

Are Schools Failing Our Sons? Why Boys Are Struggling

By Erika Scott, parentzone.com, March 2008

In this article:

- [The Facts](#)
- [Why Is This Happening?](#)
- [Should Parents Consider Single-Sex Schools?](#)
- [What Can Parents Do?](#)
- [Five Additional Steps to Support Your Son](#)

Think the gender gap in education won't affect your son? Learn how teaching styles, changes in curriculum, and biology can contribute to the growing trend of boys falling behind in school.

For decades, establishing gender equity in schools meant helping female students achieve at the same level as their male counterparts. However, recent research indicates that the tables have turned, and more boys are now struggling academically.

The Facts

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), otherwise known as the Nation's Report Card, reports that girls in elementary and secondary schools across the US consistently outperform boys in reading and writing. In particular, girls outscore boys with an average of 24 points higher on writing assessments. At the same time, the perception that boys significantly outperform girls in mathematics and science has been shaken. Recent NAEP findings show that while boys are still in the lead, the gap between male and female achievement in math and science has been steadily shrinking.

When you look at the big picture, the statistics are cause for even more concern. Seventy percent of special education students nationwide are male. High school graduation rates indicate that 72 percent of girls graduate compared to 65 percent of their male counterparts. This trend continues into college, where males make up less than half of undergraduate students, and for every 100 men earning BA degrees, 133 women do.

Why Is This Happening?

These statistics leave parents wondering why one gender is flourishing and the other is struggling. Dr. William Pollack, PhD and author of *Real Boys*, believes many of our nation's schools are failing to meet the needs of male students by not giving enough attention to the problems boys are having with certain academic subjects such as reading and writing. He also suggests schools are not necessarily offering curricula or teaching methods that meet boys' needs and specific interests.

Many experts believe that brain-based differences in how boys and girls learn are at the root of the problem. Boys are generally strong spatial learners, abstract thinkers, and learn

better when active—while the language centers in girls' brains develop earlier, allowing them to grasp reading and writing skills with greater ease.

Michael Gurian, author of *The Minds of Boys: Saving Our Sons From Falling Behind in School and Life*, found that boys' brains go into a rest state several times throughout the day, causing them to "zone out" during instruction. And while girls also experience a rest state, they are still able to gather information and take more in than boys do.

Matt Miller, a first grade teacher in Newton, Massachusetts, sees these differences daily in his classroom. "I find that boys need explicit instruction and practice in learning how to listen and gather information, whereas girls almost innately come into the classroom knowing how to be active listeners," says Miller. He believes that boys are tactile learners who benefit from multi-sensory activities, and the review and repetition of skills.

Miller also feels strongly about allowing frequent breaks for movement, giving his students a chance to unleash their energy. While school systems across the country have cut back or eliminated physical education classes due to limited budgets, students, particularly boys, will have even fewer opportunities to be active during the school day which may impact their learning in the classroom.

Janine Mast, a fourth grade teacher in Dublin, Ohio, agrees. "I do think boys and girls learn differently. Boys love anything kinesthetic. They love to move around and act things out. Girls seem to be better auditory and visual learners. However, it is important to note that all students learn better by acting and experiencing what they are learning."

The struggle with reading and writing greatly concerns parents as such skills are essential to a successful future. The NAEP reports that though boys and girls have similar preschool experiences, girls seem to have an advantage in early literacy participation experiences. Miller sees the writing gap in his first grade classroom and notes that his female students do seem to learn essential writing skills with greater ease.

"The fine motor skills develop later for boys, and handwriting can become laborious," he says. As children begin to form letters and learn about the writing process, the child with strong fine motor skills is physically able to write with greater ease. Less time and energy is spent actually forming the letters and words, and the child is able to approach content of the writing more thoughtfully. Those who struggle with fine motor skills early on find writing labor-intensive, directly impacting the quality of the writing content.

Research also indicates that until about ten years ago, most of the literature children were exposed to in the classroom was oriented towards a girl's learning style. Girls tend to prefer fiction while boys prefer adventure, mystery, sports-related, or non-fiction literature. As a result, boys were less likely to engage in reading for pleasure and were less motivated by the reading material presented within the classroom. This combined with the need for alternative teaching methods to reach and sustain the attention of boys has resulted in a decline in their overall reading scores.

Should Parents Consider Single-Sex Schools?

The jury is still out on whether single-sex schools make a difference in boys' achievement. Single-sex schools may offer teaching methods that support the male learning style and an environment void of the distraction of girls. Recognizing that a co-ed school is a microcosm of society, parents wonder if their boys miss out on vital social interaction that is not available at single-sex schools.

There is, however, some evidence to support that single-sex schools are beneficial. Dr. Pollack writes that "at a well-run boys' school, boys feel more comfortable and are more confident about their abilities. Therefore they do better in school. In the absence of girls, boys don't feel as competitive or as vulnerable and thus tend to be less tough on one another."

What Can Parents Do?

If your son is floundering in school, the best thing you can do is become his advocate and develop a working partnership with his teacher. Many educators recognize the gender gap and will go to great lengths to deliver instruction that benefits all learning styles. Share your concerns with the teacher. Outline what you believe to be your son's learning style, his interests, and describe what motivates him. Ask the teacher for her observations as well.

Five Additional Steps to Support Your Son

1. Inquire about the different hands-on learning and problem-solving opportunities that are part of the school day.
2. Take a look at the classroom library. Are there different genres of literature available? Do you see books that will pique your son's interest? If not, ask if parents are able to donate books to the classroom library or take books out from the local library to supplement the collection.
3. If your son requires frequent breaks, ask the teacher how she allows for that during the school day. See if your child might be able to use a squeeze ball or fidget toy to help him maintain attention during instruction.
4. Are there alternative ways—such as literacy-based computer programs and games—for boys to engage in literacy activities? If such activities are not available, see if discretionary funds are able to cover the purchase of such materials.
5. Get involved with school-based committees to see how the school administration is dealing with the gender gap issue. If it isn't receiving much attention, form a committee designed to tackle the specific issues related to the growing gender gap in the classroom.

Though the statistics are unnerving, parents can make a difference in their sons' education. Evaluate your child's strengths and work with his teacher and school to see that his needs are being met. Each child learns differently, and ultimately teachers and parents have the same goal: for all children to reach their academic potential. Be aware of learning style differences and advocate for fresh and alternative teaching methods, and your son will indisputably reap the benefits.