

The Development of Identity in the Rock and Water Program

The Rock and Water Program is an educational program that aims to enhance the social, emotional and spiritual development of boys and girls all over the world. In the past 5 years, in Australia alone, more than 4000 teachers, youth workers etc. have been trained to work with the program. In The Netherlands Rock and Water is the most well known program targeting education for boys. In 2000 the program received a national award for being the best educational program that can be used easily in a variety of educational settings. Currently the program is used in many countries across the world.

Guidance in a Changing Society

The program originates from The Netherlands where people started to express their concern about the decrease of academic performance of boys at school and the increase of alcohol abuse, drug abuse and violence. Although originally designed for boys only, the trainers of the program have found that girls also respond very well.

The program has a very positive approach. Its focus is on the qualities and developmental tasks that young people face when growing up. Especially nowadays, living in a multi-cultural, fast changing society, there is a desperate need for guidance of youth in finding their way to happiness, real strength and meaningfulness. In many traditional cultures it was common to guide young people, boys and girls, through an Initiation Process, (a kind of Rites of Passage,) that made the passage from boy/girl to manhood/womanhood a lot easier and safer. Given the intense pressure to perform that young people are now subjected to, it is especially unfortunate that Rites of Passage rituals no longer exist. To some degree The Rock and Water Program can be seen as a substitute for the guidance given in traditional Rites of Passage processes. The Program presents a safe path with clear values and standards.

Developmental Tasks

The aim of the program is to build a Rock and Water Person. This is a person who is aware of their own qualities and who has the courage to follow their feelings, who is willing to discover their own path and who will be able to manage the responsibilities and challenges they encounter on their way through life. Boys and girls have many similarities, but they have, of course, many gender-specific differences. This adds to their richness, but it also means that they will be confronted with different developmental tasks, which generate specific challenges for their upbringing and education. Their bodies are different, they are under the influence of different hormones (testosterone versus oestrogen,) this has an impact on their energy and their emotions, and they experience slightly different development of both brain hemispheres. Therefore they need, sometimes, different educational support.

Psycho-Physical Didactic

Generally boys are more energetic (they can't sit still) and livelier than girls and they find it harder to verbalise emotions, feelings and that which moves them. These differences have a biological-neurological background and are often intensified by the way in which boys and girls are raised, taught and met by society, (socialisation.)

As boys have so much energy and more trouble with expressing themselves verbally, a psycho-physical didactic approach has been chosen. This means that skills are first introduced by way of physical exercises, after which a connection is made to social and mental skills. Starting from a strong physical basis, they set off along a path that leads to self-awareness and the insight that people are mutually connected in various ways.

Verbal-Emotional Development and Physical-Emotional Development

Verbal-emotional and physical-emotional development are the two main ways that one can follow to become aware of one's own, unique qualities and possibilities, one's position in the group, and finally one's tasks and responsibilities and the inner path to follow to become a genuine person.

Verbal-emotional development means that awareness is gained through self-reflection and the verbalisation of emotions and feelings. As a generalisation, we see that girls have a preference for this form of communication. Before they act they reflect upon a possible action to undertake. After action they reflect again and discuss this with others. Often you can see girls gathering in small groups in school or other places practising this very important skill: creating self-awareness through self-reflection and talking and listening to each other.

Boys have higher levels of energy and find it more difficult to exchange feelings and emotions through talking and listening to each other. Therefore they tend, again speaking in general terms, to more physical ways of communication by which they build up self-awareness and the needed social skills. Boys like (need) to play, to wrestle and romp, to kick a ball together and so on. By being physical boys develop self-awareness, and the social and mental skills they need to become aware of their own purpose and to become fine men. In general boys tend to trial and error behaviour instead of thinking (like girls) before they step into action. Boys have a preference to physical-emotional development: awareness through physical action. Preference means that it is possible to teach them other ways that lead to self-awareness, such as through reflecting and verbalising (verbal-emotional development), but it takes more energy. It is not their easiest route. In fact, we need to teach boys this because verbal-emotional development forms a basis for the important communication skills that are needed to become successful in our modern society.

Both ways must be respected

It is important to realize that if we didn't allow girls to talk to each other we would block their way of becoming aware of who they are, their position in the group, and the development of the kind of person they want to be. Girls need this verbal communication desperately. They tend to have lower levels of energy (as compared to boys) however language tends to be more easily accessible. We have to allow girls to talk to support their verbal-emotional development.

