



Why Boys Struggle with Their Studies and How to Support Them

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Over the past six years in the classroom, I have watched a familiar scene unfold: girls often excel academically, while boys sometimes fall behind. Year after year, I see girls quietly absorbed in the task given to them, while boys fidget and wrestle with staying on task. Because focus and attention are the cornerstones of learning, their absence can make the journey through school much harder and leave lasting effects.

To understand why boys often fall behind, it is helpful to first look at how their development differs from girls, so we can better support their needs.

How Girls and Boys Differ

As a teacher, we often assess children in different areas to assess whether their skills align with typical age expectations. Some of the skills are: language, cognitive, motor skills, and socio-emotional skills. These areas are important for teachers to have a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each child and to find what could help them learn better.

Children's development varies in key ways between girls and boys. For example, girls and boys show different rates of maturity across language, cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional skills. Research suggests that girls mature slightly faster than boys in some developmental areas, which may also explain the gap.

Language development

Girls tend to develop language earlier; you may observe girls starting to speak as they process speech and social cues, giving them a head start in understanding and communicating. This early development often translates to their linguistic skills, helping them read better and have better comprehension of what they read. Conversely, boys often exhibit delays in their language, contributing to potential challenges in their studies when they start school.

Cognitive skills

Cognitively, boys and girls show different strengths. Girls display strength in verbal and social reasoning, while boys are more into spatial and visual-motor skills. This shows that these differences influence how they perform in class. Girls may show higher

interest in problem-solving activities, while boys prefer using manipulatives or exploratory tasks.

Motor skills

Boys often excel in gross motor skills as they are more active and have higher energy levels, and prefer physical activities over doing seated tasks. However, girls' fine motor skills develop faster, showing better eye-hand coordination when writing or even doing arts. So in class, girls demonstrate better handwriting, while boys may struggle with this, causing frustrations when doing writing activities.

Socio-emotional skills

This area is one of the most obvious differences that you may see in class. Girls are generally more aware of their emotions and even others. At school, you would often see girls helping each other and being more open to share their emotions verbally. On the other hand, boys express their emotions through actions more than words - you would see boys running around and jumping when they're happy or excited. This doesn't mean that boys are not aware of their emotions; rather, they are more in a shell and would rather show how they feel instead of speaking about it.

These developmental differences can influence how boys experience school and may explain why many struggle academically.

Why do boys struggle more with their studies than girls?

According to OECD, the results from the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) showed gender disparities, wherein girls outperform boys by 24 points in reading, while boys are better in mathematics by 9 points. While these results vary across countries - and may not directly reflect every classroom - they highlight a global concern.

Behavioral differences play a vital role. Boys are more likely to face challenges in behavior, attention, motivation, and self-regulation. The American Psychological Association also mentioned that boys are at higher risk for inattention, hyperactivity, and externalizing behaviors. As mentioned earlier, children are typically required to sit quietly and focus in a classroom and are expected to finish a task at hand. Whereas boys with hyperactivity struggle with this.

Part of the problem is how many teachers reward following directions, communication, and sitting still - areas in which girls show strengths. Meanwhile, boys have higher energy and may be more active while learning, which usually isn't expected in the

classroom, so they are sometimes labelled as “disruptive.” As a teacher, I am guilty of giving more praise to girls as they show more favorable behavior in class, especially when they are seated well and follow directions, while I call out boys for fidgeting in class. Over time, this can affect boys’ motivation and confidence. Pressure from their environment could also be a factor, as they are often taught to be tough and to hide emotions rather than ask for help.

Just like girls, boys are competent; a different approach may be what they need to support their studies.

Supporting boys with their studies

1. Encourage them to read early. In school, you would more likely see girls holding books, while boys build or play. While building and play are also valuable activities that hone creativity, encouraging boys to read or be interested in printed words can strengthen and develop their linguistic skills. At home, let your child choose books that interest them (sports, cars, or adventure) - they can look at the pictures and let them explain what they see. Help them understand the book by asking open-ended questions.
2. Help them express their emotions. Most boys are not confident in sharing their emotions, and I see this every day in school. We can help them name their emotions and how we can express them in different ways, let them know that these emotions are normal, and it is okay to show them. Remember that emotions affect their motivation, focus, and behavior. Read more about social emotional learning for boys [here](#).
3. Incorporate movement. Don’t just do paper and pencil tasks; you may incorporate movement in learning, moving their body in class can help release energy and support their focus. You may turn math or reading into games! Simple addition could be an active learning moment; one example is how I taught my students addition by having them jump forward for each number added.
4. Praise their effort. Instead of just praising the results, make sure that you praise their persistence and effort. You may say, “I like how you use the colors!” when they are doing art, “Great effort!” or even “Thank you for trying!” Boys are more likely to be motivated when they know that their effort is being valued. Positive reinforcement boosts self-esteem that helps boys feel more ready to tackle academic challenges in the future.
5. Create a flexible learning environment. You may add brain breaks every 20 minutes, so that they don’t feel too tired or get bored. Group-based activities can be

especially effective as it could be a competitive learning opportunity that engages boys to collaborate with their classmates that builds their communication and social skills.

6. Strengthen parent-teacher partnerships. Boys will gain more if both sides are consistent with how we support boys in their learning. It is important to know how the child is at home, as this may show their interest, strengths, and even challenges. This would make the boys feel understood and supported.

When we recognize that boys learn differently, we can create a classroom that celebrates their strengths. Every child has the potential to thrive, and we just need to be the people who support them and guide them.

References

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