



Supporting Boys Through Social Emotional Learning

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In the previous article, we explored [why boys face more struggles in school](#) — from their focus and self-control to managing frustration. But understanding the problem is only the first step.

This follow-up article will dive deeper into the how: how we can support boys' social-emotional growth so they can have better focus, cooperation, and help them handle their emotions in positive ways. Drawing on research and classroom experience, let's look at the issues, what could be the reasons, and the strategies we can use at home and in the classroom.

What boys struggle with most

In school, I have always noticed that boys often have more trouble focusing or sitting still when doing a task or during classroom discussion, or even staying calm when frustrated. They might struggle with working with others or cooperation, which often results in conflicts, and find it hard to express their emotions with words.

Some common areas where boys struggle include:

- Impulse control and focus - boys tend to be more physically active, which makes it harder for them to stay focused. The boys in our class would often move around while seated. You would often see them stand up several times or fidget with whatever they had.
- Regulating their emotions - some boys find it difficult to express themselves with words, so they show it through actions. At school, when boys are happy or excited, you often see them run around or might even accidentally break something because of their heightened emotions.
- Cooperation - in our classroom, this is something that I have always focused on. Boys often struggle with teamwork, as they see games or activities as competition rather than teamwork. They get frustrated when what they had in mind didn't go as planned.
- Communication - this is an important factor that boys need to learn, as this would help them in the long run. Boys don't express their emotions as much as girls, as they are

always taught to be tough and strong. This makes it hard for adults to understand what boys feel or need.

Although this isn't true for everyone, it is still worth noting that most boys struggle with these, and it is our responsibility to understand them so we can help them understand themselves.

Reasons for the differences we observe between boy's and girls' behavior

As in the [previous article](#), we discussed how girls and boys differ, and we dove into their developmental differences. We will further talk about these differences as it is more than just the gender.

- Developmental - boys and girls develop differently in brain areas related to language and self-regulation. Girls mature faster than boys, and this also includes their linguistic skills, making them better at understanding other people's words and social cues.
- Social conditioning - we have all heard about Ivan Pavlov's Classical Conditioning; oftentimes, we don't notice that we have been applying the same concept at home and in school. Boys are always told, "You're a boy, so you need to be tough," or "Boys don't cry." These phrases conditioned their minds that they are not allowed to show their weakness.
- Teacher's attitude and classroom expectations - traditional classroom structures reward children who sit still, follow directions, etc. — skills that develop early in girls. As a teacher, I also misinterpret boys who have active behavior as misbehavior, especially when they are expected to stay seated and focused.
- Cultural expectations - in our society, we often give praise for independence and competition in boys. This teaches them that being more competitive will give them rewards, which, in turn, makes it harder for them to practice teamwork and even empathy.

How social-emotional learning (SEL) helps boys' school performance

Social-emotional learning focuses on helping children to have a better understanding of their emotions and others as well. SEL focuses on five key areas:

- self-awareness - understanding your own emotions and values. This helps boys gain confidence in their own abilities as they learn their strengths and weaknesses, and

they will be more open to asking for help and cooperating.

- self-management - being able to control emotions, thoughts, and actions in different situations. This also includes the ability to manage stress, control impulses, and persevere through different challenges for them to achieve their goals — personal and educational.
- social awareness - having empathy towards other people and acting in an ethical manner. Being able to distinguish right from wrong helps boys control their impulses as they know the consequences of it.
- relationship skills - help boys have meaningful relationships with peers and adults. This also involves acting in accordance with social norms. In this skill, boys learn how to communicate clearly, actively listen, cooperate, negotiate conflict constructively, resist inappropriate social pressure, and seek help when they need to.
- making responsible decisions - the ability to act and respond appropriately to certain situations based on what they learned. With this, boys will be able to act accordingly, weighing consequences and the well-being of others and themselves, and being more mindful of the decisions they make, making an impact on how they approach school conflicts as well.

Social-emotional learning helps boys have self-control, thus, helping them become more confident, cooperative, and motivated.

In my own classroom, I've seen how SEL transforms behavior. I used to have a student who struggled with his emotions; whenever he got frustrated, he would throw whatever he was holding and in turn, this affects him the whole day which causes him to not focus during class. So we began teaching him how to understand his emotions and manage them. We started with simple breathing exercises and gave him a designated calm corner that he could go to whenever he needed space. It wasn't easy as it took time, but it worked. Now, whenever he feels upset or mad, he tells us and asks us for help instead of acting out.

Social-emotional learning benefits boys' school performance and helps reduce conduct problems. In one study by Durlak, he found that SEL improves academic achievement by an average of 11 percentile points, and it also adds to their prosocial behaviors and improves their attitude towards school. SEL can be both taught in school and at home, and it is important that we stay consistent with it and model the behavior that we want them to learn and apply.

Tips and techniques to support boys

Here are some things that we can do to better support boys:

- Teach regulation strategies. You can do this by doing breathing exercises or movement breaks as we do in school. Let boys — or even the whole class — release their energy through dancing or even fun games, then do breathing exercises to help them calm down. You may also try having a “calm corner” or a “calm chair” ; this is where they can go when they have too much emotion or if they are still not ready to do activities.
- Name the emotions. This is something that we often do in class, instead of just showing the emotion, help boys name it, like “I feel happy” when they are running around, or “I feel frustrated” when they show frustrations. Encourage them to describe their feelings and what they feel physically (heart beating fast - nervous, wanting to move around - excited/happy).
- Encourage cooperation over competition. Design activities that encourage teamwork, like a group project or games. You may assign the roles to make sure that everyone gets the chance to lead and collaborate. Praise their cooperation to motivate them, but make sure that you emphasize cooperation, like, “Great job listening to your teammate!”
- Do role play and hands-on activities. Role playing is a good activity that helps boys understand social cues, and this can be done in school and at home as games! Boys love activities where they can use their hands and move. Use this as an advantage and incorporate it into learning instead of just doing paper and pen activities. You may even do outdoor exploration and use manipulatives to get their hands working.
- Model emotional intelligence. Children learn through observations, so seeing adults manage their emotions well will also help them with their own. Express yourself calmly to children, let them know that all emotions are okay, but you should learn how to react properly. Listen to them and validate their feelings.
- Work hand in hand. Parents and teachers are one of the most important parts of the children’s lives. Boys thrive when adults work together. Remember that staying consistent will go a long way! Share strategies together so that you can use the same techniques.

We often hear the phrase “Boys will be boys,” as if their behavior is unchangeable. Boys will always have that energy, curiosity, and drive, and our role is to guide them using

these strengths that they already possess. Let us focus on their socio-emotional growth as this would be a tool for them that'll help their focus, grit, and cooperation.

When boys learn to understand their emotions, they will become resilient and confident. We want boys to be able to thrive not just in school, but in life as well.

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