

Helping Boys Succeed

Rachel Attmore, Stephanie Nader & Elizabeth Williams
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What do we know about boys?

Nationally for the 1999-2000 school year:

- Boys are 30% more likely than girls to flunk or drop out of school.
- Approximately, 70% of boys receive discipline referrals and suspensions.
- Up to 76% of students in special education classes were males.
- For the last 13 years, girls have significantly outscored boys on tests of reading and writing.
- Boys now represent the minority of college graduates; women outnumber men in higher education with 56% of bachelor's degrees and 55% of graduate degrees going to women.

Crime and Safety

- Boys represent 93% of juvenile homicide offenders between 1980 and 1997.
- Males accounted for 86% of juveniles in residential placements in 1997.
- Boys were more likely than girls to have been bullied in middle school.
- Boys were more likely to have been in a fight on school property and use weapons.

Boys' health, mental health and substance abuse:

- Dyslexia and autism are four times more common among males than females.
- Boys are four to five times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- Boys have a far higher rate of Conduct Disorder and Expressive Learning Disorders.
- Boys are fifteen times more likely than girls to abuse drugs and alcohol and twice as likely to die in a car crash.
- Boys account for 80% of youth suicides.

Boys and learning:

- 55% of boys versus 68% of girls report that they are motivated to do well in school.
- When it comes to grades and homework, girls outperform boys in elementary, secondary, high school, college, and even graduate school.

Boys and values:

- Most boys believe that it is essential for a boy to get respect from others and will lose respect if he talks about his problems.
- Approximately 40% of boys (compared to about 60% of girls) said they value caring for others and promoting equality.
- 64% of boys reported acting on their convictions and standing up for their beliefs, compared to 76% of girls.
- Only 32% of boys report that they seek nonviolent methods to resolve conflicts, compared to 76% of girls.

Boys' identity:

- Boys have a stronger sense of their future and self-esteem than girls. More than half of boys report having high self-esteem, compared to only 45% of girls.

How are boys unique?

Biology

Boys, like girls, have a distinct genetic make up that predispose them to certain personality traits and learning styles. Brain structure and hormonal influences are essential components in this development.

A boy's brain is equipped with a more enriched right hemisphere than a girl's brain—which is built for understanding systems and spatial relationships. Therefore, in the classroom and other settings, boys may be more comfortable with visual or hands-on activities. Conversely, girls have a larger corpus callosum, which results in the right side of the brain and the language-oriented left side of the brain communicating together more efficiently. Subsequently, in the classroom and other settings, this equates to girls generally being more comfortable with verbal language and complex communication than boys.

Testosterone levels rise sharply in boys between the ages of 11 and 14—to almost 800 times that of when they were toddlers. Boys also have less of the aggression-reducing neuro-transmitter, serotonin than girls. This increase in testosterone and lessening of serotonin has behavioral implications that manifests differently in each boy. Furthermore, as boys become older, there is a developmental shift where they are less facially expressive. However, there are some behavioral tendencies recognized with these hormonal and biological changes:

- More impulsive
- Shorter attention spans
- More action-oriented
- More physically aggressive

Environment

Society and peers place certain expectations on boys, sometimes called the “Boy Code”. It is an outdated set of behaviors and rules of conduct imposed on boys about what it takes to be a man. The “Boy Code” includes the following expectations:

- Be stoic, stable and independent. Never show weakness or pain.
- “Boys will be boys” represents the misconception that boys are biologically wired to act macho, high energy and violent.
- Be a “tough guy” is the pressure for boys and men to achieve status, dominance and power. Act tough and in control even when one is not, in an effort to avoid shame at all costs.
- There should be “no sissy stuff” represents the pressure on boys not to express feelings or urges seen as feminine like hurt, dependence, warmth and empathy, because they may lose respect.

Oftentimes, boys will purposely *stop* trying in school because doing well in school is considered a feminine pursuit. Boys can be shamed by other boys if they are successful in school.

How can educators help?

Improve Boys' Connection to School

Research shows that students with a strong connection to school are more successful both in school and after graduation. Boys, however, have a more challenging time connecting and building relationships. Here are some ideas:

- Communication should be subtle and casual.
- Allow for movement while in conversation, like walking or shooting baskets.
- Allow boys to step back from an intense talk and return later.
- Develop opportunities for boy-friendly activities and events, *besides* sports.
- Consider implementing mentoring options, such as older students being “buddies” to encourage positive attachment and model achievement to younger students.
- Make personal connections to boys using humor, their favorite topic or just by saying hello and acknowledging them.
- Praise and reward boys for trying hard versus getting something done quickly.
- Ask boys what could be done to help them feel more connected to school.

