

Episode 28: Boys Learn When it's Real and Relevant

Brave Hearts Bold Minds

Episode Transcript

Leigh Hatcher: Hello. Welcome to the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. I'm Leigh Hatcher. Thanks for joining me as we explore a whole world of ideas an inspiration to help the boys of today grow into the fine young men of tomorrow. Each week I'll be interviewing an educator from The Scots College in Sydney to find out how to truly know our boys and to offer all parents of school-age boys really practical ways forward to shed the character of a young man for his own good, and for the good of the world. Let's ring the bell and meet our guest for this week's podcast. With me today is Dougal Parsons. Dougal is Head of English at The Scots College and his topic is 'Boys Learn When it's Real and Relevant'. Dougal, welcome.

Dougal Parsons: Thanks so much Leigh. It's good to be here to talk about it.

Leigh Hatcher: Great to see you. I'm feeling a bit like captain obvious about this because it's hardly surprising, but well worth exploring because both at school and at home, not everything is real or relevant when you're trying to develop or educate a boy.

Dougal Parsons: No, and you have to be adaptable to those things and boys will often throw up a lot of unexpected responses to their learning. I think the point is that when it can be real or relevant, then that's when it's actually really effective. Recently I was just reading an article by Guy Claxton who is Professor of Education at King's College in London and he points out that school is not just a place for passing tests and simply getting through, but actually a preparation to embark on life. We should be narrowing the gap between what learning is like in the real world, and what we're actually configuring at school.

Leigh Hatcher: Does it give living examples of what that looks like?

Dougal Parsons: Yeah, he talks a lot about how if a point of learning can't actually achieve a practical outcome, if it can't be applied in a way that a student could take outside of the



classroom, then even though it may still be useful, and it may be a background or a stepping stone to the application of that skill, it's probably not as powerful as something that can actually lead to a change in character or a change in behaviour or a development of skills.

Leigh Hatcher: Yes, it's much more than just developing a boy for a career.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah. Exactly.

Leigh Hatcher: Authenticity is the kind of word for all this, isn't it?

Dougal Parsons: Yeah, that's right. Authenticity is really important to boys. Just look at Kendrick Lamar's latest single Humble, which all of my Year 12 boys are playing at the moment. It's a great album. Kendrick Lamar is a great artist. The whole notion of Humble is that he wants as he says in his lyrics, "Show me something natural. I don't fabricate it. Most of ya'll be faking." I think that really resonates with the boys because they think, yeah I want to avoid pretence. This goes back to even say Hamlet, who said at the start of a great play to his mother that, "There are actions that a man might play, but I have that within which passeth show."

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah. Two other words, get real. I mean that's what it's all about. How do you see that? What's that look like for a boy?

Dougal Parsons: I think it's actually a paradox for boys because even though I just made those points about how it has throughout history been important for human beings in general but especially for boys and as they grow into men, this notion of authenticity. Also, I think it's a paradox because there's a lot of studies that show that there is a great pressure on boys to be led by their friends and by the conformity of a social setting.

Leigh Hatcher: Peer pressure.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah that's right. Now, but what those studies also show is that those pressures and that conformity are actually short lived and it's often a performance for the sake of social acceptance. It's actually about working with boys as they negotiate that. Not necessarily punishing them or being strict about that type of behaviour, but helping them become aware of the fact that they are forming their identity and their character. In this 2007 study that I read, it showed how boys at the end of that passage in their life when they reached the end of their adolescence, they actually were aware of the fact that they had conformed but now they were ready to take up what their authentic personality was.

Leigh Hatcher: How revealing.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah.



Leigh Hatcher: I reckon truth and honesty has a place in this. They're big issues for us to consider in an era of say fake news, also what's happening on social media, where people are so often projecting their lives as perfection. There's so much that's not real around a boy today.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah. I think that is going to be with the growth in technology and the growth in social media as you say. It's going to be one of the biggest things for an adolescent to contend with. Talk about some of the emerging social issues that come with technology. I think for adolescents, that's one of them. That's one of the big ones. How do I know what's true in the world, and also how do I know what's true about me, because I'm often asked to project a certain image about myself? I think the right type of education is one that actually confronts that issue, opens it up, discusses those notions.

Leigh Hatcher: Why is it important for a boy to know what is true in this world?

