



LEARNING CURVED

Are schools failing our sons?

by LIZA FINLAY

I LOVE MY BOYS — THE WAY THEY SIGH IN rapture the second I put on high heels, the way they nestle their noses in my neck when they feel sad. I love the way they race through forests turning every fallen branch into a sword with which to vanquish evildoers, how at storytime, books become bats for impromptu games of popcorn baseball and how handwriting winds and weaves over lined pages, drifting, like the meandering of childish imagination.

I love my boys, but I wonder sometimes if the scrawl on those pages is a road map into their psyches: directionless, distracted, sometimes defiant. I wonder if I should worry about a grade-one report card that shows low grades in reading and writing (albeit high marks in math and science).

My son Liam is a textbook case, I am assured, but I wonder what to read from that text. Across school boards in every province, girls are outperforming boys in reading and writing. In Liam's board, the Toronto District, standardized tests show a six to 12 percent performance gap in grade three. Coast to coast, provincial testing shows that boys consistently score lower than girls across all elementary grade levels in

core subjects like reading and writing.

By the time they get to high school, more boys than girls are dropping out and further down the road, admissions surveys show a higher percentage of girls than boys are entering university. According to Statistics Canada, in the 2004/05 academic year, 58 percent of all university students were female, up from 51 percent in 1984/85.

The gender gap almost closes in math and science, but because reading and writing are what educators call "core" skills (they're essential to all learning), the chasm has set off alarm bells and, in many provinces, boys' literacy has become a hot button issue.

Provincial ministries of education are stepping up. A Regina school board poured \$40,000 into the acquisition of non-fiction books geared to boys. And Ontario launched a province-wide initiative that includes the establishment of a "Read to Succeed" intranet for teachers, a boys' literacy advisory team and a resource guide distributed to schools aptly entitled: *Me Read? No Way!*

But is it enough? Will some teacher training and boy-friendly materials turn the tide? Or

KATHLEEN FINLAY: CAR PHOTO; CORBIS PHOTOGRAPHY/VEER



OH BOY: According to Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth, parents say that about 16% of boys frequently display hyperactive/impulsive behaviour, compared with 10% of girls.



JUST BOYS

are the problems more systemic? Some parents are pointing accusatory fingers at schools they feel are unfriendly to boys, naming everything from the preponderance of female teachers to “no snowball” rules as proof. A boy pushes and shoves in line and he’s sent to the office, they say. Are boys being bad, or are they just being boys? You know, different from girls.

The central issue, it seems, is this: Are boys failing school, or are schools failing boys?

“**T**here is quite a gap and there is cause for concern,” says Ken Pettigrew, a literary consultant with the Toronto District School Board. “Lack of interest plays a big role in boys’ literacy challenges. My sense is that boys often feel there just aren’t any interesting choices in the library or in the classroom. We know, for example, that boys would far rather read magazines and non-fiction over fiction, and if they are going to read fiction, the book has to appeal with lots of excitement and gore and toilet humour.”



OH BOY: A resting female brain has the same amount of neural activity as a male brain engaged in problem solving.

Bill Waldman, principal at Forest Hill Public School in Toronto, agrees. When he saw year after year of poor provincial scores, he saw a slippery slope for boys and literacy. So he created a boys’ book club. The club, for boys in grades three to six, is now in its seventh year and similar clubs have sprouted in more than 250 area schools.

The goal, says Waldman, is to get boys reading more and, further, liking it. To that end, he chooses titles like *Captain Underpants* and has guest stars make occasional appearances. A couple of years ago, Waldman worked with the Toronto Raptors and their Read to Achieve program. Chris Bosch invited a class of grade threes — including boys in the reading program — to a Raptors game, where he came by and signed autographs. Says Waldman: “You have to have a big draw.”

Finding a big draw is getting increasingly critical, in part, says Waldman, because there are so few male role models for young boys. “We send our kids to school every day where they are surrounded by adult women.” Statistics Canada recently reported that, as of 2001, nearly 300,000 more females than males entered educational occupations. Not only do boys need to see men reading, they need to be instructed by teachers who get boys — understand their need to fidget, let loose, tell fart jokes. And some boys need a teacher who won’t label them troublemakers when, during carpet time, they roll around on the floor with a buddy in a headlock. “Female teachers can do that,” says Waldman, “but males seem to know what little boys need more instinctively.”

Seeing men read will only motivate boys if all the rest of us — parents, librarians, teachers and administrators alike — embrace a broader definition of what reading really is. “Boys see mom reading a book and dad reading the paper, but they think mom is the only one truly reading,” says Pettigrew. “So when boys are asked [in provincial assessments] if they read on their own, they discount their comics and answer no.”

