

Episode 38: Boys Need to Seek Answers

Brave Hearts Bold Minds

Episode Transcript

Leigh Hatcher: Hello and welcome to the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. I'm Leigh Hatcher, thanks for joining me as we explore what shapes the character, the courage, the compassion of our boys today to see them grow into the fine young men of tomorrow.

Each week I'll be interviewing an educator from The Scots College in Sydney, to help parents of school-age boys anywhere and everywhere to truly know them and take away very practical ideas of how to shape them for their own good, and for the good of our world. So, let's ring the bell and meet our guest for this week's podcast.

With me today is Chris Metcalfe. Chris is Dean of Applied Science at The Scots College, and his topic is 'Boys Need to Seek Answers'. Chris, welcome.

Chris Metcalfe: Thank you very much, Leigh.

Leigh Hatcher: Great to meet you. My guess is, step one a boy needs to be interested to seek answers, but across the things ... all the things he must learn at school, and how he's shaped at home. He can't surely be interested in everything.

Chris Metcalfe: No, and this is one of the problems that we have with structured education.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Chris Metcalfe: And we see that natural curiosity that you get when kids are younger, and you have your five-year-old in the backseat of the car incessantly asking those questions, and the breadth of their questions is enormous, and I think particularly when boys get into those teenage years and the questions in their minds become very focused in areas that they are interested in and those sorts of things, first of all, we don't hear a lot of them, and second of all we have a tendency to want to have particular knowledge that we want them to ask questions about, and they don't get the opportunity to allow their natural questions to flourish and I think that's one of the down sides of a formal and vigorous education.

Leigh Hatcher: So why is it that you don't often hear those, questions?



Chris Metcalfe: I think two-fold, one we're very focused on the questions that we want them to be asking. It's a curriculum based thing particularly for parents and teachers – we're saying there is a game we're going to play, and you need to be asking the right questions, and be pretending almost that you are interested in everything, as you said before.

Their actual questions are on very different things, often of a very personal nature. Particularly when they get into those teenage years, and we find that we as parents, we as educators find that we feel isolated from them. They are naturally trying to extend themselves and divorce themselves from us as a natural progression through adolescence.

Leigh Hatcher: Find their own place in the world.

Chris Metcalfe: Correct.

Leigh Hatcher: So are there tricks that you use? Or that you'd advise parents of, how you can perhaps leave the curriculum aside a bit and just ... know the boy.

Chris Metcalfe: I think in modelling, where you always say is one of those critical elements. I was in a car recently and the father of two boys got into the car and literally said "okay, phones to the front" and the phones went in the dashboard and we're practising the art of conversation, and the questions then weren't scripted, they weren't provided - it was space in which questions could be asked, and the conversation went in some really interesting directions, and everybody can then sort of participate, and allow those sort of questions to flourish.

Leigh Hatcher: How old were those boys?

Chris Metcalfe: They were about 15, 16.

Leigh Hatcher: That's interesting, yeah, that's really interesting.

Chris Metcalfe: Yeah.

Leigh Hatcher: Now for all the different approaches to learning that you have in education, say activity-based learning, discovery learning, experiential learning, before all those there were simply questions.

Chris Metcalfe: Correct, and it goes back a long way when you think about the Socratic way of thinking and how education used to be structured, it was all around those questions and in education we obviously know that that is an essential part.

I was thinking about this the other day and I was wondering how do you liken questioning and education, and that engagement in learning that we want the boys to have, and what does that actually sound like? And I was sort of bringing in an analogy around some music, and thinking about a conclusion to a musical piece – there's always some rising tension and then a resolution in a perfect cadence or whatever it might be.



Leigh Hatcher: How artistic of you!

Chris Metcalfe: Oh I know.

But if you imagine a classroom, and there's information being discussed around you or presented to you or as an activity that's been designed for you, whatever it might be, there are questions that we want them to be asking, and I was likening it to just being given the last chord of a piece of music and thinking "we're giving you the last chord but we haven't taken you on that journey" ...

Leigh Hatcher: Yes.

Chris Metcalfe: ... which is – I think – part of what is excellent education but also how we can actually take that through for, as a parent, to be able to be getting the boys thinking and asking those questions so that the information that's provided gives us that perfect cadence.

Leigh Hatcher: It's important to probably delineate between training them to think and training them to know stuff. They're two different things, aren't they?

Chris Metcalfe: Very much so, and two different ways of, I suppose, internalising those sorts of things, and an educational area that, well, a model that we've used over a long period of time is called Bloom's Taxonomy and even that simple structure where you take knowledge and it is deemed the lowest level of the questioning hierarchy, so knowing something is the very base ...

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Chris Metcalfe: That's the starting point. Once you know something then the whole idea is that then you have to be able to ask questions to move up through the hierarchy, going through the comprehension ...