Dougal Parsons: Yeah, I guess if they don't know what's true in this world, then they're not going to be able to respond effectively. That's one thing. They're also going to get really quite a damaging sense of living in a sense of a double life or a double standard of how information is conveyed. I think it's very important that we have adults who believe strongly in the truth of things and not just in the communication of ideas, but whether those ideas are actually true. Yeah, I think it will be quite damaging for those adolescents to become adults who think it's okay to be duplicitous or to have a kind of double standard.

Leigh Hatcher: For without truth, between say you and me, we got nothing.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah, that's right.

Leigh Hatcher: In any relationship.

Dougal Parsons: I couldn't even believe that you're Leigh Hatcher.

Leigh Hatcher: Pinch myself. Find out if that's real or not.

Dougal Parsons: I'm going to have to see some ID.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah. Do you think this is more of an issue for boys today more than in the past? When a boy had to learn, often by rote without much consideration of who he is or the environment in which he learns, what his aspirations are, what his worldview is. It's a bigger issue today.

Dougal Parsons: Well yes and no. Yes in the ways that I think I've just discussed the growth in technology, growth in social media. You and I didn't have to contend with that when we were in our teenage years. We spent a lot more of our time in face to face interaction.



Leigh Hatcher: We're just watching the television.

Dougal Parsons: Watching the TV. Exactly, that's about as interactive as it got for us.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Dougal Parsons: Therefore there wasn't that filter that needed to constantly be negotiated between human beings. Whereas for our boys, they are constantly working through that filter of –

Leigh Hatcher: What's real?

Dougal Parsons: What's real and how things are projected, but what's actually behind the projection. The reason I'll also say no, it's not a change is that I think we've always been contending with truth and value in truth and constantly searching it out and not being passive or accepting of things that are a fallacy basically.

Leigh Hatcher: Here, here, well worth saying. In terms of education, or for that matter, developing a boy at home, what role do you think experiences, practical real experiences, play for him?

Dougal Parsons: Absolutely. I think that if a student feels as though they can't actually take something that's been communicated to them and engage with it in a real way, then they're probably less likely to hold on to it and integrate it into who they are. It's a cliché but it's that whole notion of it's a community or I think the original quote is, "It's a village that raises a child." It's not just the school. It is definitely the home life and it's about having parents and also friends and siblings, who can actually encourage curiosity and encourage a sense of taking what you learn in a classroom and actually having it change you as a person. It's not just cerebral. It's actually lived.

Leigh Hatcher: Go out and experience that.

Dougal Parsons: Exactly. Yeah if we were always training for a rugby game that we never played, I think that we'd find that quite frustrating.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Dougal Parsons: If we're looking at literature or we're looking at scientific experiments or we're looking at maths equations, but we can't actually see how that's leading to a development of self, then I think that would also be quite frustrating.

Leigh Hatcher: Build confidence, sense of direction if a boy is seeing how the world operates, that there is stuff that's real and relevant.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah. I mean, if you can perform the task and not just learn it. If you can enact the skill and not just hold it in your mind, then that's obviously going to make you feel more



confident. There's going to be a greater sense of development because the next time you deal with the same issue or problem, you're going to probably be even more successful.

Leigh Hatcher: For a parent, for a teacher, how much of a place does feedback, affirmation, and even praise play in a boy being able to see the stuff that's real and relevant, and have some sense of direction and confidence in life, in the world?

Dougal Parsons: I think affirmation and praise are huge.

Leigh Hatcher: Especially for a boy?

Dougal Parsons: Absolutely for a boy.

Leigh Hatcher: Why is that?

Dougal Parsons: Well, because they're still, despite potentially having an exterior of confidence – research has basically said that boys always overestimate their abilities, or at least they have an appearance that they have an ability greater than what they do actually have.

Leigh Hatcher: Interesting.

Dougal Parsons: Girls often go the other way. With boys, we do need to break through that kind of bravado, and part of it is actually affirming them, and praising them so that they feel like they can actually seek out as you said, feedback, and they can actually seek out a secure relationship with the teachers. You can't get a boy to a point of curiosity if they don't feel that they're engaged by the people and with the concept that they're learning about.

Leigh Hatcher: If it's not safe to do that.

Dougal Parsons: Exactly yeah.

Leigh Hatcher: Sometimes that'll involve risks.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah.

Leigh Hatcher: It'll impact on his identity. It'll shape his identity, how he sees himself, how others will see him.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah, I remember being a teenager and there were seminal moments in those years that definitely shaped me, that there were moments that I realised what's important and it might have been through mistakes or it might have been through these important interactions with older mentors and that can be anyone from family through to friends through to teachers.



