

Building Social Connections: How Research supports Boys' Schools

Abigail Norfleet James, Ph.D.

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New ideas about the adolescent brain (ages 10-20+)

- What we used to think
 - Brain is at its most plastic when in infancy, so as we age, we are less able to learn from experience
 - Giedd: teen is not an old child brain nor a half-baked adult brain
- What we now know
 - Limbic system (emotions) is rapidly developing in the adolescent, but the prefrontal lobe (decision making) is not – creates a mismatch
 - Rapid brain growth combined with neuronal pruning creates a brain which is changing rapidly – can be very scary to both adolescents and those who work with them, but also creates a huge opportunity to develop new approaches to learning
 - Individuals become very responsive to social cues and to rewards

Relationships and Connections

- Critical periods of development
 - Language, before age 12
 - Sensitivity to social others, age 14
- Social and emotional learning
 - Boys more responsive to social goals and will self-handicap to maintain social status
 - Very responsive to cues from agemates, especially when working in groups
 - Supports Reichart & Hawley (2014) Boys as relational learners
- Negative experiences
 - Harmful events may lead to vortices from which it is difficult to recover
 - Early experimentation with drugs and alcohol more likely to result in addiction

Respect for self and others

- The connection to others is also a need to connect to the world
 - Contributing to society helps guard adolescents against depression and anxiety
 - Contributions need to be real, valuable, and effects need to be obvious
- Respect students' thoughts, beliefs, and ideas as laying the groundwork for the adults they will become
 - Teach lessons based on evidence – less on personal beliefs
 - Don't challenge them, ask them to provide evidence

Disinformation and Adolescents

- Children are targets for propaganda and half-truths, and conspiracy theories (fake news)
 - Especially at age 14!
 - This is probably connected to the rapid neuronal growth
- How can schools deal with this?
 - Historians and students often fooled by fake news especially when using social media, but journalism fact-checkers were not because they compared to other sites rather than testing the truth within a site
 - Media literacy programs have increased students' distrust and cynicism
 - Better approach is to teach scientific thinking and problem solving as part of civics, media literacy, journalism, and IT encouraging students to be engaged members of society
 - Teach skepticism

What do Adolescents Need to Succeed?

- A number of studies have similar findings
 - Combination of social support and grit
 - Social emotional learning combined with social support
 - School belonging
- All agree that students need to feel like the school provides a place where they belong and where they feel like they are a part of the community
 - This is the third step in Maslow's hierarchy of needs after providing food and shelter and safety
- The common element in these studies is that students who believed that when both faculty and fellow students supported them in their efforts, they were more likely to work hard and were less likely to be frustrated when their efforts were not successful.
 - Grit is just the ability to keep going when things get hard and when you feel that others "have your back" you are more likely to persevere
 - Social isolation (the pandemic) may have created massive problems

How is this different for boys?

- A study looked at gender differences in risk and how that affected empathy, impulsivity and antisocial tendencies as measured in other-oriented behaviors – in this study, trust and reciprocity
- An economic game was used to determine gender differences, and none were found for reciprocity
- Both this study and others cited in this work did find that boys trusted others more
- The likelihood of trust combined with the adolescent need for social support indicate that boys' schools need to be very careful in monitoring places where trust can be exploited such as
 - Bullying – cyber and personal
 - Exclusive groups (such as clubs, athletic teams, and art/drama groups)
 - SES, racial groups, ethnicities

Moral development and sports

- Social relationships important for adolescents and particularly for boys
- Sports teams are important groups for many boys and are shaped by coaches and other leaders
- As level of unethical behavior on the part of the coach increases (allowing students to exhibit unsportsmanlike behavior) students will display more moral disengagement
- Younger athletes (especially boys) valued winning over sportsmanship. As students aged, the results of behavior were more likely to be considered in on-field behavior and coaching intervention
- Coaches interested in helping students develop psychosocial skills and all-inclusive growth, focused most on mastering skills, social connections, and teamwork and least on winning. These also provided community service opportunities to promote life skills and citizenship

Concussions (new findings)

- We already knew that athletes with multiple TBIs and students with learning disabilities were more likely to have lower cognitive test scores which may progress over time
- There is a need to do regular baseline cognitive testing for athletes with LD to ensure that academic challenges do not progress in these students as a result of head injuries
- Students with ADHD and prior concussion had longer recovery times.
 - One concern is that neurostimulant meds used by students with ADHD may affect recovery
 - Other factors which affected recovery were ethnic/cultural expectations, family expectations, social support, individual motivation and coping skills (this study done in Houston, TX)
 - Study reveals that girls have longer recovery times, not sure what this means

Creativity

- Creativity involves both novel/original and useful/adaptive thoughts or behaviors
 - Has to show both to be truly creative
- Females showed left side brain component in exhibiting creativity and males showed right side brain usage
 - Language skills vs. spatial skills
 - Greater connectivity in female brain – males may find it harder to articulate something they have created
- ADHD shows a positive connection to creativity
 - Authors mention the connection of ADHD to hunter-gatherer skills
 - Need to recognize that ADHD may be a survival skill and we need to rethink this condition as not a disorder but as a “mode of thought”
 - ADHD is a problem only in situations where control is required

Conclusion

- Social connections are vital for boys to develop into good men
- Boys' schools are aware of the need to provide opportunities in all parts of the school for their students to connect with fellow classmates, the entire student body, the adults in the school, and the larger community.
- It is by providing those opportunities that boys' schools become safe places allowing boys the space and support to develop into strong, positive members of their community and the world in which they will enter.

• ajames@anj-online.com