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Sax, Leonard. (2007). *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

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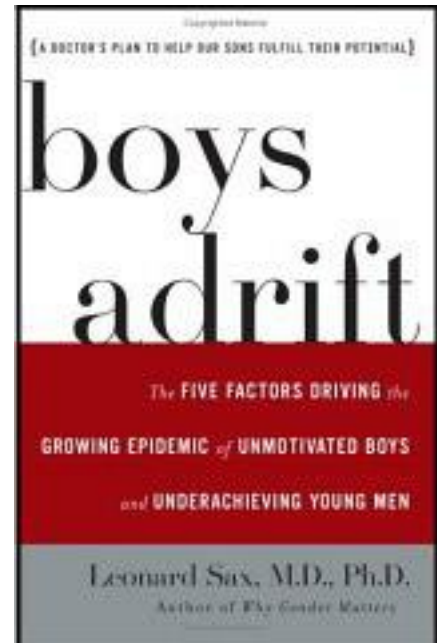
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In *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men*, Leonard Sax identifies and explores issues that he believes are negatively affecting American boys and male adolescents during their developmental years. These factors range from micro-level parental decisions concerning medications and leisure activities to macro-level factors related to recent changes in schooling and in general societal norms. Whether taken individually or in concert, Sax argues that these five factors have had a negative impact on individual boys and American society at large.

In *Boys Adrift*, Sax presents his arguments in an eminently readable fashion. Through the use of stories, examples, theory and practical remedies, he provides a critical examination of how American society is affecting the lives of boys and young men today, and how this state of affairs

has changed over the past 30 to 40 years. Sax builds his arguments through each chapter of the book and clearly identifies each of the five factors that are contributing to male development problems, along with a possible solution to the problems presented.

The overall structure of the book, and each individual chapter, are logically organized into segments that clearly define the problems, Sax's hypothesis concerning each problem, methods for identifying the problems, and conclusions to resolve these problems. Using stories, anecdotes, and citing scientific literature research throughout the book, Sax presents evidence of the real-life problems that many parents of boys and young men of all races and socioeconomic classes face today while trying to raise their children in an increasingly complex world. Sax also notes that American girls and young women are currently facing similar problems in their developmental years; however, this book is written to address the problems related to the upbringing of boys and the author confines his remedies to the problems of developing males in this book.



Leonard Sax

Boys Adrift begins with Leonard Sax discussing his experiences as a practicing physician giving lectures and presentations on the subject of developmental issues and differences between the learning styles of boys and girls following the publication of his book *Why Gender Matters* (2005). While attending these conferences and holding discussions with both parents and teachers, Sax found that he could not provide a simple answer to the questions that many parents were raising concerning their sons' lack of motivation and desire to connect with school related activities. Many of the parents that Sax spoke with inquired as to why it seemed that their daughters were so much more motivated than their male siblings in an academic setting. In addition, some parents went on to point out that boys traditionally have been less motivated in school than girls. However the recent evidence suggests that contemporary boys not only have a disdain for school, but they seem to be unmotivated by anything that society has to offer in general. Given the recent empirical and anecdotal evidence demonstrating boys' general lack of interest and motivation, it would appear that America has entered a new era male childhood development.

Yet the symptoms of the problem of males lacking in motivation are not confined to the primary and secondary education arenas. The effects of the decreased levels of motivation in young males are being felt in the halls of higher education as well. Today, many American college and university administrators are struggling to find, recruit, and retain qualified male students, while at the same time the number and percentage of motivated, high achieving female students in college is increasing (pp. 8-9). It is the problems and questions relating to the general lack of male motivation that form the basis of the riddle that Sax attempts to solve in *Boys Adrift*.

In chapter two, "The First Factor: Changes at School", Sax delves into the general problems with American primary and secondary school pedagogy and the recent changes in pedagogy that have led to boys losing interest in participating and possibly excelling in the academic arena. Specifically, Sax points to the fact that the curriculum in most North American kindergartens is on par with the first grade curriculum in the same schools circa 1977. Sax argues that the problem with these curriculum changes is that they affect boys in a negative manner due to the differences between the brain developmental pace of school age boys and girls. Sax contends that while the

trajectories of brain development may be the same in both sexes, the pace of the development may differ significantly. For example, the pace of female development leads that of males in the area of information integration by as much as two years time, while the male pace tend to lead the female pace slightly in the area of spatial perception and object recognition.

In order to remedy the problem of differences in gender developmental pace, some suburban parents are joining the trend of beginning their son's formal education up to two years later than they start their daughter's formal education. Unfortunately, this remedy does not appear to be an option in low-income areas. According to Sax, the lack of this option may help to explain some of the difference in the academic performance between low-income male students and male students residing in more affluent areas.

