

**FIVE POWERFUL STRATEGIES FOR
CONNECTING BOYS TO SCHOOLS**

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Judith Kleinfeld
Director, Boys Project
Professor of Psychology
University of Alaska Fairbanks
Fairbanks, Alaska
ffjsk@uaf.edu

The nation has succeeded in removing the barriers to the success of girls in schools, and the achievement of girls is soaring. Now girls score almost equal to boys in the areas in which they fell behind in the 1970s—mathematics and science achievement. Now more young women than young men graduate from college. Congress passed the Gender Equity Education Act in 1994, educators heeded the call and launched into action with stunning success.

Now the nation needs to do the same for boys. Many boys, especially boys of color, lag far behind in school achievement. The biggest problem lies in the essential skills of reading and writing where the typical boy lags a year and a half behind the typical girl. Boys who are unable to read and write with competence, can not get good jobs and can not become well informed citizens.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, mandated by Congress in 1969 to measure the academic success of America's youth, offers the best and most comprehensive measure of the achievement of students across the nation. These tests show that boys are in trouble, not only boys of color, not only boys of poverty, but boys themselves.

Most of us are not aware of the sheer size of the gender gap in literacy. Government reports do not trumpet these numbers. This presentation is the first time, to my knowledge, that these numbers have ever been presented. Take a look at the reading and writing achievement of boys whom we would most expect to do well, the sons of college educated parents—your sons and grandsons and the young men available for your daughters to marry. Take a look at the literacy of 12th graders, seniors in high school, those young men who have hung in there and not dropped out. At the end of high school, 23% of the white sons of college educated parents—almost a quarter—scored “Below Basic” in reading achievement, compared to only 7% of their female counterparts.¹ (See Table). We are not

¹ In doing these analyses, I used the variable “parental educational level” from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which classifies students as coming from college educated parents if one or both parents completed college. These figures come from the NAEP reading assessment in 2002, the most recent year for which information is available.

talking about boys who read at the Basic Level. We are not talking about boys who read at the Proficient level. We are not talking about boys who read at the Advanced Level. We are talking about boys who read “Below Basic.” This means that almost one in four boys who have college educated parents can not read a newspaper with understanding. What kinds of jobs can they get in the information age, where not only professionals but also mechanics must be able to read complicated directions? Even more alarming, the reading skills of these boys—the white sons of college-educated parents—have dropped substantially over the last ten years.²

In schools as they are structured today, boys of color fare far worse. At the end of high school, 43% of the African-American sons of college educated parents scored “Below Basic” in reading achievement, compared to 33% of their female counterparts. Among Hispanics, 34% of the sons of college educated parents scored “Below Basic” compared to 19% of their female counterparts.

Writing scores tell the same story. Boys of every ethnic and socioeconomic group are falling far behind girls of similar backgrounds.³ Four times as many white sons of college educated parents fall “Below Basic” in writing achievement compared to girls of similar backgrounds; almost twice as many African-American boys; and more than twice as many Hispanic boys.

Many boys are disengaging from school. The U.S. Department of Education’s surveys of student commitment show that boys are far less likely than girls to do homework or to come to school with the supplies they need. Many boys are becoming alienated from school because they do not

² In 1992, 13% of the white sons of college educated parents scored at “Below Basic” in reading skills at the 12th grade level. In 2002, the most recent year for which we have NAEP reading scores, 23% of this group scored “Below Basic.”

³ In 2002, the NAEP writing assessment shows that 25% of the white sons of college educated parents scored “Below Basic” compared to 6% of girls from the same backgrounds. Among African-American sons of college educated parents, 45% of boys fell “Below Basic” compared to 24% of comparable girls. Among Hispanic sons of college educated parents, 39% fell “Below Basic” compared to 17% of comparable girls.

see schools as “fair.” In one study, junior high school and high school boys were significantly more likely than girls to say that they believed “teachers did not show genuine concern for their learning” and that they “personally felt they were not treated fairly in school.”⁴

Of course, teachers are genuinely concerned about the learning of both boys and girls. Most teachers are doing their utmost to reach every student in their classes, but teachers face numerous challenges—the pressures of large classes, of students who do not show up to class or who are disruptive in class, of students who do not sit still when they teach, of school settings which are poorly adapted to the developmental needs of many children and especially many boys.

