much more likely to engage boys in learning.

## **More information**

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Andrew's websites

[www.andrewfuller.com.au](http://www.andrewfuller.com.au)

[www.mylearningstrengths.com](http://www.mylearningstrengths.com) has helped over 200,000 young people discover their learning strengths.

## **Books for Parents**

*Neuroadvantage: The Strengths-Based Approach to Neurodivergence* (available in June 2025)

*Tricky Behaviours*

*The A to Z of Feelings*

*Unlocking Your Child's Genius* (Amba Press)

## **Books for Teachers**

*Guerilla Tactics for Teachers*

*Tricky Behaviours*

*Tricky Teens*

*Unlocking Your Child's Genius*

*Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems to Maximise Learning* (Amba Press)

