Engaging and Keeping our Bright, Gifted Boys

by

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After some 35 years of feminist movement in this country, plenty of issues facing females still exist. In that process, however, boys have slipped through the cracks. The statistics on boys are both disturbing and alarming.

From elementary school through high school, boys receive lower grades than girls do.
Eighth grade boys are retained 50% more often than eighth grade girls.
By the time they reach high school, boys account for more than two thirds of the students in special education.
Fewer boys than girls now attend and graduate from college.
Fifty-nine percent of all masters’ degree candidates are now women. In every racial and ethnic group, women outnumber males in the acquisition of college degrees. One hundred and thirty-three females get an undergraduate degree to every 100 males.
Boys are up to 10 times more likely to suffer from hyperactivity than girls are.
Boys are 10 times more likely to be labeled ADHD
Ninety-five percent of all juvenile homicides are committed by boys.
Males account for almost nine out of 10 alcohol and drug law violations.
Suicide is the third leading cause of death among boys in their mid-to late teens (accidents and homicides are first and second).
Boys are more likely to face verbal abuse than girls in the classroom and at home.
Boys are four times more likely to prescribed Ritalin. Currently over four million boys take Ritalin daily in the U.S.
Boys are slower to develop impulse control than girls are.
Seventy-six percent of all students labeled emotionally disturbed are boys.

With increased pressure on schools to perform, more and more classrooms have resorted to pencil-paper tasks, allowing for less movement, and reducing the number of hands-on activities for students. This has resulted in many schools and classrooms becoming more girl-friendly than boy-friendly.

Understanding the wiring of the male brain can assist teachers in being more effective with gifted boys academically. The following modifications in a classroom can help boys become more successful in school.

Spatial ability is an area of strength in the male brain. Putting things in diagram form or using symbols aligns with this area of strength. Boys are iconic thinkers; they tend to think and process information better when it is presented in symbols, pictures, and diagrams. Instead of giving boys a step sheet in narrative form, try putting the steps in the form of a flowchart. Girls typically prefer the words.
When giving boys explanations, try to get to the bottom line. Think in terms of bulleted items or lists. When boys are bombarded with long narrative explanations, they tend to disengage.
Boys are basically deductive thinkers. When conducting inquiry lessons and Socratic questioning, boys may need more coaching to be successful. When frustration sets in, be prepared to give the boy the generalization and then have him find the examples to support the generalization or theory.
The corpus callosum is the bridge portion at the front of the brain that connects the left and right hemispheres of the brain. In the male brain, the corpus callosum is smaller than in their female counterparts. This size difference makes girls better at multi-tasking than boys. As a result boys prefer doing one thing at a time, often refusing to let go of an existing task in order to move to another task. To assist boys in the classroom with this, consider using a timer. Set the timer and say, "Try getting to a stopping point before the timer goes off." Most boys will compete with the clock because they tend to be highly competitive.

For boys who need to move around, try to allow them to have an area in which to move. Place some desks at the back of the room and put masking tape on the floor. Say to the boys: "If you need to move while reading, writing, etc, you can sit at that desk and get up as long as you stay within the taped-off area." Most boys can move in this way without disturbing others. Giving boys an opportunity to get up periodically as part of an instructional lesson can also help boys to continue being engaged in the lesson. The movement can be as simple as asking the students in row four to trade places with the students in row two and then work with the person across from you in doing a given task.

To promote writing, allow boys to draw pictures of what they want to say. Many boys love to doodle. Use that to your advantage. It can be a pre-writing activity that motivates boys. Draw pictures of vocabulary words. The brain has a limited ability to remember words, but it has an almost unlimited ability to remember pictures. Allow boys to write about things they are interested in, which may include some things considered gross. As one 11 year-old told his mom, "Mom, you know I am into gross logy." Computers can also allow boys to write without physical effort of putting pencil on paper and forming the letters correctly. Word prediction software, such as Co-writer, allows boys to type the first few letters of the word and then have the program give them choices of the words they may be trying to type.

To promote reading, allow boys to choose things that interest them. Boys prefer how-to books and articles over fiction. Boys like action-centered material. Audio books, graphic books, how-to-books, sports, cars, and adventure appeal to middle school boys. There are reading lists of recommended books now available that have been generated by other males. Two such sources can be found at http://www.guysread.com and by looking at the recommendations of the American Librarians Association at http://www.ala.org. Another possible source is Great Books for Boys by Kathleen Odean (1998). To help boys stay focused while reading, allow them to play with nerf balls. It helps take care of the need touch things, fidgeting, and can help reduce pencil tapping.

Schools tend to be more girl-friendly then they are boy-friendly. Schools are designed to come in, sit down, and get to work. The male brain is wired to come in, sit down, and get up. Boys are more physically active and stay in motion longer than most girls. To minimize discipline problems and to encourage boys to be successful in school, try and include some movement into lessons. Short periods of reading or pencil-paper tasks need to be kept to about 10 to 15 minutes with opportunities to move and talk separating the tasks. For middle schools that have incorporated block scheduling, building in frequent opportunities for movement is extremely important for boys to be successful.

Including games and competition can also motivate boys to succeed in school. Boys are highly competitive. As a result, they typically do not like small group work. Having boys work in pairs instead of small groups minimizes the competition. When a boy and a girl are paired together, many boys sit back and allow the girl to do all the work. Being paired with a boy forces them to rely on one another.
Accompanying this shift in the classroom, boys are subjected to ridicule from other boys, especially gifted boys and more sensitive boys. Boys are the recipients of remarks that drive many boys to come to some drastic conclusions that prevent them from excelling in school. The conclusions . . .

School is for girls and not boys.
Being smart is synonymous with being a geek or nerd.
More sensitive boys are often called gays or fags.
It is not cool to be smart.
By adolescence, many boys want out of the gifted program.
Books that are part of the curriculum are often uninteresting to many boys. Reading and writing become a girl-thing and not a guy-thing.

For African-American, Hispanic, and boys from poverty backgrounds, the problem is compounded. These boys frequently lack role-models that value academics. African-American, Hispanic, and boys from poverty have fewer peers in the gifted program making it an uncomfortable place for some of these boys. Additionally, they may be accused by their peers as trying to “act white.” For some Hispanic students, English may be their second language which further reduces the chance that they will be identified and served in the gifted program.

To increase the probability that boys are going to be successful in the gifted program, several things must be addressed. Schools have to improve their identification processes, allowing for twice exceptionally gifted students. Boys who have labels of ADHD and ED can also be gifted. Second language learners can also be gifted. A higher percentage of boys also suffer from dyslexia but they may also be gifted. Classrooms must incorporate hands-on experiences for boys, allow for movement in the classroom, and create tasks that allow boys to be competitive. Boys need reading material that interests them. Boys prefer more how-to reading and non-fiction than girls do. Since the public school workforce in the United States is 85 percent female and we have increasing numbers of boys being raised by single moms, more male role models are needed, especially professional men who know the pressures placed on bright boys. We must make it cool for boys to be smart if we are to attract and keep our brightest young men engaged in courses of study that embrace academic rigor.

References


