

Boys performing badly

New research reveals that girls are consistently outstripping boys academically right through their school years. Education expert **Robert Watts** asks why this should be and – crucially – how teachers and parents can help to redress the balance



For little learners

It's a beautiful crisp morning and I've joined a class of six-year-olds in Tilford, Surrey as they head out of the classroom and into the woods to spend some time at their forest school.

Given a choice of activities, the girls are gathering kindling, working together to make sure there's enough wood for the fire they'll soon be building. And the boys? Are they patiently picking through twigs, quietly collecting acorns or sketching the shapes of the trees? Uh-uh.

Right now, three of them are noisily dragging an enormous tree trunk across the forest floor, while others are wielding makeshift wooden swords above their heads and the rest are busy firing imaginary bullets from fallen branches.

Boys, they say, will be boys – that's just the way things are. But there are growing concerns that a combination of digital technologies and female-friendly teaching methods is creating a culture of low expectations for boys.

Recent research reveals that girls consistently outperform boys in every area of the curriculum and throughout their time in school – a pattern that is repeated year in, year out, all around the world.

So why do boys continue to fall behind in school? Do they learn in different ways from girls? And what can parents do to support boys' learning at home?

A slow start

Children undergo their first assessments at the end of reception class and, even at this early stage, boys are falling behind. In 2015, fewer than six in 10 boys reached the expected standards of the Early Learning Goals compared with three quarters of girls.

A closer analysis of figures from the Department of Education reveals that boys find some curriculum areas more challenging than others. Their attainment in maths almost matches that of girls (74 per cent reach the expected standard against 81 per cent of girls).

But when it comes to writing, only 63 per cent are meeting expectations compared with 78 per cent of girls. Literacy is the key area in which boys are falling behind: one in three boys begins Year 1 unable to write simple sentences with correct spellings.

The good news is that there has been a slight narrowing of the gender gap, but these figures will still ring alarm bells in many homes and schools. Gareth Jenkins, director of UK Poverty at Save the Children, highlights the extent to which boys from poorer backgrounds are underperforming: 'In England, too many children, especially boys, are slipping under the radar without the support they need to reach their potential. They're falling behind before they even get to school and that puts their life chances at risk. This is unacceptable. A whole generation of boys is being failed.'

Could it be that boys are simply not suited to school? Recent research confirms what many parents might suspect. 'Boys are less motivated than girls and have less positive attitudes towards school', says Mieke Van Houtte of Ghent University, Belgium,

'Girls spend more time doing homework, display less disturbing behaviour in the classroom and have higher expectations of themselves,' adds Mieke. 'Boys take it easier, work less hard and are distracted more quickly, while girls persevere more. Boys need more encouragement.'

Teaching methods

I follow my forest school kids back to their classroom to speak to Sara Bedford, headteacher of All Saints Infant School. Does she notice the difference in boys' attainment?

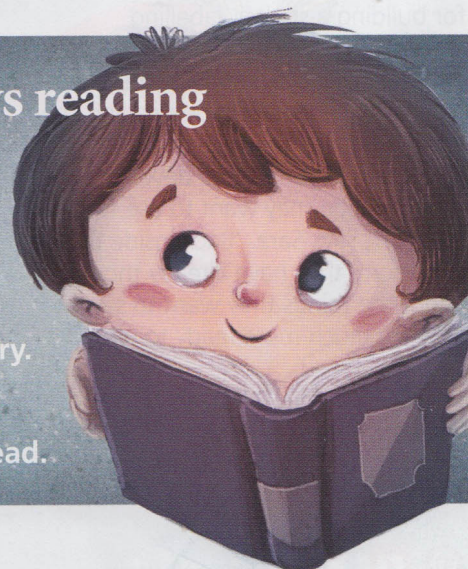
'Absolutely. It's especially apparent in a small infant school like ours. When they start in reception class, boys have lower speech and language skills and lower fine motor skills.'

This lack of basic skills, says Sara, has an immediate impact on attainment in literacy: 'If you don't get the speech and language right, you don't get the writing – it's like asking children to run before they can walk.'