While the acceleration of the elementary curriculum may have caused some differences between the academic performance of the sexes, Sax also points to changes in the curriculum that have led to male students to having a lower level of mental curiosity in general. As the school curriculum has increased the emphasis on phonics, reading, and computer skills, it appears that boys have been negatively affected, while girls have benefited. Furthermore, Sax argues that gendered perception of competition may have a different effect on boys' and girls' self esteem. For example, the basic teaching technique of team building and competition appears to have a positive affect on some boys, while having a negative effect on girls (p. 46). Additionally, Sax cites important research findings by Richard Louv (2005; p. 31) that demonstrates that "when nature is replaced by computer screens and fancy indoor toys – the result is an increased risk for attention deficit disorder" (p. 31). The increased risks of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) due to curriculum and pedagogical changes may in turn contribute to the problems of possible misdiagnosis and over-medication that are discussed later in chapter four of *Boys Adrift*.

"The Second Factor: Video Games" explores the problem of boys spending excessive amounts of time engaging with computers and playing video games. In order to explain why some video games are so attractive to young males, Sax cites what German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called "the will to power" (p. 56). According to Nietzsche, the will to power is the desire by individuals to control their respective environments. Sax argues that "the will to power" may have different effects on boys and girls. In boys, it appears that "the will to power" leads to a desire to be in control or in charge, and therefore makes playing video games, some of which are of a violent nature and some not, very attractive to young males. The "the will to power" effect does not seem to affect young females in the same manner. Finally, Sax recommends reducing negative video game risks by monitoring and modifying the content of allowable video games, limiting the amount of time a child is allowed play video games, and prioritizing all activities so as to show which activities are most important in the child's life during the developmental years.

In "The Third Factor: Medications for ADHD", Sax discusses the factors in the growing trend in increased diagnosis of diseases such as ADD and ADHD. The author attributes these increases to changes in societal norms that have moved away from a belief in individual responsibility toward third party explanations of outcomes (p. 85) and the inappropriate acceleration of the elementary curriculum. Sax also points to the willingness of American physicians to rely on empirical trials of medications, which has led to possibly over-prescribing medications to boys who appear to have symptoms of ADHD. According to Sax, these medications will improve the attention span and academic performance of the patients, however there are two problems with using this approach.

First, in the short term, ADHD medications will improve the performance of boys regardless of whether or not they have ADHD. Second, the negative side effects in boys can be long lasting because of the possible damage to the nucleus accumbens area of the brain. Sax draws the link between the lack of motivation in boys and the damage to the nucleus accumbens by citing a recent study conducted at Tufts, UCLA, and Brown University, which found a correlation between

apathetic behavior and the size of the nucleus accumbens region of the brain. Additionally, playing video games appears to negatively affect the nucleus accumbens by increasing blood flow to the area, which pulls blood from other, balancing regions of the brain. The resulting effect is that boys who play video games receive the same mental rewards and feeling of achievement as if they have actually completed the task as portrayed in the game despite there having no physical connection to real world activities. Thus, it appears that playing video games may negatively affect boys in a similar manner as the use of ADHD drugs.

In “The Fourth Factor: Endocrine Disruptors”, Sax analyzes environmental factors that have affected both boys and girls negatively, but in different ways. The author begins by discussing how medical researchers in Puerto Rico investigated the appearance of signs of early puberty in young girls, and discovered the connection between exposure to high levels of phthalates and the acceleration of girl’s endocrine development. While this connection results in the problem of early sexual development in girls, it appears to result in the opposite problem for boys, as many of the synthetic chemicals to which humans are exposed to seem to only mimic female hormones. Consequently, while young girls develop faster sexually, there is evidence to suggest that boys may develop more slowly due to exposure these synthetic chemicals.

According to research cited by Sax, chemical exposures may come from the use of plastic baby bottles during infancy and the consumption of bottled drinking water and soft drinks, which are all common in the US, but are less common in developing countries. It should also be noted that research has shown that testosterone levels are connected to the drive or motivation to succeed found in boys (p. 107), which leads back to Nietzsche’s “will to power” argument. It appears that exposure to environmental estrogens has not affected the drive and competitive nature of high-achieving girls, but has led to decreased testosterone levels in young males and has resulted in a reduction in drive and motivation in boys (p. 107). On the physical side, it appears that early exposure to environmental estrogens may lead to obesity in males and females, and also may decrease the differences in sex behavior (p. 112). The problems related to chemical exposure may help explain the changing nature of gender roles in American society, which are discussed in the next two chapters of *Boys Adrift*.

