



# Rock and Water – setting the ‘inner compass’

*Psychologist and school counsellor Mark Stahnke examines a new program that helps young men cultivate the right blend of mental and social skills to survive the edgy world of adolescence*

**R**ock and Water was developed in Holland. It is based on the fact that most boys love sport and express themselves physically rather than verbally. Not surprisingly, the program has struck a potent chord with young Aussie boys.

As a psychologist, you often get the referral: ‘Anger Management’. Anger management is a bit like its clinical siblings – anxiety management and pain management. It sounds so compact, so easy. You have a problem – get someone to manage it for you. Simple!

But the reality, from a clinician’s point of view, is very different and one of the harder referrals you will ever have to deal with is a teenage male, brimming with testosterone and pubescent angst, whose parents or teacher request that you ‘manage his anger’... just like

changing the oil on the family Commodore.

Unfortunately, it’s not that straightforward. Kids are not cars and human emotions are a little more complex than your average V6. Talking to a teenage male straight up about emotional regulation is often akin to talking to your budgie about the Dow Jones Index. You can hear the sound of worlds colliding as soon as he enters the room. For this reason, doing physical activities with boys is usually a better way to start the counselling process rather than sitting across from them in a comfy chair and talking about emotional intelligence.

## **Rock and Water**

Enter Rock and Water, a different approach to dealing with emotional regulation in teenage boys. Rock and Water is a program that grew

out of a surge in interest over the past few years in educating boys. Much of this has developed from the increase in ADHD diagnoses and the fact that, in most cases, it is boys that are being diagnosed. It also stems from research indicating under-performance in boys on many academic indicators and falling numbers of male enrolments in tertiary studies. For example, recent OECD surveys revealed that 15-year-old girls are ahead of boys in every one of the 43 countries on assessments of literacy.

Girl power is, apparently, on the rise, to the point where some critics have argued that modern education systems pathologise masculinity. The behaviour of boys has been seen by some academics as becoming the new model for disorder, to the point where there have been lawsuits brought against the United States

Department of Education for discrimination against boys in the education system.

Freerk Ykema, a Dutch educator who originally introduced the program into a comprehensive school in Schagen, in the north of Holland, developed Rock and Water. It is based on martial arts and self-defense; however, self-defense is not seen as the goal but rather the process that will be used to develop mental and social skills.

The term 'Rock and Water' refers to the central theme of the program that in all situations there is a 'Rock approach' and a 'Water approach'. 'Rock' representing times where one must be tough and single minded. 'Water' then represents those times when flexibility and negotiation are a better means of conducting yourself. At all times, boys are encouraged to think in these terms – stand strong or negotiate. Reflect before you act. The language is framed in terms so that boys need to think: "Is this a rock or water situation? "Are you showing too much rock attitude at the moment"? The eventual aim is that students will have a simple system for finding an element of self-control, self-reflection and self-confidence.

The theory of the program is built around the concept of psychophysical didactics – quite the mouthful, but in fact an easily digestible philosophy. Psychophysical didactics holds that the learning of higher order cognitive skills should start with sport and physical activity. Start with simple, fun activities such as maintaining balance on one leg and then broaden the complexity and analysis of such activities over time. It is based on the simple fact that most boys love sport and expressing themselves physically rather than verbally.

Skills in self-defense are taught along side such things as understanding body language and appropriate communication strategies in times of conflict. Students are asked to reflect on how their body feels after activities, with the long-term goal that they will eventually be able to recognise anger and other emotional states by registering how they feel physically i.e. "I know that I am angry because I get a tingle in my neck and a queasy feeling in the stomach". It is a concrete, pragmatic approach to the ethereal world of emotions.

Eventually, it is hoped that students will be able to use the path of Rock and Water to consider such complex notions as the 'inner compass', that is, that sense of connection of the self to others and one's own spirituality. The program culminates with elements taken from yoga and tai chi that involve considerations of energy, intuition and meditation.

So, you start Rock and Water with swinging legs, Chinese boxing and punching bags and end up with Eastern philosophy. It is a long road to take in a few lessons and for this reason; the program needs to be embedded over the long term in classrooms and across the curriculum.

It is a program not designed to run for three weeks, but for the duration of a student's time at school.

It is also a program that needs to be pitched differently according to the group you are working with. No two groups will be exactly the same, so you need to manipulate the content of the course to match the learning style of the participating students.

For example, in a NSW country school where we are currently implementing the Rock and Water program, I am working with a small group of boys who have significant behavioural problems. Accordingly, the focus for these boys in the course is on the activities more than the theory. They do not take on the deeper ideas and higher order thinking skills so much, but love the physical interaction and competitive nature of the games. They love the chance to wrestle with a teacher and not to be suspended. They also love that you can throw a punch within school grounds and not earn a suspension either.

The program has an amazing impact. Rock and Water is so different to mainstream subjects that it sets up a different dynamic between teacher and student in the classroom. When you are working with kids who are alienated in schools because of their behaviour, these differences immediately bring these problematic young men on side. It is the anti-subject, perfectly suited to the anti-student.

The physical interaction with teaching staff helps to break down the disconnection between teacher and student and this improved rapport also has a flow on effect into other areas of the school allowing better communication with troubled students once the class is finished.

In these times, where teaching is increasingly dominated by legal concerns and of a growing professional distance, Rock and Water brings a more personal connection between staff and students. In cases where all previous attempts to connect have failed, it offers a way in.

While it is only early days for the program in country NSW, maybe one day these boys may well come around to contemplate such things as the 'inner compass'. In the meantime however, Rock and Water is helping school staff to engage with these young men in a much more meaningful way.



Mark Stahnke is a registered psychologist and teacher. He is currently working in schools on the North Coast of NSW. He had previously worked as a psychologist in occupational rehabilitation and mental health and has taught overseas.



For all creatures great and small.

## Secondary Youth Program to hit schools



\*Israel Cruz

Through this program, we aim to encourage young people to respect all living things, including people and the environment.

The free educational program caters to all students K-6 and includes live footage of shelter animals, cruelty case studies (age appropriate), music and funny clips. There is also a number of celebrity guests featured throughout the audio visual presentation, and students are invited to volunteer for the interactive components of the lessons – which includes the biggest highlight of all – picking up the fake poo!

The Secondary Youth Program is set to hit the schools very soon too. Schools will receive the audio visual presentations, conducted by RSPCA Education Officers, and may even be lucky enough to have a visit paid to them by a few of our STOP ANIMAL CRUELTY Youth Program celebrities. Some of the celebrities include Israel (hip hop artist), JoJo Gatehau (Australian Idol), Michelle & Shannan (Biggest Loser), and Nate Myles (NRL Player). These celebrities, and many more, will feature throughout the audio visual presentations and in all of the marketing materials for the program to help influence young people to take responsibility for their own actions, particularly when it comes to issues of violence in society.

If you have any enquiries about our education programs, please do not hesitate to contact us. We also deliver programs to training teachers at various tertiary institutions, Prevent-a-bite for PreSchools, Juvenile Justice Programs, Special Needs Programs and workshops with shelter puppies for senior citizens. We are also currently looking for education volunteers to help with events, fundraising, and the delivery of Prevent-a-bite Programs to Preschools across NSW. If you feel strongly about preventing cruelty to animals, please get involved, and together we can make a difference!

\*Israel Cruz (hip hop artist) is a huge supporter of the STOP ANIMAL CRUELTY Youth Program. Israel is a proud pet owner of Pia, a Sharpei, and it was through his immense love for animals that he decided to help the RSPCA.

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