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, it's probably helpful to briefly take us through Bloom's Taxonomy.

Chris Metcalfe: Sure.

Leigh Hatcher: Those different steps.

Chris Metcalfe: Yeah, it's like any tool that we use, if you know some of those steps then it gives the boys the framework, or parents as they're talking to their boys, you're thinking "well I shouldn't just be asking them knowledge questions, I should be asking them deeper questions" which are considered higher orders of thinking.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Chris Metcalfe: So, comprehension is the next level up, so if you're given some information how do you internalise that information and then be able to answer questions on that, and then they



go to the next level where you need to be able to apply that knowledge, or information, or skill, and to get there those sorts of questions – “how does this relate to things, how does this apply ...

Leigh Hatcher: Yes.

Chris Metcalfe: “ ... in this particular context, how does this translate into a similar context but in a different situation” all those sorts of things, then you go into analysis where you are then a little bit more internalising, saying “if this is true then what if..?” And asking those more broader questions and you can get into some fairly philosophical sort of areas in there, then synthesis, so again the next level up where you’re trying to apply and solve things which may be a little bit more abstract or removed from a particular situation, and then the highest order is when you start then going back in to and evaluating the information or the skill, and refining based on the information that you get like a feedback loop, so that’s that self-evaluation, meta-cognition, it’s really understanding “why do you think that?” Or “what was the reasoning that you came up with that particular conclusion?” And really trying to understand the nuances around that, which if we think about it as a parent there are some fairly logical steps there where we can think “well yeah I’ve asked you “how was your day?” ...

Leigh Hatcher: Yes, you’ve grunted.

Chris Metcalfe: The question is very rarely answered, apart from “fine” ...

Leigh Hatcher: “good”

Chris Metcalfe: ... and then you’re trying to think, “okay, what sort of questions can I engage them in?” ...

Leigh Hatcher: It’s a great framework.

Chris Metcalfe: ... to model that sort of thing, and if they’re seeing that and being exposed to that in a continuous manner, then there’s, I would hope, that they’re developing those skills and given the space, like the example with the phones and the dashboard, and so we’re actually going to have a conversation ...

Leigh Hatcher: Especially today.

With that recognition that knowledge is only just the first step of probably seven or eight of them.

Chris Metcalfe: Correct

Leigh Hatcher: Here’s a question though, some boys will be more naturally curious than others. Are there ways to fire up the interests of all boys? Can you give us some practical examples or strategies?



Chris Metcalfe: Well I think the strength of what we have as parents is often greater than what we have as an opportunity in school, where we're very restricted in school...

Leigh Hatcher: Yes.

Chris Metcalfe: ... So, you might have a student who is very disengaged in, as a Science Teacher, in my science class, and yet we as teachers, the better teachers are actually ones that will engage with them on a personal level, and really try to understand who they are, what they're interested in, and to create that sort of relationship in the first place by understanding them as a person and as a learner.

Parents have the opportunity to know their boys ...

Leigh Hatcher: Totally.

Chris Metcalfe: ... to the point where they can really target some really deep and meaningful thinking in an area that they are passionate about. That might be rugby, or cross country, or the music that they're doing, or that particular composer, and I think the effort that comes from parents who take an active interest in their boys, not just a "oh well, I was never good at music, he happens to have a passion for it" to be able to have a conversation and ask questions about the composers and then say "well what's happening in the art at that particular period of time?" There's a very close relationship between those two and it might not be something that you're necessarily interested in ...

Leigh Hatcher: No.

Chris Metcalfe: ... but the fact that they are is worth the investment in picking up a book or doing a quick Google search, so "Oh, Boccherini was the composer that you just played this particular piece of music by".

Leigh Hatcher: And he might say "how'd you know that?!"

Chris Metcalfe: Exactly, but then they're seeing that the depth of understanding that can come from that continual questioning, but at a more and more sophisticated level, is something that they should be striving for ...

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Chris Metcalfe: ... and that richness can come from it.

Leigh Hatcher: It takes courage for a boy to ask questions, seek the right answers. That can sometimes be a risky thing?

Chris Metcalfe: It can be, definitely, and there's the culture that exists in a family or a classroom or a school, is something that is paramount in terms of the importance and the culture within a classroom is dictated by the teacher, the culture within a family is dictated by the parents.



If there is a culture of questioning and being able to be heard, I think, then that's going to engender more confidence in that area. The same thing in a classroom - if there are boys who are reticent in terms of asking their questions or they feel that it's too much of a risk, then the teacher really has to make some changes within that culture to be able to elicit those responses from the boys.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Chris Metcalfe: But yes, it is challenging. There are a lot of peer influences, and I mentioned before the areas of interest that the boys have as they go through the developmental changes that they, from the early years all the way through to late adolescence, that is where we get to have some influence over their lives ...

Leigh Hatcher: Yes, yeah.

Chris Metcalfe: ... in that those phases where they are, very much moving away from the family-centric dynamic to a more individualistic way of thinking, they are very concerned with their peer groups, how they're perceived, and how their knowledge, how smart you are, or what lack of intelligence you have in a particular area of study or whatever it might be is something that they really hold very strongly, and therefore it's very difficult to make some boys feel comfortable in asking those questions and engaging in those particular areas.

Leigh Hatcher: Some of that's about confidence, especially at home.

Chris Metcalfe: Very much so.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah.

Chris Metcalfe: Yeah.

Leigh Hatcher: Give us some practical tips, finally. How can they encourage an inquiring mind in a boy particularly, Chris?

Chris Metcalfe: Well, I think it's – from a very practical perspective – it's those questions of the boy, to be actually asking them not just those low-level questions. We expect more of them, we have to expect more of ourselves. Discussing things like politics, some of the difficult issues, around gender, and sexuality, and faith. Having those sorts of conversations with them naturally, I think, draws out opinions, and opinions can then be tapped into as to "Where does that come from?" And "What's your rationale behind that?" And it's a deeper level of understanding, more than who you're spending time with and "How did you go on at the weekend in your sport game that I didn't quite get to" or whatever it is, there's deeper issues that we can have conversations with our boys, and that will help them be in an environment where they feel comfortable asking those type of questions.

Leigh Hatcher: Sometimes though, even unintentionally, a parent can squash those conversations by rushing in with their own opinion, or even with their own judgement.



Chris Metcalfe: Correct, yeah, and I think it's because we as parents have a very strong feeling of "I want to give you some information" ...

Leigh Hatcher: Yes, "and I do know more, actually"

Chris Metcalfe: ... but, and we do, we have greater wisdom but you've got to ask yourself "How did we get that wisdom?" It wasn't because we were told a whole bunch of stuff, it's because we've had the time to inquire and work things out for ourselves, and boys particularly of adolescent years, we probably as parents all know they don't like to be told, funnily enough, and they are not keen to take on board the information that's coming from our wisdom, so being able to probe their sense of justice, fairness, what's right, through questioning enables them to have a voice but also gives them an example of how questioning can actually be taken on board.

Leigh Hatcher: I can imagine a boy glowing when they feel a sense of almost the trust that a parent has in them that they can ask questions, seek answers like that.

Chris Metcalfe: Absolutely, and not be judged on their answers, but merely pose more questions.

Leigh Hatcher: You said before that we have such wisdom because we've had the time, especially today and this is coming up so many times in our podcast series, the issue of time for parents and their boys in a big one.

Chris Metcalfe: It is a tough one, yeah, and I think particularly as boys want to isolate themselves more and more as they grow older, and that's what needs to happen, they need to feel that they are independent and become their own man and have that level of independence, but I think the small periods of time – sometimes it's just easier to let them just sit in the car next to you or on the way to school or be chatting or on their phones or whatever ...

Leigh Hatcher: I think the car is a really, really strategic spot for this stuff to happen.

Chris Metcalfe: Yeah, that's why I mentioned this example, it was something that really rang true to me, and said well this is a fantastic example of how you can really take advantage of that 20 minutes. In 20 minutes a conversation can go a long way like ours has today.

It's quite astounding, if you allow the space it can actually happen, but it can happen around a TV show or something that you have experienced together – a family holiday – there are so many times, it doesn't have to be all the time, it doesn't have to be a planned "okay we're going to have ten minutes of question time today" ...

Leigh Hatcher: The son goes: "groan!"

Chris Metcalfe: Of course that's not going to work, but to be looking for those opportunities I think as parents is one of those vital things - a plane trip, and experience that you've had in a holiday, or even a news item that just came across everyone's desk at the dinner table. The switching off of things is something that obviously is an important aspect ...



Leigh Hatcher: I've got a personal vice here: take him fishing. Leave the phone at home. For those many hours when you're waiting for the fish to bite there's a lot of time to talk.

Chris Metcalfe: That creates a lot of space, fishing I would imagine would be one.

Leigh Hatcher: Well we're just about at 20 minutes, Chris Metcalfe what a great conversation and an important one, thanks so much for joining us.

Chris Metcalfe: Pleasure, Leigh Hatcher, thanks for your time.

Leigh Hatcher: If you'd like more information about growing your boy into a fine young man, you can subscribe to receive really useful articles and news from The Scots College. It's free and 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, hope you'll join me again next week on the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men.

Now as I've said that Chris has moved his hand closer – he can't help himself.

Chris Metcalfe: I want to press the bell. We hear it every day but we don't get to press it.

Leigh Hatcher: It's that time of the interview, press that bell.

Chris Metcalfe: Brilliant.