Improve Academic Performance

- Address boys' activity levels inside the classroom by providing movement within the structure of the school day.
 - A ball toss when reviewing for a quiz,
 - Utilize learning stations.
 - Incorporate curriculum that allows for acting and costumes and hands on activities.
 - Allow use of highlighter for kinesthetic learners during reading and non-distracting fidget items.
 - “Brain Break Center” area where students can go for 3 minutes to engage in gross motor activities.
- Utilize competitive tendencies in a positive way.
 - Reward everyone for participating; award points for encouragement and cooperation.
 - Have students compete with themselves to strive for their personal best.
 - Have students compete against the teacher.
 - Compete in teams with an emphasis on the group skills process, so one works cooperatively to win for the whole group.
 - Have a competition that gives the winner a chance to enter a drawing, so the actual winner is random.
- Encourage an appreciation for reading
 - Have men read to children.
 - Allow boys to choose books of interest and alternate forms of literature like comic books and cartoons.
 - When violent themes are involved in art and literature and discuss it in an age appropriate fashion.

- Similarly, when violence occurs in their writing, it is important to not overreact. Instead, ask what affect the boy is trying to convey. Perhaps it's intended to be humorous.
- Utilize technology, like cameras, video and audio recorders to record their stories maximizing oral skills and alternatives to writing.

Address Life Skills

- Implement a skill based violence prevention curriculum, ideally paired with an environmental shift program to help create a safe, positive school climate.
- Make the reduction of teasing and bullying an administrative priority, with consistent intervention.
- Educate parents on how to help their sons deal with teasing and bullying.
- Teach a model for self-control such as "Feel-calm-think-act."
- Praise them for acts of self-control.
- Recognize and praise boys when they work through frustration and persist in their work
- Use cooperative groups to develop collaborative skills.
- Develop perspective taking by having them write from another's point of view.
- Accept and encourage the expression of emotion. Inquire what is wrong and express empathy for feelings.
- Recognize and praise acts of caring and empathy.

Establish Positive Male Identities

- Educate families about the critical role men play in their children's lives. Studies have shown that higher levels of father involvement in activities with their children, including meals, outings, and helping with homework are associated with fewer behavior problems, higher levels of sociability, and a high level of school performance among children and adolescents.
- Invite men to participate more in their child's education, whether at home or volunteering in the school.
- Create volunteer opportunities that are attractive to men.
- Encourage men to educate and model to boys that there are many ways to define masculinity. Adult men who provide models of respectful masculinity are key to helping boys succeed in school.

*Small boys learn to become large men in the presence of large men
who care about small boys.*

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- *Approximately, 70% of boys receive discipline referrals and suspensions.*
- *Only 32% of boys report that they seek nonviolent methods to resolve conflicts,*
- *Boys were more likely than girls to have been bullied in middle school.*
- *Boys account for 80% of youth suicides.*
- *Disorders such as, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism are four times more common among males than females.*
- *Most boys believe that it is essential for a boy to get respect from others and will lose respect if he talks about his problems.*

How are boys unique?

Boys, like girls, have a distinct genetic make up that predispose them to certain personality traits and learning styles. Brain structure and hormonal influences are essential components in this development.

A boy's brain is equipped with a more enriched right hemisphere than a girl's brain—which is built for understanding systems and spatial relationships. Therefore, in the classroom and other settings, boys may be more comfortable with visual or hands-on activities. However, currently the classroom structure typically utilizes more verbal language and complex communication, which boys will find more challenging.

Testosterone levels rise sharply in boys between the ages of 11 and 14—to almost 800 times that of when they were toddlers. Boys also have less of the aggression-reducing brain chemical,

serotonin, than girls. This increase in testosterone and lessening of serotonin has behavioral implications that manifests differently in each boy. However, some common behaviors include: impulsivity, shorter attention spans, aggressiveness, and being physically active.