Leigh Hatcher: Can you think of one particular instance in your own boyhood say, the journey to manhood? How did this play out for you? What were the ways in which you were able to kind of look beyond the boring, the mundane, and the learning by rote maybe, to find skills and abilities in a world which were real and relevant?

Dougal Parsons: Yeah. I guess my specific anecdote is to do with that social pressure, which I think is all bundled together. I've mentioned that 2007 UK study before and it showed that in the upper years of high school, the pressure on high school boys to disguise academic effort and conform to what these researchers call hegemonic masculinity, which are these fairly negative and quite damaging accepted modes of masculine action. I remember being a teenager and being drawn into that world of quite loutish behaviour and actually having an older male figure at my church youth group actually, who started to question me about those things. Not in a way that he was an authoritarian, but in a way that was actually quite real.

Leigh Hatcher: It was real.

Dougal Parsons: It was real. He said to me, "What do you want? What do you want to do?" He wasn't just talking about my life. He was talking about my actions on a Saturday or even as I go to school with people, and actually led to a change of friendship groups. It was actually really hard for me because I had to lose friends to become more myself.

Leigh Hatcher: It's the peer pressure thing, yeah.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah. I found other friends who were more affirming and ultimately truer friends in the process.

Leigh Hatcher: What did that mean for you in the years to come?

Dougal Parsons: Well, it meant that going back to that notion of confidence, that was a formative instance or a formative moment, but it meant that I'd found the confidence to – boys do don't they. They find the confidence to make the right decisions, and not to just accept blindly what society and especially their peer group when there as a group might tell them. The truth is there's a difference between boys as a group and boys individually.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Dougal Parsons: It takes courage and it takes bravery to sometimes go against the flow and do the right thing and be truthful.

Leigh Hatcher: What it takes the courage and bravery of that guy who challenged you. He could have easily thought, oh not worth it.

Dougal Parsons: Yeah, that's I think for teachers. It's not just teachers but speaking as a teacher, I can say that it does take courage sometimes and it also takes patience.



- Leigh Hatcher: Yes.
- Dougal Parsons: Courage and patience to work with boys through this, but I think the best adults in terms of interacting with teenagers are those that have patience and are those that are going to go out of their way to actually show love to teenagers by asking hard questions.
- Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, what about parents?
- Dougal Parsons: Yeah.
- Leigh Hatcher: There are so many parents listening to these podcasts. For them, this is really significant. What do you say to them about what they'll be doing and saying, and how they'll be living to make life more real, more relevant for their boy?
- Dougal Parsons: I guess the one thing I would say, maybe two things actually. The first thing is you need to get engaged first. I think it's quite hard to be a parent if you're on the sidelines and then every now and then you might jump in the game. I think that you do actually need to be engaged with what's going on so that when you come to speaking into that space of the boy's life, you've actually got the currency. You don't really have the currency if you are kind of on the sidelines.
- The second thing I would say is that there really is great wisdom in being positive with boys and being alongside them before you try to shape them. I think boys, in particular, can be quite wary of somebody who tries to shape them or speak into their life if there's no sense of relationship. I would say, and maybe I'm speaking out of turn because I'm actually not a parent, but one thing I do know about teenage boys is that if they trust you, and if they respect you, then they're far more likely to go with you when you make a hard call or ask a hard question. That's what I would say. I don't know what it's worth actually, my advice, but anyway.
- Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, it's gold. That process will begin early in a boy's life.
- Dougal Parsons: Yeah. I would assume so, yeah. I mean, it's pretty hard to just start a relationship when a boy is entering adolescence, so I assume that adolescence is a good relationship at that point is the product of all of those years of fantastic parenting, which I'm sure that many parents listening right now are involved in. I say congratulations to you and just keep going.
- Leigh Hatcher: What great wisdom Dougal. Thank you so much for joining us.
- Dougal Parsons: It's been great.
- Leigh Hatcher: If you'd like more information about growing your boy into a fine young man, you can subscribe to receive useful articles and news from The Scots College. It's free, offered to every parent who wants the very best for their boy in their journey to manhood. In



your internet search engine, enter “The Scots College enewsletter,” to subscribe. I’m Leigh Hatcher. I hope you’ll join me again next week on the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. Dougal one more task, will you please ring us out with that enormous buzzer there.

Dougal Parsons: Absolutely, here we go.



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