

We Can Do Better By Boys

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All over the English-speaking world, some simple ideas are being discussed that may improve the school performance of millions of boys. The ideas are that many, perhaps most, boys start school a year too soon; that most boys are not developmentally ready at age five, as girls are, for the demands of sit-down schooling; and that if most boys moved through school being a year older than the girls in their class, many of our boy problems would disappear.

To infant teachers, the problem has been obvious for years. Many boys in kindergarten and grade one just don't have the ability in their fingers and brains to handle fine motor tasks such as pencil-and-paper work or cutting out; they are also not ready to sit still for long periods. The reason is that their nerves and brains are still growing into these abilities. By about the age of six-and-a-half or seven, these abilities develop and they're school-ready. Yet as we have forced formal learning earlier into the school curriculum, more boys are failing - and learning to hate school.

For 20 years now, it has been deeply unfashionable in education circles to look too closely at gender differences in children. We have been busy with the necessary task of equalising opportunities for girls. Now, however, the spotlight is being wrenched across to boys because, across the developed world, they are failing educationally as never before.

Boys' troubles at school are not just a recent problem, and are certainly not the fault of girls' equity programs going too far. Boys have been allergic to school since school was invented. Boys' misbehavior was once routinely overcome by the cane, today (some would argue) it is with drugs such as Ritalin. Boys' problems with spelling, reading, writing neatly, have always been with us too.

Yet the problem does not follow the same pattern everywhere. In English-speaking countries, boys make up more than 80 per cent of all remedial classes. In Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, and many other countries where school does not begin until age seven, this gender gap in literacy does not exist. By late primary school, moreover, European children have caught up and passed British children, who started school two years sooner.

The problem is connected to readiness. Among all mammals, males and females develop differently. In humans, it's a difference both of speed of development, and the order in which skills are acquired. Boys' brains are slower growing, and do not catch up with girls until about 17. More importantly, their abilities tend to arrive in a different order to girls'. Boys generally learn to control their arms and legs before their fingers. In girls, this is somewhat reversed. So, girls of four can often draw tiny figures and pictures, yet may reach seven or eight before really being able to run, jump, and catch a ball. Boys can often run and jump beautifully long before they can hold a pencil or scissors. Only by age seven or eight do their nervous systems develop enough to sit still and hold their body erect while writing at a desk.

For a long time these were just teachers' anecdotal observations, but in Britain this year, nationwide testing was carried out on all children entering kindergarten. The early results showed a marked difference in the abilities of boys and girls in both number work, and reading and letters.

Hence the idea of boys delaying starting school till they are at least six. It can mean a choice between your son being one of the youngest in his class, feeling inadequate, being the least able, or being one of the most coordinated and confident by waiting and starting the following year - and having this remain so all the way through school. In Scotland this month, a group of mothers told a national newspaper they had formed a mutual pact to keep their sons out of school for one extra year. Many parents tell me they have made similar choices. Teachers are delighted at this new willingness of parents to resist the pressure to race ahead. For years, schools have been fighting the trend from parents to admit children younger and younger. The idea needn't and shouldn't be made into a rigid rule. Some five-year-old boys are ready for school; some six-year-old girls are not. The important thing is to look closely at readiness during the pre-school year, and act accordingly. A simple checklist - do they hold a pencil well, sit still, enjoy deskwork, listen and follow instructions well - may be all that is needed.

It's a matter of breaking out of the bureaucratic straitjacket of a system ruled by the calendar, and also resisting the yuppie tendency to treat childhood as a contest - "my child is learning Mandarin".

Professor Kathy Silva at Oxford University recently reported findings that starting school too soon creates a failure mentality while kindergarten, which used to be a year of play, activity, and social learning - has succumbed more and more to pressure for skills learning. This compounds the problem.

When people object to later starting for boys, it is usually on one of the following grounds - and each has something to say:

- All children, not just boys, are starting school too young. This is the basis of the approach in Europe, where all children must wait until seven to start school.
- Gender differences don't exist; it's how we bring up boys. This view was once held absolutely in academic circles. Today few take such a black-and-white view. But environment is a huge influence, and the one we can control. Teaching boys long before school starts to love words and books, restricting TV watching, helping them control aggression and be loving and safe, will all lead to better times at school.
- It's school, not boys, that should change. If the early school years were more activity and play-based, as they once were, then boys would be happier. Many schools are having 15-minute exercise sessions to start the day, and find that boys behave better and learn more easily.
- Economics. Many children go to school at four or five because it provides free child care. Not all kids have access to preschools. And some children are in such poor environments at home that they may be better off in school.

Many of us will know boys who are quiet and studious, girls who are active and agile. However, the fact is that, for most boys, the combined effect of biological and cultural differences creates almost a 12-month difference in school-readiness compared to girls. Some compassion and understanding of boys' natures, therefore, instead of the luck of the calendar, might make school happier for everyone.