The Boys Project

The question we face as a nation is what to do. We need the energy of our sons as well as our daughters if we are to prosper. How can we increase the success of boys in reading and writing as we have done for girls in science and mathematics? How can we engage boys in school despite many boys’ belief that success in school is “unmanly” and “uncool”? The Boys Project has brought together experts in boys’ issues from a diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints to set an agenda for action and to identify the most promising strategies for change (www.boysproject.net).⁵ These are five such powerful interventions. We can put them into place now.

Strategy 1: Educate Teachers on Gender Differences in Development and Learning

Many teachers know from common experience and many studies show that boys and girls often differ in the ways they develop intellectually

⁴ Sharon L. Nichols and Thomas L. Good, Students’ perceptions of fairness in school settings. *Teachers College Record*, 100 (2), 1998, pp. 369-401.

⁵ The Boys Project was developed in January, 2006 to find ways to increase the success of boys in school and life while maintaining or increasing the gains of girls. The board members are listed at this website: www.boysproject.net

and in the ways they learn. This does not mean we should stereotype boys or girls. Children are individuals. But boys are typically more active than girls and more action-oriented in their styles of learning. Many boys find sitting still in a classroom and paying attention to a constant flow of words far more difficult than girls do. Such boys are often diagnosed as suffering from “attention deficit hyperactivity disorder” and put on medications which may be dangerous to their developing brains.

Instead of trying to change boys, many creative teachers are changing their classrooms. The Gurian Institute has developed a wealth of “boy friendly” teaching tools, like letting boys do origami while listening to stories which keeps them awake and alert, using squeezable stress balls, and teaching academic concepts through physical movement.⁶ Many of these techniques benefit girls as well, especially girls with kinesthetic styles of learning.

Single sex schools and classrooms offer excellent opportunities for putting into practice boy-friendly teaching strategies. Some teachers in all-boys classrooms, for example, have removed desks and chairs altogether because they find young boys learn better when they stand up and move around.⁷

Teachers also need to know that boys and girls typically enjoy reading different texts. The research on gender and literacy shows that boys are more “inclined to read informational texts,” that they are “more inclined to read magazine articles and newspaper articles,” and they are “more enthusiastic about reading electronic texts than girls are.”⁸ To help boys learn to love reading, we need to offer far more choice than we now do.

⁶ Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens, *The Mind of Boys*. Jossey-Bass: 2005. See generally www.gurianinstitute.co

⁷ This example comes from Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters*, New York: Broadway Books, 2005, pp. 252-253.

⁸ For an excellent summary of the research on gender and literacy, see Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, “*Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys*”: *Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002, pp. 10-12.

In short, we need to educate teachers about the biological and neurological differences between boys and girls and the motivational strategies—like working hard so your classroom team will succeed—that engage boys in school. Teachers are hungry for this knowledge, and we already know far more about what to do than we are actually doing.

Strategy 2: Start School at a Later Age for Slower Developing Boys

One of the easiest ways to increase the success of boys in school is simply to start boys who are developing more slowly in language and fine motor skills later in school when they are more physically mature. Boys typically take longer to learn how to read.⁹ Boys typically are slower at developing the fine motor skills needed for neat, legible writing. School is getting more difficult for slower developing young boys because schools are now teaching academic skills at younger ages. In many school districts, children now are taught in kindergarten the academic skills that used to be taught in first grade.¹⁰

Unable to compete with faster developing, more verbal girls, many boys are apt to conclude that they are “no good” at schoolwork and disengage. This should not be surprising. Most of us do not invest emotionally in areas where we think we can not do well, whether it is sports or school.

Delaying a child’s entrance into kindergarten is far more effective than failing a child later on. Children who repeat a grade conclude that they are “dumb” and become even more alienated from school.

⁹ Smith and Wilhelm, *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ John Holloway, When children aren’t ready for kindergarten. *Educational Leadership*, April 2003, pp. 89-90. See Sax, *Why Gender Matters*, pp.94-96.

Strategy 3: Create “Focus Schools” Which Offer Nurturing, Personalized Education

Boys need nurturing just as much as girls do, but the “cool, tough masculine” pose that many boys adopt keeps people at a distance.¹¹ Small schools with a specific, shared focus can break down this shell and connect boys with nurturing adults. Many “focus schools” are charter schools within the public education system, such as academies which emphasize college or career preparation. Many “focus schools” are single sex schools. These schools create a culture stressing not only academic achievement but also good human relationships and good character.

