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"A must-read for any parent of boys."—**DR. MEHMET OZ**, Professor and Vice Chairman,  
New York Presbyterian Hospital, Columbia University

# boys adrift

**THE FIVE FACTORS DRIVING THE GROWING EPIDEMIC OF  
UNMOTIVATED BOYS AND UNDERACHIEVING YOUNG MEN**

video games • teaching methods  
prescription drugs • environmental toxins  
devaluation of masculinity

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD FROM THE AUTHOR

**Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D.**

Author of *Why Gender Matters*

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# THE RIDDLE

I didn't know what to say.

"What do you mean?"  
I asked.

I'd just finished speaking to a parents' group

in CALGARY, ALBERTA,  
in MARCH 2004.

"I mean that he doesn't do his homework and he won't study for tests.

He doesn't seem to care whether he gets an A or a C or an F."

The talk

—>

about the subtleties of difference between

- how girls and boys learn,
- how they play, and
- how they are motivated—

had gone well.

"How old is he?"  
I asked.

"Sixth grade."

I began doing these talks for parents' groups, and for schools,  
in 2001.

"Umm.  
What does he like to do in his spare time?"  
I asked.

By MARCH 2004

I was pretty comfortable with the format.

"Actually Billy loves to read.

Science fiction mostly.

He just refuses to read the books the school assigns.

I don't know why he seems to hate school so much.

It's a good school."

The presentation is the easy part.

The questions afterward are more difficult.

<sup>2</sup>  
BOYS ADRIFT

"Which school does he attend?"  
I asked.

"Dr. Sax, my son Billy<sup>1</sup> is very bright," one father said.

"We've had him tested, twice, and both times his overall IQ has been  
in the 130 range.

But he just has no motivation to learn."

Dad named a local private school that I knew to be very prestigious.

- Class sizes at that school are small.
- The teachers are well trained and highly regarded.

- Tuition is more than twenty thousand dollars a year.

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**Stall for time.**

“Have you spoken with anyone at the school?”  
I asked.

He nodded.

“The school counselor thinks Billy might have ADD, but I just don’t buy that.

- How could he have ADD?
- He’s read [Isaac Asimov](#)’s entire *Foundation trilogy* twice.
- He can quote whole passages from *The Lord of the Rings*; he’s even memorized some of the poems in Elvish.
- That just doesn’t sound to me like a boy who has ADD. Billy loves to read.

He just doesn’t like school.”

**I paused.**

I wanted to say that I couldn’t give any specific advice without meeting Billy myself and doing my own evaluation, an evaluation that would take a minimum of two hours.

That was the truth

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but I knew it would sound like a cop-out, since I was flying out early the next morning to return to my home in the suburbs of Washington, DC.

There would be no time to meet with Billy on this trip.

**While I hesitated,**

a woman spoke up:

“My son’s in a similar predicament, but he’s younger.

- Second grade.
- Outside of school my Jason is as sweet as an angel.
- But he’s been sent to the principal’s office several times now for hitting other kids.
- He says he was just playing.
- He’s never actually hurt anybody, but the teachers say they have to refer any child who hits another child.
- **Referral to a specialist is mandatory after three episodes.**
- So now they’re saying that I have to have Jason evaluated.”

I wanted to point out that Jason’s predicament wasn’t in any way similar to Billy’s situation.

- Billy hasn’t been hitting anybody, but he seems to lack the motivation to succeed at school.
- Jason’s problems seem to be not motivational but behavioral.

**But I knew better than to say that.**

- **I just didn’t know what to say.**
- **So I turned the tables.**

**I asked** the parents a question of my own:

“How many of you are in a similar situation:  
You have a son who’s having school problems of some kind,  
but it’s not clear why?”

About half the parents raised their hands.

“I’d like to hear from you, then.

What do you think is going on?

Do you have any thoughts as to why your son is having a problem?”

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“School has become too academic,” one father said immediately.

“Kindergarten isn’t kindergarten anymore.

- My son, and my daughter last year, came home with homework their first week of kindergarten.
- Can you imagine assigning homework to kids in kindergarten?
- Five year-old kids with an hour of homework to do.
- It’s absurd.
- No wonder kids hate school.”

