

a positive and pro-active response to young boys in the classroom

by Merle Froschl and Barbara Sprung

Raising and educating healthy young boys is an area of increasing concern among early childhood educators, child development experts, and parents. A growing body of research has raised questions about young boys'



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vulnerability on a number of fronts: social/emotional development, expulsion from preschool, referral to special education, and academic achievement, particularly in terms of literacy. It turns out that on all measures African American and Latino boys are especially at risk.

The facts

- In 2000-2001, African American boys made up 8.6% of national public school enrollment, but 20% of those classified as mentally retarded, 21% of those classified as emotionally disturbed, 22% of those expelled from school, and 23% of those suspended.
- Boys score 16 points lower in reading and 24 points lower in writing than girls, with three-fourths of this gap opened up by grade 4.
- Boys commit 85% of school violence and comprise the majority of victims of that violence.
- Expulsions from preschool occur three times more often than the national K-12 expulsion rate, and boys are five times as likely to be expelled as girls.
- African American boys are three times more likely to be expelled than white children.
- African American boys in preschool are often stigmatized into the role of troublemaker or 'bad' child. This early stigmatizing follows them through the grades, and other children pick up the message and the 'bad boy' language very quickly.
- Boys are nine times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, or attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity.
- Boys represent 70% of students diagnosed with learning disabilities and 80% of those diagnosed with social/emotional disturbance.

These alarming statistics are a clarion call to action. If young boys are "turned off to" or even, as the research shows, "turned out of" education early on, the consequences to them and to society are severe. Parents, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders must understand the consequences of inaction and take steps to reverse the path of failure. The PreK-early elementary years are the time when a positive, pro-active effort to meet boys' needs can lead to a more successful school experience for all boys, and especially for African American and Latino boys.

Socially and emotionally: boxed in

William Pollack has coined the phrase “the boy code” to express the constraints on boys’ emotional development and the resulting inner emotional pain that many boys carry around under the façade of being ‘normal’ and ‘okay.’ In 2003, as part of our Raising and Educating Healthy Boys Project, we conducted a series of focus groups with preK-3 teachers and parents to explore their thinking on “the boy code.” Participants were asked to address questions in two boxes:

- Box one asked: What does it mean to be male in our society?
- Box two asked: What happens to boys who don’t fit into box one?

The focus groups pointed out that, starting in early childhood, broadly shared stereotypes about masculinity impede boys’ development in many areas. In terms of these male stereotypes, teachers and parents feel that boys are in a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation. They are constrained emotionally if they fit the stereotype, and ostracized if they don’t.

While teachers and parents are aware of this situation, strategies for change are scattered at best. Early childhood teachers feel limited by the current ‘pushdown’ school climate that affects preK and constrained by the high-stakes testing that typically begins in fourth grade.

Viewing boys as ‘problems’

Unfortunately, rather than addressing the physical and emotional needs of boys, many teachers perceive boys as ‘problems.’ In one study, teachers said that boys were “difficult, and take up more than their share of room in the

classroom.” During an in-service professional development day, one Kindergarten teacher described a class of all boys as “every teacher’s worst nightmare.”

One way schools deal with ‘problems’ is by making them go away, literally. Boys, and particularly African American boys, are often separated from other children in the classroom for behavioral issues, so they are perceived as ‘bad,’ a label that can stay with them throughout school. Boys are relegated to special education, which results in a disproportionate over-representation of African American and Latino males enrolled in those classes. And, when all else fails, boys are expelled from preschool entirely.

This situation, which is especially prevalent and devastating for African American boys, needs to be counteracted as early as possible. Early childhood teachers should not approach boys’ needs from a deficit model. The energy that boys bring to the classroom should be viewed as an asset. If we have a mindset that boys will be difficult then, more often than not, they will be. Children will live up to the labels we bestow on them.

By being aware of the stresses young boys feel, it is easier to be compassionate. Compassion can replace frustration and create a welcoming environment and a climate of respect for all children’s ideas and interests. Don’t be afraid to appropriately nurture girls and boys, and be celebratory — create celebrations around the end of projects that will help all children feel good about their accomplishments.

Gender and literacy

The widening literacy gap between boys and girls has received much attention in both the popular and educational press. There is no one easy solution to this

complex issue. It is necessary to look at developmental issues, the role of gender socialization, and the classroom environment. In this regard, the developmentally-appropriate practices identified by NAEYC can serve as excellent guidelines. It is unnatural to expect children to sit for long periods of time — it is hard for boys and unhealthy for girls. Daily exercise, either indoors or out, is essential and can easily be provided through jumping jacks, small weights, or deep-knee bends in 10-minute segments morning and afternoon.

Literacy can best be encouraged through an interdisciplinary curriculum that includes active learning:

- Ongoing science discovery, with problem-solving, decision-making, and cooperative learning
- Large-motor activity, such as carpentry, music, and outdoor structured non-competitive games
- Social studies, including mapping the school block, neighborhood, and inside of school.

All of these have literacy components, for example, chart reading, oral discussion, and related storybooks. And don’t forget the tried and true literacy techniques that will engage both boys and girls: self-made, child illustrated stories, class-made books following projects, and individual and whole-class family books.

Lessons learned: Applied to boys

Many years ago when schools first began to address issues of gender equity, the focus was on opening up more options for girls. Teachers encouraged more physical activity outdoors, more large-motor activities, more assertiveness, and more comfortable clothing that allowed for running, jumping, climbing, and getting

dirty. Attention also was paid to boys' needs for more emotional expressiveness. Now, however, it is important to address boys' needs from a gender equity perspective. We can build curriculum around active learning — it's good early childhood practice for girls and boys. We can encourage emerging literacy with an eye to what boys like to read and write about. We can celebrate boys' (and girls') successes, making school a place where children feel good about themselves.

Boys bring energy into the classroom; use it to everyone's advantage. Let them create and lead an exercise lesson, and write/draw/dictate instructions to follow. Plan with them for outdoor games that involve running, jumping, and climbing. Create a mini-triathlon in which everyone can participate, and then turn it into a reading/writing lesson back in the classroom.

These are just a few ideas to start you thinking pro-actively. You know your classroom better than anyone. Find the ways to address boys' needs that fit your teaching style and the children in your class.

For more information

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