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## Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men

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*Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men*

Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D., 2007  
New York, New York: Perseus Book Group

Reviewed by Jenni Williams

While conducting a presentation to parents, Dr. Leonard Sax was asked a series of questions by parents with concerns about the development of their sons. The problems ranged from lack of motivation to acting out at school and home. The discussion sparked interest for further research and led Dr. Sax to identify chemical, cultural, and environmental factors which may be negatively impacting the development of young men. In his book, he identifies five factors that may be contributing to a lack of motivation and drive among young men. These factors are changes in education, video games, ADHD medication, environmental toxins, and the loss of positive role models.

Sax devotes a chapter exploring each of these factors, including personal research, clinical studies, and testimonials of those affected. He presents findings from his experience as a medical doctor and psychologist. Additionally, he has conducted extensive research related to gender issues and the science of sex differences. While his findings are not prescriptive, they do illuminate an area of concern for both professionals and parents.

First, he identifies the ways that education has changed. Students are expected to enter into rigorous study at a younger age, and most five-year-old boys are not prepared for these high expectations. In many cases, these demands set them up for failure and cause them to disconnect from the learning experience (pp. 19-21). The second factor identified

by Sax is video games. He identifies first-person shooter and violent video games as specific problems. In these environments, boys can control their world and experience dominance that they may not experience in the real world. This leads to a detachment from reality and desire to escape into fantasy. The third factor is ADHD medication. Sax states that there is a growing number of students who have been prescribed stimulant drugs to treat ADHD, when they may not actually have the disorder. He draws a correlation between the dependence upon stimulant medications and a lack of motivation and drive (pp. 89-91). The fourth factor is environmental toxins. He presents research on chemicals in plastic that are polluting our drinking water and our bodies. There is concern related to consumption of these chemicals during pregnancy and their effect on cognitive and sex development of babies in utero. Finally, he recognizes that there is a disconnect between males and their sons. In cultures that have endured for hundreds of years, there is a distinct process where the older males train the young men how to be “men:” how to treat a woman, how to behave, how to provide, and so on. In these rituals of “passing the torch,” young men have clear expectations set before them. In the American culture, there is no such process.

In recent years, kindergarten has evolved into an “academic kindergarten.” The changes require that kindergartners perform on the academic level of what was previously first grade. Children are expected to enter kindergarten with a list of competencies, prepared to tackle reading and math. The days of finger painting and naptime are over. Sax points out that most five-year-old girls are prepared to engage in this environment, while most five-year-old boys are not. He references a study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which shows that brain development in young girls is “roughly two years ahead” of brain development in boys (p. 17). Therefore, boys are more likely to be frustrated by the academic demands of the today’s kindergarten curriculum, which may cause them to dismiss school altogether.

The author highlights a variety of teaching and learning environments throughout the book that have been successful in meeting the educational needs of young boys. Among these are competitive learning environments (pp. 42-48), *Waldkindergarten* or “forest kindergarten” (p. 189), and single-sex classrooms/schools (pp. 212-215). Each of these environments offer benefits for learning, however, they may not be conducive to the needs of every child.

Sax spends significant time addressing the implications of chemicals on the development of boys. First, he explores the rise in children diagnosed with ADHD and the subsequent increase in prescriptions for stimulant medications, such as Ritalin, Adderall, Concerta, among others. He references a study conducted by Harvard on juvenile laboratory animals, which shows that these medications cause damage to a part of the brain called the *nucleus accumbens*.

This is the portion of the brain that “is responsible for translating motivation into action” (p. 90). The study reported that the animals look fine, however they were lazy and unmotivated to do any work. The second chemical factor is related to phthalates found in plastics. These can be found in plastic bottles, pacifiers, and baby bottles. As babies, even in utero, come into contact with phthalates, they experience damage to their developing brains. Sax recommends that parents remove plastics that contain phthalates from their households.

Sax also provides insight into a frightening trend, in which young men are more comfortable with the virtual worlds of their Xbox console and are more likely to seek sexual satisfaction through pornography instead of engaging in a meaningful relationship with a living, breathing woman. Boys and young men experience a level of control in these virtual worlds that they may not experience in the real world, which places them on a dangerous trajectory as they learn from these fantasy worlds how to interact with others and women.

While Sax is not writing from a Christian viewpoint, I believe that his book has application for those in Christian higher education. It is troubling to read about the emotional disconnect boys are experiencing, as they become disillusioned with learning and are medicated simply to meet the demands of the classroom. In my work with college students, I have witnessed exceptionally bright young men begin their freshman year with excitement only to drop out after their second semester because they have no motivation simply to attend class. Based on Sax’s work, this could be symptomatic of the disconnect with learning and the need to escape into a fantasy environment where there is “will to power” (pp. 56-58).

As Christians student affairs professionals, we should be enthusiastic proponents for equipping young men to enter manhood and for preparing them with the support they will need to fill this role. This should stem from our interaction with students in both the curricular and co-curricular environments. The awareness of the challenges facing these young men better equips those in student affairs to intervene and support the success of these students. 

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