Several parents nodded.

But why would that affect boys more than girls,

I wanted to ask.

Another father said,

“The schools have become feminized.

- The only adult male at my son’s elementary school is the janitor.
- The teachers all want the students to sit still and be quiet.
- For some boys, that’s not easy.”

“It’s not the teachers who are to blame,”  
a woman said softly but firmly.

“It’s the kids.

- I’m sorry, I don’t mean to give offense, but kids today are lazy.
- The boys especially.
- They’d rather just sit at home and play video games.
- They wouldn’t go to school at all if it were up to them.
- I know a boy across the street who doesn’t do anything except play with his PlayStation.
- He doesn’t do homework, he doesn’t help around the house, he doesn’t play sports.
- It’s just video games, video games, video games.”

More nods.

“When I was their age, we had to walk to school, three miles each way, no matter the weather,” an older man said.

“We didn’t have any of these school buses you see nowadays.

- We had to walk.
- Even in the snow.

play hard to get

And I’ll tell you one thing.

When you’ve walked three miles in the snow to get to school, you make darn sure you learn something.

You don’t want that long walk to be for nothing.

I think it motivates you.

- Nowadays the kids get chauffeured everywhere.
- No wonder they don’t have any motivation.
- They don’t have to work for anything.”

No one made any reply.

After a moment, a young woman said, “I read somewhere that plastic might have something to do with it.”

“How do you mean?”  
I asked.

“Something about plastic.

It’s like hormones in beef.

It messes up children’s brains.

That’s why so many boys are having problems.”

That sounds a little far-fetched, I wanted to say.

But I’ve learned that  
it’s best to humor the people with the wackiest ideas —>  
while still expressing courteous skepticism,  
so that the sane people won’t think  
you’ve completely lost your marbles.

### BOYS ADRIET<sup>4</sup>

“But why would plastic affect boys differently from girls?”  
I asked politely.

“Aren’t girls and boys equally exposed?”

“I don’t know.  
It just does,” the woman said.

The pace of my speaking engagements, both for parents and for teachers, picked up substantially after the publication

in 2005 of my book

*Why Gender Matters:  
What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging  
Science of Sex Differences.*

I’ve now spoken at more than 260 venues around the

- United States,
- Canada,
- Mexico,
- Australia,
- England, and
- Scotland.

The scene described above has been repeated dozens of times.

I’ve engaged in ongoing correspondence with parents and teachers who are struggling to encourage boys to work up to their potential. And of course I’ve seen many such boys in my own medical practice in Maryland.

I’ve heard any number of explanations for why so many boys are having trouble connecting with school.

- Some parents blame the school.
- In some cases, Mom believes it’s because the boy’s father walked out when her son was little, so he’s never had a strong male role model.
- Others blame video games or “society” or plastics or Hollywood.
- One parent even blamed Hillary Clinton,
- and several blamed George W. Bush.

“What’s the connection between  
President Bush and your son’s problems in school?”  
I asked that parent.

“Our country is spending so much money on that stupid war, when we ought to be spending money on the schools,” she replied.

But how would spending more money on public schools help your son, I wondered.

- Your son attends a private school.
- But I didn’t ask that question.
- I wasn’t interested in having an argument.
- I was interested in finding some answers.
- I’m a family physician.
- I’ve lived and worked in the same suburb of Washington, DC, for the past seventeen years.
- We have more than seven thousand patients in our practice.
- I’ve seen hundreds of families where the girls are the smart, driven ones, while their brothers are laid-back and unmotivated.
- The opposite pattern  
—with the boy being the intense, successful child while his sister is relaxed and unconcerned about her future—  
is rare.

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It’s not just my suburb, either.

As you and I review what’s known about this problem, we will see that the problem of boys disengaging from school and from the American dream is widespread.

It affects every variety of community:

- urban,
- suburban, and
- rural;
- white,
- black,
- Asian, and
- Hispanic;
- affluent,
- middle-income, and
- low-income.

The end result of this spreading malaise is becoming increasingly familiar.