On the other hand the same goes for the boys: the moment we forbid boys to be physical, the moment we take away physical activities from our schools and education, the moment we don't allow them to discover, to be challenged, to learn to live with risks and boundaries, we block their way to self-reflection and self-awareness. Language is less accessible for boys, due to biological-neurological differences (the influence of testosterone before and after birth.) Because of these differences and because they have higher levels of energy, (caused by testosterone,) boys have a preference to physical-emotional development. In particular boys need physical activity to become aware of themselves, who they are, what they are capable of, what triggers them, and in the end which way they have to go to become real, loving people, real men. It is an enormous mistake and misjudgement of boys' qualities and tasks of developments to take physical exercise and activities out of their education. By doing this we create the problems ourselves. We create men who are not aware of their own strength, not aware of their own qualities and tasks, not aware of an inner path, not aware of connection with their inner core and therefore also not connected with other people. Boys need physical activity, guided by wise educators, desperately!

One way is not enough: girls and physical-emotional development

It is clear to see that if girls stick to the verbal-emotional activities and boys to physical-emotional activities that they both will miss out. Girls need physical activities to develop more self-confidence and the ability to step into action when needed. This applies to situations in which they feel threatened; they have to learn to stand up for themselves and even, if needed, to defend themselves. But this also applies to other situations in life. There are many talented girls in our schools whose talents remain unseen because they don't dare to take the first step to exhibit their talents or wishes. The physical activities of the Rock and Water Program create more self-confidence. So the main phrase for girls is: go for it, don't worry too much, take your first step.

On another note: Girls tend to depression if things go wrong in their emotional life. By discovering the joy of physical activity they also discover the power of physical action: it helps them to release emotions instead of taking those inwards and by doing this, developing depression.

Boys and Physical-emotional development

For boys the story is almost opposite. Boys tend to action. Boys tend to act before they think. Boys tend to trial and error behaviour. This causes many problems. In situations of violence for example they tend to a fight or flight action. The fight action with its physical and emotional ramifications can cause a lot of damage and unhappiness. But in other areas, educational or daily life situations, boys tend to 'do' before they examine, (think, reflect, plan, structure,) the task that is ahead of them. This leads to insufficient academic performance, can cause lack of self-confidence and boys may turn away from school.

If boys are unhappy they bring it out. Self-reflection and verbalising of their unhappiness is more difficult and leaves their energy too close to their inner self. Therefore boys tend to aggression if they are unhappy. Many times aggression is a way to release uncontrollable feelings of unhappiness.

So this is the task that lies in front of us, teachers and parents and educators of boys on their way to manhood, to becoming 'genuine' men: we have to teach them how to connect with the valuable energy that comes directly from the core of their being, we have to teach them to master this energy and we have to teach them how to direct this energy positively. This can only be done by physical activities.

Physical-Social Teaching: putting both ways together

The physical-emotional development of boys is vital for them. Without this they will fail in becoming aware of who they are and what they are capable of. On the other hand, and this is very important, we also have to teach boys to; think, (self reflection,) before they do; and to verbalise what (and why) they have done; and to be aware of whether they are happy about it. In other words: the verbal-emotional way of development must also be part of boys' education. It is not easy for boys to learn this because they are always pressed by the existence of an abundance of energy, but without the skill of reflection they are uncontrollable rockets filled with explosive gunpowder.

Summarising: boys and girls both need the verbal-emotional way of development just as they both need the physical-emotional developmental path. In the Rock and Water Program both ways are brought together in a new didactical approach called Physical-Social Teaching.

The Rock and Water Person

You can start teaching rock and water exercises when boys and girls are around 6

years old. At this age you have to start to work with the fundamentals of the program. The main focus will be on standing strong, learning how to communicate, other social skills, how to deal with and prevent several forms of violence such as bullying. They are all important skills to develop a strong social identity.

When around 14/15 years old or older the focus will be more inward. As their brains mature more and more (boys will be behind the girls in this development) boys and girls are confronted by questions such as:

- Who am I?
- What are my qualities?
- Which way do I have to go in life?

Answering these questions will help them to develop their psychological identity. The concept of the Inner Compass will be discussed, examined and practised by doing mental strength exercises and inner strength exercises. Topics will be around sexuality, solidarity and spirituality.

Boys and girls around the age of 14 – 18 feel very insecure and lonely. They know they are different and unique but they don't yet possess fully developed communication skills, and are often not aware enough to be confident about their own direction. Therefore they want to be part of a group, and so they become very sensitive to peer pressure. What they need is:

- understanding of their difficult position
- respect (even if they make stupid mistakes)
- support (in many ways, a wink of an eye can sometimes be sufficient)
- love (education is more about building up relationships between teacher and students than being filled with knowledge)
- inspirational teachers and inspirational education (education that connects with the inner core of the students taught by teachers who live their own dream)

The last step in normal human development is the development of spiritual identity. The question "who am I" will then slowly transform into the question "who are we". On a deeper level this person understands his task in life, his responsibilities, his interconnectedness with all the people and life in general around him. This person understands the gift of inspiration and feels humbled by that. This person has a deep respect for the mystery of life. The feeling of connectedness is essential and has a deep impact on morality. This person is positive in mind, trusts his heart, is compassionate with others, and follows the path that lies in front of him.

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