An excellent example is the “Excellence Charter School” of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. This charter school began in 2004 with a class of 88 kindergartners and is adding a grade each year. The boys wear school uniforms and learn that it is “cool” for boys to be smart, curious scholars. The principal, Jabali Sawicki, who himself comes from a single parent home, can connect with the children emotionally and talk to them about good character in a language that they can hear, in a language that touches the heart. The school focuses not only on reading and mathematics but also on values like teamwork and perseverance. In May, 2005, at the end of the school’s first year, 80% of the first grade boys scored at or above grade level in mathematics; 78% scored at or above grade level in language, and 65% scored at or above grade level in reading on TerraNova standardized tests.¹²

Strategy 4: Connect Boys in Groups with Caring Adults

Educators have long recognized the power of teams and coaches in helping adolescent boys get on the right track in school and in life. But the

¹¹ See William Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998 for an illuminating discussion of “The Boy Code” and the way this “mask of masculine bravado” cuts off feelings and connections. Pollock coined the term “The Boy Code” to describe the shell many boys adopt to feel tough and confident.

¹² More information about Excellence Charter School and these test results may be found at <http://www.uncommonschoools.org/ecs/home/index.html>.

principles that make teams and coaches effective in reaching boys apply to realms beyond sports. Teams create peer group buy-in by connecting boys *as a group* to caring adults. The team creates emotional security and individual boys do not want to let their team down by sloughing off.

“Band of Brothers.” a school-based mentoring program created by Jonathan Shepherd at Sycamore Elementary School in Crowley, Texas, shows what one school administrator can do for boys of poverty.¹³ Community volunteers come to school once a week, usually on their lunch hour, to develop mentoring relationships with boys. Band of Brothers teaches the hidden rules for success, such as the importance of goal setting and positive self-talk, and the language of negotiation. When boys are inducted into the group, they agree to live up to the Band of Brothers Code of Conduct and to hold each other accountable. Some boys post the Code of Conduct in their bedrooms.

Strategy 5: Respect Boys

The “Boy Problem” has been created by a profound and disturbing cultural change that goes far beyond what happens in schools. All of us sense immediately and viscerally whether people respect us, and boys do not get respect. American culture has lost respect for what used to be considered “manly virtues.” These include 1) physical courage, used in the service of noble ends, 2) singleness of purpose, energetic devotion to one overarching goal, and 3) emotional restraint, what we used to call “grace under pressure.”

We shut boys down, labeling the rough and tumble play characteristic of all juvenile male primates “violence and aggression,” labeling immature attempts at romance “sexual harassment,” labeling spiritedness, the quality of the soul the Greeks called *thumos*, “rebellion and defiance.” When we

¹³ The parallel mentoring program for girls is called Band of Sisters. More information about these programs can be found on the board members page of the Boys Project (www.boysproject.net).

shut boys down, why should we be surprised when so many of our boys become lifeless and dispirited?

What will turn around the “Boy Problem” is not only programs and classroom strategies but, just as important, a sea change in our attitude toward boys. The Women’s Movement drove such a change in our attitude toward girls. The Women’s Movement deserves credit for changing our expectations of girls and for developing an appreciation of the qualities girls bring to the table, such as the ability to multi-task and their relational skills. We need as well to respect boys—to appreciate their energy, their spiritedness, their offbeat ideas, and, yes, even their rebellion and defiance. This energy moves us forward as a culture.

This is the bottom line: We need now to pay attention to boys and to respect boys. Enjoy your own creativity in figuring out how to create schooling where both boys and girls succeed.

TABLE: Achievement of 12th Grade Males and Females by Parents' Education and Ethnicity

White Twelfth-Graders With At Least One College Graduate Parent Who Score "Below Basic" by Gender and Subject

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Reading	23%	7%
Writing	25%	6%
Mathematics	19%	17%

Hispanic Twelfth-Graders With At Least One College Graduate Parent Scoring "Below Basic" by Gender and Subject

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Reading	34%	19%
Writing	39%	17%
Mathematics	40%	49%

African-American Twelfth-Graders With At Least One College Graduate Parent Scoring "Below Basic" by Gender and Subject

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Reading	43%	33%
Writing	45%	24%
Mathematics	57%	60%

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress