

Episode 38: Boys and Connection

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

With me today is Gareth Dyer, Gareth is Manager of the Office of Heritage and Tradition at The Scots College and his topic is 'Boys and Connection'. Gareth, welcome!

Gareth Dyer: Hello, Leigh.

Leigh Hatcher: Great to meet you! Can you describe to me in practical terms what connection at school and home is going to look like?

Gareth Dyer: Yes, I can. Connection for me is about, first of all, approaching somebody at eye level, as if they're equal, and that's really valuable. I don't feel like you want to look down upon a boy or make a boy feel like you're his better.

Leigh Hatcher: No.

Gareth Dyer: The approaching at eye level is the opening of the door, the conversation starter, the terms on which you agree to move forward I think. And that's the start for me.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah. Practically, how will that be done, at school and at home?

Gareth Dyer: Well it's a really interesting one, and I firmly believe that all boys, all children, everybody, in fact, has a 'thing.' And for me, the trick to connection is finding that 'thing,' or those terms on which you operate, so practically it's about breaking that cookie cutter, we don't push kids through one mould and they all come out the same. They're all different and to find out what it is that makes them different and makes them tick, that's the practicality of it. Seeing that difference and nurturing that



difference so that you can work with that when you need to, as opposed to treating all boys the same.

Leigh Hatcher: So you've got to be interested in them, like truly interested in them, and respect them.

Gareth Dyer: Absolutely yeah, that's right. And I think that will foster a bit of confidence and a bit of inclusion. I'll give you some examples if you like. So my school background put me in charge of the Library, where, I was in this wonderfully unique position where I was able to see all boys of all different shapes, sizes, models, and brands, and not necessarily that one subject-based or sports-based or interest-based group. There were all kinds of kids, and so the best part there was seeing all these different people all the time. And often the Library became a place where kids went when they didn't want to go somewhere else. It's the place that's always open, it's always warm you know, so they're always welcome in there. And I made it my little hobby task, if you like, to find out which ones kept coming back and why they kept coming back, and of course, there's great fun to be had with that. And it means that you can look at all these people as different, all these boys as different, and once you find that thing that makes them tick this little spark goes off, this little fire in the eyes that makes them want to engage and chat.

Leigh Hatcher: And keep coming back.

Gareth Dyer: Yeah usually, but it's a training wheels type exercise, so at one point when the boy is there, a few days later he might not be, and that's the point when you probably think you've done your job. He's worked himself out; he knows his place in the school, in the world, and off he's gone to be himself for a while.

Leigh Hatcher: What a joy to be involved in that process. If there is that connection at school, in your experience, will a boy likely do better on a particular subject say, than he might have without that sense of connection?

Gareth Dyer: Yeah absolutely, and like I said before it's about fostering confidence and inclusion, so it's that little part that says "You belong here, so you can succeed here," and I was never really in a position where I could say "I need this boy to do his Economics homework," or "I need to do this boy's French test," or whatever, I was always in a position where here's a boy who belongs to the school, what can we make him into? What's he capable of? What's the strength of his ideas and the range of his creativity? I was always in a fortunate position, not being subject based, not having to sit on the end of any kind of assessment or marking or any of that kind of stuff, I was very lucky.

Leigh Hatcher: He's the nice guy in the Library!

Gareth Dyer: Yeah, sometimes. Not always the nice guy, but you know how it is. There are some lovely examples there.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, totally!



Gareth Dyer: There are a few boys and often they'd show up and be a bit weird, and there's one lovely case of a kid who came in with one sachet of sweet chilli sauce every single day, and he'd grab the nearest book of the shelf and he'd suck on the sachet of sweet chilli sauce until it was done, and when it was done he'd stuff it down the cushion of the chair and he'd go on his way.

Leigh Hatcher: That's amazing!

Gareth Dyer: Yeah, and it was one of those moments where you didn't really follow the story until you lift up the cushion and there were a dozen empty packets of sweet chilli sauce.

Leigh Hatcher: That little grub!

Gareth Dyer: Yeah! And a phenomenal reader and a really creative writer. So all I had to do was take that time when he was being away, withdrawing from school a bit and hiding in the Library, and put it to good use.

Leigh Hatcher: And clean up the sachets after.

Gareth Dyer: That's essentially what happened. And I teased him; I used to leave some packets of soy sauce or some ketchup in there to see if he'd take the bait.

Leigh Hatcher: Ah, classic.

Gareth Dyer: But it was always sweet chilli sauce.

Leigh Hatcher: See, that's connection.

Gareth Dyer: Absolutely, absolutely. I've got another great story about a boy who, a very confident, dynamic boy, but didn't really join in a great deal until I found out that he likes Westerns, and particularly he likes those very odd little Italian-style Spaghetti Westerns. And once we connected on that we started talking about Sergio Leone and all this other kind of stuff. He went on to make some wonderful films and now he's doing other successful things, I'm still in contact with him. It's a good one. And his dad strangely, I often wonder where a 17 year old boy gets a love of Spaghetti Westerns in Australia ...

Leigh Hatcher: Totally!

Gareth Dyer: Turns out it was his dad. So I've got a bit of a relationship with his dad too, it's quite nice.

Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, to do this you have to know a fair bit of stuff or be prepared to learn about it, and in this day and age, there's the Internet so that's pretty easy!



Gareth Dyer: Well absolutely, it's handy when ... There's another boy who liked European football, so he's playing in my own backyard there, that was quite easy, we'd spend long times actually with very negative conversations about the players we didn't like rather than the players that we did like, and how overinflated and powder-puff their shirts were. It was a lovely connection point, but it means you've got to have a great memory because the boy you have a conversation with might show up two weeks later and ask you something and you've got to be on your toes.

Leigh Hatcher: It'd be hard to forget the sweet chilli sauce guy though.

Gareth Dyer: Ah, crackin' kid! Crackin' kid.

Leigh Hatcher: In all of this, and this is a frequent theme in our podcast, respect is a huge thing for boys. Especially trying to connect with them, I suppose also for men. Why do you think that's the case?

Gareth Dyer: Well that's a great question. I'm not entirely sure, but it's very important, and something I do with my own children too. I was always conscious when I was training to be a teacher of that curriculum language of 'delivering' subjects, and 'giving' them things, and I always felt like that cut-off some of the two-way process, and in doing so some of the respect went with it. So I always like to think that there's much more of a journey, or a sharing, or an involvement, and you'll be surprised at how many times, if you open the door to let them, that you'll be corrected or bettered by somebody who knows something or looks at an old subject in a different way. And I think that that's where some of the respect comes from, because if it's not there, then you don't open yourself to the second half of the conversation. I want boys to feel like they can point their finger squarely at me and say, "No, I don't agree with that," or "Have you thought about it this way?"

Leigh Hatcher: Because you're trying to get them to think, ultimately, at school.

Gareth Dyer: Absolutely.

Leigh Hatcher: How easy would you say the connection is for boys? Because certainly at first presentation they can often be kind of too cool, or even aloof, distant.

Gareth Dyer: Oh, yes.

Leigh Hatcher: How do you break through that?

Gareth Dyer: Well sometimes the boys don't need my input. I mean, particularly sports-type teams, there's a lot of culture there that connects them anyway, and they give each other a bit of confidence and a bit of dynamism. But it's the ones on the fringes that I'm attracted to, it's the boys that don't always fit necessarily, and it's about finding out what their capabilities are and the strength of their ideas.



Leigh Hatcher: But you can't just ask them questions.

Gareth Dyer: That's right, yeah.

Leigh Hatcher: It's trickier than that.

Gareth Dyer: Well there's a little game to play to figure out why they're here, what's he doing ... and there's a story about a boy from an incredibly wealthy background who had the first iPhone I ever saw, and he was using it to search flights to the UK for him and his family. It was a little gift from his dad, and the iPhone was the little door-opener, and he turns into actually a really interesting kid, and the iPhone was the thing that made me able to start a conversation with him, and I still see him around sometimes when he wants to come and talk.

Leigh Hatcher: That's a great little door to open. Especially today. A boy, part of this process I suppose, a boy wants to know that you believe in him.

Gareth Dyer: Yeah, absolutely. There's a great story I want to share because one of my great things in the Library, is myself and my colleagues up there are able to do a range of different things, so we offered a smorgasbord of activities. We were a bit forward thinking for a Library and we had managers and people that believed in that. So we opened up a very successful little film-making unit through the Library. We also had photography and story writing and all sorts of other things ...

Leigh Hatcher: Because you've got a media background too, we should say that.

Gareth Dyer: Yeah, absolutely, yeah, so with a view to try to get something off the ground down the track that might feel like a film festival, we had this boy that showed up and he was a bit awkward and a bit on his own, and he was a boarder and he didn't have a great time in the boarding house, and he was writing stuff elsewhere in school that was really quite good, and one day he dropped this kind of semi-poetic bit of prose on us, a bit ragged, a bit teenage boy you know, type writing. And we had another boy who was also in the boarding house, not having a great time, but also were into the technical side of filmmaking, loved the cameras, loved to see how things presented on screen and all that kind of thing. And so we married these two things together and made what probably became the school's most successful short film, and it was about a boy who was kind of awkward in himself and had to challenge himself to get beyond it. And it's resonating in ways that we didn't really understand at first but it brought two really interesting characters together.

Leigh Hatcher: How creative, because it does involve a bit of creative thinking.

Gareth Dyer: And a really bold idea. That I'm going to give it a crack, and I might get some flak for this, but I'm going to give it a crack. And I think that's where a little bit of confidence comes in, you need a boy to be happy with himself if he's going to open this little door.



- Leigh Hatcher: And when you talk about iPhones, you talk about making videos, there's so much that is in our world today, almost too much sometimes, that you can tap into.
- Gareth Dyer: Yeah well that's right, and that then gives you that little stream of research and information that you may or may not need, it might be from a boy it might be somewhere else. But your right, and sometimes it's a dangerous thing, but ...
- Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, here's an interesting question with this whole connectedness thing, and these relationships between a teacher and a boy or a parent and a boy, there will still be boundaries, maybe even rules, and sometimes boys will need that.
- Gareth Dyer: Yeah absolutely, and I'll tell you a story about a boy who I got on really well with. And what became our thing that we would share was that he had latched on to the very poor tabloid British newspapers, and he really liked some of the pun-work the journalists were doing.
- Leigh Hatcher: Those terrible headlines ...
- Gareth Dyer: Yeah, that's it, absolutely! But he loved it! He was a really creative person with a little bit of a political spark in him, but he was also aware that the school was blocking them, because of the casual nudity that ran through the newspaper, you couldn't get them online all the time. And the game that we had was that he wanted to try to find them, but he had to get past the blocks on the website to do it, and it became a really interesting challenge. So I'd be in there one afternoon and there'd be a hundred kids in there in the wet trying to make the place work, and he's come excitedly running over to me saying "I got through! Look check out this one, it's about ducks!" And it was great, it just sharpened his writing a little bit, so he went on to be a bit of a superstar, and again not your normal fit, not your ordinary kid that you'd expect, but he's a bit of a superstar.
- Leigh Hatcher: So he broke through the boundaries and the rules, but still there does need to be boundaries.
- Gareth Dyer: Yeah, absolutely. He played that game of "Where would these boundaries be? Why can't you log on to this? What's wrong with that?" And occasionally he'd find a little hole where there'd be an article in there that was cleverly placed next to a topless lady and we'd have to have a little chat about that. But, the fun there was working out what the boundaries were. And occasionally you get a boy who pushes too far and you have to step him back a little bit and maybe you exclude him for a while until he works out what he needs to do, and then like I do with my children, you hug it out and you move on from there.
- Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, but boys, again, it's a very consistent theme in our podcast, they do like the boundaries actually, they need them.
- Gareth Dyer: Yeah, and also the exercise of finding out where they are, that's quite interesting too.



Leigh Hatcher: Yeah, with parents, you might think this connectedness is just a given, “Well of course it happens at home,” do you think that’s right? And what’s your advice to parents about how they might build or nurture or strengthen the true connection with their son?

Gareth Dyer: Yeah. I think you just have to be acutely aware of how delicate it can be. So I have these lovely little examples of kids where you talk about his trumpet lessons or something, but it’s a very delicate thing, because it only takes the kid to have a bad morning or something else to happen elsewhere, and he loses the need for me, or the need for anyone else. And that connection there is incredibly fragile, so you’ve just got to be aware of it and aware of what makes it work and what challenges it when it doesn’t work.

Leigh Hatcher: Practical ideas? For a parent?

Gareth Dyer: For a parent? That’s tricky coming from me, I’m relatively new to this parenting game, but I think it’s about being constant, it’s about being consistent, and it’s about being a little bit unconditional, because things can go wrong and that shouldn’t let the relationship change, you just have to acknowledge they’ve gone wrong and put them right again.

Leigh Hatcher: And also to acknowledge that while there is this, hopefully, lifetime connection between a parent and a son, there will be ways in which he’ll be moving on from that.

Gareth Dyer: And like I say, when I was a kid I was in the UK and you used to be able to go to your local shop and buy a box of fireworks, and you go in your garden and you’ve got a little fire on and it was dad’s turn to go and light these fireworks. And the metaphor here is that each one of those things is very slightly different but there’s a link to them, they’re all consistently the same one way or another, and some of them, when they go off, they’re going to go off, and they always need your help, they always need you to light the touch paper and stand well back and make sure they’re pointed in the right direction. And some of them don’t go off so dramatically sometimes, and I feel like that’s it. We get this group of fireworks and you strike them up and get them in the right conditions and light the touch paper and you wait.

Leigh Hatcher: And they’re all really different.

Gareth Dyer: All different colours and noises and “BANG,” there they go. The only thing you can be sure of is they’re all going to go off in one way or another, not always when you expect, but they probably all will go off I’d say.

When I was a kid my auntie used to have Rudyard Kipling’s If on a massive poster on the back of the toilet door, and I remember looking at it, and the words kind of sink in but you don’t really digest them straight away, so there are a few lines that will wrap up what I’m trying to say, and one of them is: “If you can walk with kings and never lose the common touch.” And I always like to think of that one because you find



yourself, recently the school opened a new building, and there I am with some of Australia's richest and wealthiest men, and then immediately after I'm talking to one of their sons about Antoine Griezmann in France, and you feel like you need that common touch.

And the other line I really like is: "If all men count with you, but none too much." And that sums up the whole idea of, we're at The Scots College and there's a chunk of boy's here who pay nothing for their education and there's a load of boys here who pay an awful lot for their education and we count them all the same, we foster them the same, we look at what their capable of and enjoy that.

Leigh Hatcher: Gareth, what a great conversation, and what great stories, great insight. Thank you so much indeed for joining us.

Gareth Dyer: Thank you.

Leigh Hatcher: Thank you!

Gareth Dyer: 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, absolutely 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, hope you'll join me again next week on the Brave Hearts Bold Minds podcast: Growing Fine Young Men. One more task Gareth, before you go, you know the drill, hit that bell! Ring us out, please!

Leigh Hatcher: My pleasure.



The Scots College
Sydney Australia