Rock 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.

Freetek 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 alongside 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.