In “Failure to Launch”, Sax discusses sociological changes and the effects on society as the behavior young males has changed during the past three or four decades. The author relates stories from tradesmen in construction-related fields, as well as Native Alaskan hunters, and tries to answer the question of what has happened to the traditional role of the American male. The tradesmen and Native Alaskan hunters both noted that today, young men are not interested in pursuing careers or lifestyles in those areas of endeavor. On a related note, Sax discusses the changing relationship between economic capital and sexual attraction. According to Sax, over approximately the past 40 years, sexual activity has been separated from the institution of marriage. Therefore, since it is no longer necessary for men to hold a position of relative economic affluence to gain sexual satisfaction, the desire and/or motivation to economically succeed has been diminished. Hence, the ‘failure to launch’, or desire to leave the parental nest and venture out into the world with the proper motivation to economically compete and thereby satisfy sexual desires has been diminished in young American males.

In “The Fifth Factor: Revenge of the Forsaken Gods”, Sax discusses how changing role models may affect the development of boys into adult men. Ultimately, it is “the devaluation and disintegration of the masculine ideal” (p. 183) over the most recent time period in American society that has led boys adrift. By way of example, the author notes behaviors that tend to attract young women to young men at various New England boys’ schools, and the core values that these schools tried to instill in their students that have had a positive effect on male female relationships. Sax proceeds to argue that a society that neglects to provide pro-social role models for boys who are transitioning into adulthood will find that the boys will construct their own adult behavioral models. Further, Sax suggests that if boys have no role models on which to base traditional adult

behavior, they may turn to media images for guidance, some of which may glorify gang-like behavior, violent activity, and perpetuate negative stereotypes of females.

According to Sax, it is the possible use of media images for guidance on the subject of proper adult behavior that raises the question of whether American culture is toxic to developing males and females. Both boys and girls appear to struggle with trying to define gender roles, and to develop into mature adults according to what society prescribes, due to negative media influences. For boys, contemporary media images imply there is no shame attached to lack of motivation or selfish behavior, and there should be no concern about failing to become what is defined by society as a 'real man'. For girls, it appears that the cultural marketplace has valued female activities and ambitions only as they relate to their ability to attract male partners (p. 183). When taken together, these negative adult role models presented by the American media have led to a generally confused perception of the roles of males and females by today's American youth.

In the final chapter "Detox", Sax summarizes his findings as they relate to the five factors that he believes are negatively affecting boys (and girls) in today's American society and reiterates the strategies that he recommends to counteract these negative influences. First, the author provides specific steps to change the American school curriculum and the family home environment that will lead to a more hands-on atmosphere, and thus be more inviting to boys and young men. Second, he discusses what parents need to know about ADHD medications, and what early childhood behaviors and criteria the American Psychiatric Association recommends be used to assess whether or not a child has ADHD (p. 195). Finally, Sax suggests remedies for reducing children's exposure to synthetic chemicals, counteracting the loss of positive role models and inter-generational contact. As a testimony to his concern about the book's topic, Sax offers provides his readers and other interested parties with updates on his research through his website: www.boysadrift.com.

Overall, in *Boys Adrift*, Sax presents an argument that attempts to answer the questions that many parents and educators have tried but have, as of yet, been unable to answer. Throughout the book, Sax argues that micro-level and macro-level factors are affecting and changing the behavior of developing adolescent males and females and that these changes are to the detriment of American society. Sax diagnoses the problems and offers provides remedies as would be expected of a good practicing physician. Sax supports his arguments using recent medical, sociological, philosophical, and psychological research, which, in a few instances may strike some readers as sounding political in nature. While a deeper investigation of the relevant literature is likely warranted to further support Sax's arguments and to satisfy an academic audience, the exploration of the issues in *Boys Adrift* is sufficient for the general reading audience. It is the use of a mixture of evidence that makes the book readable and the complex nature of the problems presented and the remedies understandable.

At times, it appears that Sax's arguments may be contradictory. On the one hand, he argues that personal responsibility and better decision-making will solve the riddle of the problem of the general lack of young male motivation. On the other hand, the author presents evidence to suggest that third-party influences have had a negative effect on developing males and females through changing pedagogies, media images, and video game exposure. Nevertheless, it is likely that Sax's recognition of both micro-level and macro-level problems, and his development of a multifactor model solution will ultimately begin to address the issues and questions related to male development that contemporary parents and educators are facing. Consequently, it appears that Leonard Sax has diagnosed the problem, provided a remedy, and contributed to solving the riddle of *Boys Adrift*.

About the Reviewer James Jackson, Ph.D. is a Lecturer in Finance in the College of Business at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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