



WAR ON BOYS

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Being a normal boy is a serious liability in today's classroom. Boys tend to be disorganized and restless. Some have even been known to be noisy and hard to manage. Sound like any boy you know?

But increasingly, our schools have little patience for what only a couple of decades ago would have been described as "boyishness." As psychologist Michael Thompson has aptly observed: "Girls behavior is the gold standard in schools. Boys are treated like defective girls."

As a result, these "defective girls" are not faring well academically. Compared with girls, boys earn lower grades, win fewer honors they're are far less likely to go to college. Boys are languishing academically, while girls are prospering. In an ever more knowledge-based economy, this is not a recipe for a successful society.

We need to start thinking about how we can make our grade school classrooms more boy-friendly. Well, here are four reforms that would make a very good start.

1. Turn boys into readers.

In all age groups, across all ethnic lines, boys score lower than girls on national reading tests. Good reading skills -- need I say? -- are critical to academic and workplace success. A major study in the UK discovered, not surprisingly, that girls prefer fiction, magazines, and poetry while boys prefer comics and non-fiction. Boys whose eyes glaze over if forced to read *Little House on the Prairie* may be riveted by the Guinness Book of Records. Boys will read if given materials that interest them. If you're looking for suggestions for books that have proved irresistible to boys go to guysread.com.

2. Inspire the male imagination.

Celebrated writing instructor Ralph Fletcher contends that too many teachers take what is called "the confessional poet" as the classroom ideal. Personal narratives full of emotions and self-disclosure -- these are stories girls commonly write -- and these are prized; whereas action stories describing, say, a skateboard competition or a monster devouring a city, these are not. I recently read about a third-grader in Southern California named Justin who loved science-fiction, pirates, and battles.

An alarmed teacher summoned his parents to school to discuss the picture the 8-year-old had drawn of a sword fight -- which included several decapitated heads. The teacher expressed grave "concern" about Justin's "values." The boy's father was astonished, not by his son's

drawing which to him was typical boy stuff, but by the teacher's overwrought -- and female-centered -- reaction.

If boys are constantly subject to disapproval for their interests and enthusiasms they are likely to become disengaged and lag further behind. Our schools need to work with, not against, the kinetic imaginations of boys.

3. Zero out zero-tolerance.

Boys are nearly five times more likely to be expelled from preschool than girls. And in grades K-12, boys account for nearly 70% of suspensions, now this is often for minor acts of insubordination and sometimes for entirely innocent behavior. Hardly a week goes by without a news story about a young boy running afoul of a school's zero-tolerance policy.

Josh Welch, age 7, was recently sent home from his Maryland school for nibbling off the corners of a strawberry Pop-Tart into shape it into a gun. Josh -- like many other boys punished for violating zero-tolerance policies -- was guilty of nothing more than being a typical 7-year old boy.

4. Bring back recess.

Believe it or not, recess may soon be a thing of the past. According to research summarized by Science Daily, since the 1970s, schoolchildren have lost close to 50% of their unstructured outdoor playtime. And much-loved games have vanished from school yards. In schools throughout the country, games like dodge ball, red rover, even tag have all but disappeared; too damaging to self-esteem or too "violent" being the usual excuse. One popular classroom guide suggests tug-of-war be replaced with "tug of peace." Boys need to work off their energy. They need to be free to play games they enjoy. And keeping them cooped up inside all day will not help them learn.

As our schools become more feelings centered, more competition-free, more sedentary, they move further away from the needs of boys. We need to reverse the boy-averse trends. Male underachievement is everyone's concern. These are our sons. These are the young men with whom our daughters will build a future. If boys are in trouble, so are we all.

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