- Emily (or Maria or Shaniqua) goes to college, she earns her degree, she gets a job.
  - She has a life.
- Justin (or Carlos or Damian) may go to college for a year, or two, or six, and
  - he may or may not get a degree, but he doesn't get very far.
  - He may have a great time at college, in part because **there are now three girls at college for every two boys.**

At **some large universities, there are now two young women for every young man.**

- But the young women at college are more likely to be studying while the young men are goofing off.<sup>2</sup>
- That boy just doesn't seem to have the drive that his sister has.
- He ends up working part-time at the mall or at Starbucks.
- Eventually he's back home living with his parents, or with his girlfriend's parents or another relative.

But here's what's really strange, and new, about this picture:

- That young man isn't bothered by his situation.
- His parents are.
- His girlfriend, if she hasn't left him yet, is at least having second thoughts about him.
- But he's oblivious to their concerns as he surfs the Net on the computer they've provided, or plays video games on the flat-screen television they bought for him.

## But haven't boys always been that way?

During the question-and-answer section of another one of my talks focusing specifically on boys, one father objected:

"Dr. Sax, I'm not hearing anything new here.

- Haven't boys always regarded school as a boring waste of time?
- Wasn't that pretty much Tom Sawyer's attitude?
- What's changed?"

He's got a point.

There's a long tradition of iconic American boys who disdain school, from Tom Sawyer to Ferris Bueller.

**But while those boys weren't heavily invested in school, they were still highly motivated to succeed**  
**—on their own terms, pursuing their own schemes.**

TOM SAWYER is determined to

- outwit INJUN JOE, to
- go exploring with HUCK FINN, and to
- win the affection of BECKY THATCHER.

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# DOONESBURY



by G.B. Trudeau



Ferris Bueller disdains school because he has other more important and engaging missions to accomplish in the real world

—>

which for him is any world outside of school.

What's troubling about so many of the boys I see in my practice, or the boys I hear about from parents and teachers, is that they don't have much passion for any real-world activity.

Some of the boys are seriously engaged in video games, but as we'll see in CHAPTER 3, most of the video games these boys play seldom connect with the real world

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unless you want to shoot people or fly combat aircraft.

The boys I'm most concerned about don't disdain school because they have other real-world activities they care about more.

- They disdain school because they disdain everything.
- Nothing really excites them.
- Even more disturbing is the fact that so many of these boys seem to regard their laid-back, couldn't-care-less attitude as being somehow quintessentially male.

"You need to care about what grade you get. It's important," one mother told her son.

"Girls care about getting good grades.

Geeks care about grades.

Normal guys do not care about grades,"

her fourteen-year-old son informed her in a matter-of-fact tone, the same tone he might use to show her how to program the TiVo.

That's just the way it is  
—for that boy.

For many boys, not caring about anything has become the mark of true guy dom.

This attitude is something new, as we'll see in more substantive detail beginning in the NEXT CHAPTER.

The hostility I'm seeing toward school among so many boys

—>

no longer confined to black and Latino boys in low-income neighborhoods, but now including white and Asian boys in affluent suburbs—

is also new.

If you're my age, or older, you can remember forty years ago when the BEACH BOYS had a major hit with their song

"Be True to Your School":

"Be true to your school . . . just like you would to your girl."

That song describes a boy who is proud to wear a sweater emblazoned with the school's initials, a boy who insists that allegiance to one's school should be on a par with the enthusiasm a boy has for his girlfriend.

There is no trace of irony in the song.

If you're my age or older, you remember SAM COOKE singing

"Don't know much about history . . . but maybe by being an A-student, baby / I could win your love for me" in his song "WONDERFUL WORLD."

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BOYS ADRIET

It's hard to imagine any popular male vocalist singing such a line today, except as a joke.

Can you imagine Akon or 50 Cent or Snoop Dogg or even Taylor Hicks singing, without irony and in all seriousness, about wanting to earn an A at school to impress a girl?

I can't.

These changes may be insignificant by themselves, but I believe they are symptomatic of something deeper.

- As we'll see in the NEXT CHAPTER, a growing proportion of boys are disengaging from school.
- More and more of them will tell you that school is a bore, a waste of time, a tedium they endure each day until the final bell rings.



As far as the boy is concerned, his real life  
—the life he cares about—  
only begins each day when the final bell rings, allowing him  
finally to leave school and do something he really cares about.

“What he really cares about” may be

- playing video games,
- hanging out with his friends, or
- doing drugs and alcohol.
- It may be anything at all—

except for school or anything connected with school.

“But you need to care about your schoolwork, or you won’t get into a good college,” his mom says.

“I hate school,” her son answers.

“It’s like prison.

I’m just doing my time till they let me out.

Then I’m done.

Why would I want to sign up for four more years?”

A smaller and smaller proportion of boys are going on to college.

Right now, the student body at the average university in the United States is

- 58 percent female,
- 42 percent male

(with similar numbers in Canada and Australia).<sup>3</sup>

And going to college doesn’t guarantee any positive result, particularly for boys.

In fact, college is where the gender gap in motivation really shows up.

- Most girls who enroll in a four-year college will eventually earn a degree.
- Most boys won’t.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past fifty years, college campuses have undergone a sex change:

→

they’ve changed from majority male to majority female.

Here are the numbers for the male proportion of students enrolled in four year colleges and universities in the United States, 1949–2006:

1949: 70 percent of undergraduate students were male

1959: 64 percent were male

1969: 59 percent were male

1979: 49 percent were male

1989: 46 percent were male

1999: 44 percent were male

2006: 42 percent were male<sup>5</sup>

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Colleges and universities now are scrambling to recruit qualified males.

- One mother told me that when it was time for her son to apply to college, she had some worries that turned out to be misplaced.
- Her recollection of her own college experiences thirty years ago led her to be concerned that admission offices would discriminate against her son, because, after all, he is a white male.
- “Instead,” she said in her e-mail to me, “I found that males today are on the receiving end of a kind of affirmative action for any boys who test well.”
  - This gets them into college,
  - but doesn’t teach them how to cope with the bigger choices they will eventually have to face.”

Male students attending four-year colleges and universities today are now significantly less likely than their female peers to earn high honors or to graduate.

Just thirty years ago, the opposite was true:

in that era, young men were more likely than young women to graduate.<sup>6</sup>

Today, Justin is significantly less likely than his sister Emily to go to college, less likely to do well at college, and less likely to graduate from college.

- This is not an issue of race or class.
- We’re talking about brothers and sisters from the same family.
- They have the same parents, the same resources.

Certainly, not all boys have been infected by this weird new virus of apathy.

- Some are still as driven and intense as their sisters.
- They still want the same independence, financial and otherwise, for which we expect young people to strive.
- Because we still see some of these successful young men around us, it's easy to miss the reality that more young men than ever before are falling by the wayside on the road to the American dream.
- The end result, then, are frantic parents wondering why their son can't, or won't, get a life.
- He's adrift, floating wherever the currents in the sea of his life may carry him
  - —which may be no place at all.
- Why does one young man succeed, while another young man from the same neighborhood—
  - —or even the same household—drifts along, unconcerned?

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Where is he headed?

Is there anything you can do about it?

Those will be the central questions that you and I will explore together.



For the past seven years, I've spent every available moment studying these questions.

- In 2001, I wrote an academic paper on this topic for a journal published by the American Psychological Association.<sup>7</sup>
- In 2005, as I mentioned, I published my first book, *Why Gender Matters*. That book was in part a progress report on my research on this question, although I also addressed some of the ways in which American society has become toxic to girls.

In addition to being a board-certified family physician, I have the advantage of being a PhD psychologist with a background in scholarly research.

So I've been able to investigate what I'm seeing, quantitatively and systematically.

I've talked with parents and with their sons in large cities like

- New York,
- Chicago,
- Toronto, and
- Los Angeles, as well as in

smaller cities like

- Daytona Beach and
- San Antonio and
- Cleveland and
- Calgary and
- Memphis.

I've visited schools in affluent suburbs like

- Chappaqua, New York and
- Shaker Heights, Ohio and
- Potomac, Maryland and

in the "nicest" areas of

- San Francisco and
- Tampa,

as well as the "bad" areas of

- North Philadelphia and
- Dallas and
- Columbus (Ohio); and

also in diverse rural communities.

After seven years, I think I'm finally getting a handle on what's going on.

I've identified five factors that are driving this phenomenon.