Society and peers place certain expectations on boys, sometimes called the “Boy Code”. It is an outdated set of behaviors and rules of conduct imposed on boys about what it takes to be a man. The “Boy Code” includes the following expectations:

- Be stoic, stable and independent. Never show weakness or pain.
- “Boys will be boys” represents the misconception that boys are biologically wired to act macho, high energy and violent.
- Be a “tough guy” is the pressure for boys and men to achieve status, dominance and power. Act tough and in control even when one is not, in an effort to avoid shame at all costs.
- There should be “no sissy stuff” represents the pressure on boys not to express feelings or urges seen as feminine like hurt, dependence, warmth and empathy, because they may lose respect.

Oftentimes, boys will purposely *stop* trying in school because doing well in school is considered a feminine pursuit. Boys can be shamed by other boys if they are successful in school.

This “Boy Code” is harmful because it limits a boy’s range of emotion and his ability to think and behave as freely and openly as he could. The following is a list of ways parents and guardians could help support boys realize their full potential and teach them there are many ways to become a loving, confident, successful man.

1. Talk about the social pressures to conform to this narrow definition of men. Ask open-ended questions about what they learn from playing or watching sports, winning and losing, and how it feels to not be picked for a team. Let them know there is no single way to become a man. It is about being yourself, a real boy, who will grow up to be a real man.
2. Encourage and accept expression of emotion. Ask how they feel. Look beyond anger to see if there are other feelings they are having difficulty expressing. Teach them a range of words to describe feelings. Offer physical outlets to express themselves. If they look upset, then ask “What happened?” and when they express sadness say “I’m sorry that hurt you.” Avoid using shaming words like “Boys don’t cry” or “No, you’re not hurt.” because this may cause boys to disconnect from their feelings and shut down. Boys need to connect with feelings to function well in relationships.
3. Boys benefit from discipline, which includes love, respect, clear limits, consistency and short, clear messages. The most effective discipline is built on the child’s love for the adult and his wish to please them. If the child experiences significant shaming, harsh punishment or overwhelming anger from adults, he may begin to react rebellious against authority instead of wanting to please.
4. Provide many opportunities at home for physical activity. At times, play has aggressive themes. For example, one common boy fantasy is killing the bad guys to save the world. Adventurous fantasies are not the same as real aggression. Games of power and

dominance are acceptable provided they don't hurt anyone. If boys do play games with violent themes, talk together about how it might make others feel and create rules to make sure the game feels safe for everyone.

5. Teach boys the importance of respect for oneself and others. Take a stand yourself against teasing and bullying. Do not allow disrespectful comments about others' abilities, sexual identity, etc. Encourage tolerance and acceptance. Redefine "tough guy" to be someone who stands up for what they believe in. Teach them non-violent ways to respond to bullies.
6. Teach boys self-control. Model and talk about times you maintained control of your impulses. Praise and reward them for thinking before they act.
7. Since society discourages compassion in men, help boys develop and keep their ability to be empathetic and caring. Encourage and reward acts of caring and empathy. Give them opportunities to care for plants and animals and to volunteer to assist those in need. Get involved as a family in a community service project.
8. Be a good role model. Watch for comments that put-down men. Be mindful to support men in their roles as fathers. Men need to be aware of how they treat women, respond to homophobia, share in domestic chores, and demonstrate a balance between work, family and play. Boys watch and learn far more from what we do, than what we say.
9. Boys also need male role models from their community. They benefit from male mentors, activities geared to bonding experiences and exposure to various people who take on non-traditional gender stereotyped jobs, such as male nurses, female carpenters, male chefs and female plumbers.
10. Advocate for boys at school. Help create a school environment where teasing and bullying are not accepted. Encourage the use of oral reports, technology, hands-on learning activities and physical activity within the classroom setting.
11. Connect with boys by spending quality time with him each day. Direct questioning can overwhelm boys. Try chatting while playing a game or taking a walk side-by-side. Listen attentively.
12. Support boys' interests whatever they may choose. They may need assistance in finding something they are interested in; suggest a range of possibilities.
13. Say, "I am proud of you" for as many occasions as possible; effort on schoolwork, participation in activities, expressing emotions, maintaining self control, being respectful, behaving compassionately, etc.
14. He needs to feel your love consistently and know that you are interested in his life. Tell him you love him as often as you like, because we cannot "spoil" children with too much love and attention. Express your love with physical affection such as hugs, kisses, and perhaps playful wrestling. Boys need to feel connected and secure, just as much as girls.

Remember, even if your boy acts as if his relationship to you is unimportant, it is just an act and the relationship is important!

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