That’s not the only way provincial tests are missing the mark with boys. “These tests are written,” says Pettigrew. “They only measure the written response. There is no possibility for an oral answer and, therefore, no allowance made for an experiential learner” (that is, the kid who learns better by doing, a style of learning that includes many active boys).

“We have to find ways to grab all styles of learners and that means examining everything from the way classrooms are set up to teaching styles,” says Pettigrew. “Teachers need to create opportunities for movement for experiential learners.”

That’s precisely what Marie Lardino set out to accomplish when she left Toronto’s public school system to found Voice Intermediate School, an independent school for boys and girls in grades five through eight. Says Lardino:



“When you have an environment that disseminates information one way and that one way is auditory, there are lots of learners who fall through the cracks.”

Leonard Sax, a family doctor, is pacing the floor of his Maryland home, telephone in hand. “I’m going to predict that right now you are sitting down,” he says. “Girls focus best when sitting. I, on the other hand, am wearing out the carpet walking back and forth. Most males think better when standing.”

“Having never met my seven-year-old son,” I ask, “what can you tell me about him?”

“His classroom is configured in groups of four desks; he loves numbers and does well in math, but has to be coaxed to read and gets barely passing grades in it.”

Wow. So how does Sax suggest I help my son? For starters, I should make sitting optional during reading

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practice. Allowing boys to stand (crouch, pace, rock) helps them learn, says Sax, but distracts many girls.

Getting boys moving is central to the thesis of Sax’s second book, *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys*. In it, he explains that the development of the male brain conflicts with the typical public school set-up and spells disaster for boys.

Case in point, he argues, is the acceleration of the early-elementary curriculum. “Kindergarten used to be about games of duck, duck, goose,” he says. “It was about painting and playdough. No more. Now it’s all about numeracy and literacy. If you examine the kindergarten curriculum of most school boards, it looks an awful lot like the first-grade curriculum of 30 years ago.”

And that spells trouble for lots of boys both academically and behaviourally. For starters, this is because boys’ and girls’ brains develop very differently: Asking a five-year-old boy to sit still and practise writing letters is like asking the same of a 3½-year-old girl. That’s because the region responsible for handwriting develops much earlier in most girls. “Furthermore,” says Sax, “little boys aren’t wired to sit still and be quiet. That’s a skill that comes much later. Asking him to do so at age five, or even six or seven, is developmentally inappropriate.”

OH BOY: A boy’s testosterone levels increase 800% between toddlerhood and adolescence.

So he squirms a little. So what? Here’s what. According to Sax, forcing five-year-old Johnny to sit quietly and concentrate on numbers and letters is like putting him in a straitjacket and torturing him. The trickle-down effect is a boy who sees school as prison and success at school as something designed for girls.

Little boys aren’t the only ones noticing that school is a girlish domain. Lots of parents and educators have observed the same. “Peek into the office on any given day and I guarantee you will find more boys than girls parked in chairs in front of the principal’s office,” says Trisha Wood,* a Calgary mom who pulled her six-year-old son from his local public school after repeated time outs for being “too boisterous.” “His teacher told me he was a disruptive influence. He’s not disruptive. He’s a boy.”

And — not to be too stereotypical here — boys will be boys. They roll around on floors like a heap of puppies; they stick crayons up their noses in the craft corner; they clap their feet together like seals during show and tell. That’s why we love our boys.

But lots of teachers don’t, says parenting expert Alyson Schafer. “Classrooms are crowded, teachers are unassisted and they have no time to deal with boyish antics. The climate for boys is getting worse all the time. Post-9/11, post-Columbine, post-Virginia Tech, a push or shove is labelled aggression. It’s getting harder for boys to be boys.”

For Sax, and others, the solution lies in the classroom. Standing and squirming with abandon, more dynamic classrooms, constant movement — these are just some of the reasons Sax advocates boy-only classes. Separating boys and girls, he argues, not only frees the teacher to pursue whatever boy-friendly strategies are required (without expense to most girls), but is also easily implemented at no extra cost to overburdened school boards.

Principal Bill Waldman is already onsite. He is considering a single-sex classroom in the future, if numbers permit. For other administrators, creating smaller classes is a good first step. “Schools are too big, classes are too big, and the danger is that they become teacher-centric,” says Marie Lardino. “They have to be in order for the teacher to retain control. So teachers stand and deliver, and students sit and listen.” If Lardino had her way, all schools and classes would be small so that instructors could focus on the individual needs of every child.

On a chalkboard in my kitchen, I write a “word of the day” to encourage my own sons’ literacy. Frequently, they’ll accomplish small victories. Liam will slip words like *apprehensive* into conversation, or ask me how to spell *predicament*. And occasionally, pieces of chalk become ground into dust under the stampeding feet of two towheaded, untamed boys ecstatically wild at heart. And that’s why I love them. ♥

*Name changed by request.