I'm also finally in a position to share some tested strategies to decrease the likelihood that your son will succumb to this epidemic of apathy—as well as practical tips for helping your son find his way back if he's already disengaged.

# More Than Just School

This book begins with a careful evaluation of

- how the theory and practice of education have changed over the past forty years, and
- how those changes have disengaged a growing proportion of boys from school.

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That's the first factor, which I take up in **chapter 2**.

But this book is about much more than boys disengaging from school.

## In **chapter 5**,

for example, we will consider evidence that some characteristics of modern life

—factors found literally in the food we eat and the water we drink—

may have the net effect of emasculating boys.

We will see that the average young man today has a sperm count less than half what his grandfather had at the same age.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, a young boy today has bones that are significantly more brittle than a boy of the same age thirty years ago.

The explanations for the drop in sperm counts and for the decline in bone density are complex, as we will see.

We will find that the parent who said something about “plastics” may not be so wacky, after all.

## In **chapter 3**,

we will explore in detail the controversy surrounding video games.

We will hear from respected scholars who insist that video games are good and useful for children, both girls and boys.

We will hear from other scholars who have found that video games disengage kids from the real world, scholars who believe that the harm video games do in terms of motivation and violent behavior far outweigh any cognitive benefit.

You'll see that I tend to side with those researchers who give thumbs-down to video games, but I will make every effort to let you decide for yourself who's right.

## In **chapter 4**,

I talk at length about the growing tendency to prescribe medications such as

- Adderall,
- Ritalin,
- Concerta,
- Metadate,
- Focalin,
- Dexedrine, and
- other stimulants

to children, particularly boys.

We will explore research suggesting that these medications may have adverse consequences that your doctor may not know about —adverse consequences not for cognitive function, but for motivation.

The most serious cost of taking these medications may be a loss of drive.

## In chapter 6,

we will begin to calculate the consequences of these four factors  
—not only in terms of academic achievement, but also in  
parameters that are harder to quantify:

parameters such as pursuing a real-world goal or sustaining  
a romantic relationship.

## Chapter 7

introduces a fifth factor, which I call “the revenge of the forsaken  
gods.”

In the closing chapter, **chapter 8**,

I try to pull all five factors together and consider specific strategies  
that parents, educators, counselors, and others involved in the lives of  
boys and young men might usefully deploy.

<sup>12</sup>  
BOYS ADRIFT

I will also recommend some relevant strategies at various points  
throughout each chapter.



Please don't misunderstand me.

When I talk about the problems I'm seeing in the boys whom I  
encounter in my practice, I'm not saying that girls don't have  
problems.

**Girls have problems too.**

I know just as many parents who are concerned about their daughters  
as I know parents who are concerned about their sons.

But the problems are different.

• “I told my eleven-year-old daughter that under no circumstances  
would her father and I allow her to buy those low-rise jeans.

- I just couldn't believe that any store would even have such  
an item on sale for girls her age.
- But she said we were totally clueless.
- When her father and I held our ground, she started  
shouting
- ‘You're ruining my life!
- Why do you hate me?!’

**How are we supposed to handle that?’”**

跟不上潮流

• “My Samantha has never had any problems making friends.

- But something happened at the start of eighth grade.
- She says that her best friend
  - —or the girl she thought was her best friend—
- totally betrayed her and started saying things about her that  
aren't true.
- Cruel things.
- And now she's the odd girl out.
- I hear her crying at night into her pillow and it breaks my  
heart, it really does.

**But I don't know what to do.**

**She doesn't want me to interfere.”**

朋友排擠

• “Caitlyn is always talking about how she wants to be a size two or a  
size zero.

- She looks beautiful just the way she is:
- five feet four, 120 pounds, size four or size six depending on  
the label.
- Everybody says what a pretty girl she is.
- Still she's always talking about how fat she is and how she  
needs to lose weight.

**I'm worried she's at risk for an eating disorder.”**

瘦身

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These are serious problems, every bit as difficult and as consequential  
as the boys' issues I will address throughout the book.

- But the problems the girls face are different from the boys'.
- **The girls' problems are no less important. Just  
different.**

**This book is about the boys**

—>

- and the **five factors** driving their growing **APATHY**  
and
- **LACK OF MOTIVATION.**