Could it be the teaching methods that are at fault? A typical infant school day begins with the teacher assembling children quietly on the carpet, taking the register and talking through tasks. While it offers children a

Gary Wilson's TOP TIPS for getting boys reading

- Make some time to read stories together – five minutes a day is a good start.
- Read with as much expression as you can.
- Talk about the pictures, drawing attention to detail.
- Encourage boys to predict what will happen next in the story.
- When you've finished, get them to re-tell the story.
- Don't stop reading to or with boys, just because they can read.



- ◀ calm, reassuring start to the day, many boys find it difficult to concentrate: full of energy, surrounded by friends, it's counter-intuitive for them to sit in silence and their attention can drift.

Sara and her colleagues at All Saints are experimenting with a new approach to engaging boys' attention. 'When children arrive in the classroom, teachers throw a question at them,' she explains. 'Then they discuss it amongst themselves. For example, they might be asked whether they think Robin Hood was right to steal from the rich to give to the poor.'

Boys, she finds, respond particularly well to such challenges, enjoying the interaction and the faster pace of the lesson. Crucially, this kind of interaction can inspire boys to tackle the task that many find most challenging – writing.

Too often, Sara says, children are encouraged to concentrate on the presentation rather than the purpose of their writing: 'There is an over-emphasis on encouraging children to write neatly that can destroy the boys' interest. Boys need reasons to write – something to inspire them to start and to follow through to the end.'

The idea that children should write purposefully is at the core of the school's approach to learning. 'Once boys feel that writing can make a difference, they become much more enthusiastic about exploring the language they will use to do it.'

Back in their classroom, the boys I watched carrying branches around in the woods are now fully engaged in their work. Building on their outdoor experiences, they're writing instructions for building a shelter, labelling diagrams and listing materials.

'Boys are motivated to write when teachers give them clipboards and send them out into the open air to discuss their ideas together and develop the language they want to use for the task', says Sara. 'Back inside the classroom, they have already thought about the things they want to say and they are much more ready to write.'

Helping at home

As parents, do we need to think more carefully about the way we support boys' learning at home? Gary Wilson

The twins learn differently

Paul Hogan, father of Maeve and Finlay, highlights some significant differences in the way his twins approach learning.

'We've noticed differences in the ways Maeve and Finlay like to learn. Maeve developed more quickly and has a more reflective approach to her learning. She's better at working alone and she'll happily get on with the task. She has more of a desire to please her teachers.'

The children's school tends to separate twins, and Finlay found himself with a teacher who took advantage of the fact that there were lots of hyperactive, sporty boys in the class. She tends to pair boys up to tackle tasks, sometimes collaboratively but sometimes competitively. They need a different kind of motivation to the girls – they love to compete with each other and against different groups.'

is a leading expert on raising boys' achievement and the author of three books on the subject. 'We need to create a more caring masculinity, which is of course in everyone's interests,' he says. 'Anything that we do that addresses the attitude, behaviour and performance of boys will have a positive, knock-on effect for girls too, as it's often boys that behave in ways that are detrimental to everyone's learning.'

When it comes to developing and

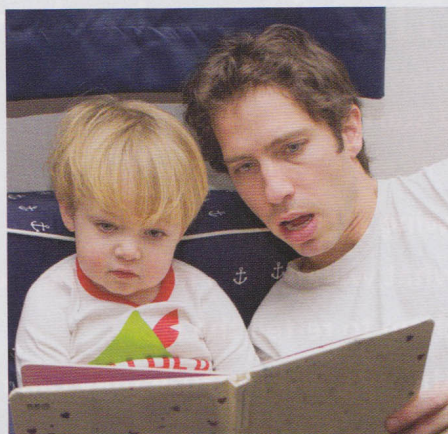
maintaining a positive attitude at home, Gary identifies a number of ways that parents can help.

Step one is to encourage independence – let boys work things out for themselves. It may be quicker to clean up after boys than persuade them to do it themselves. But in the long term, it's important to give boys the message that they need to take responsibility for their actions.

A hands-on approach from both parents is the next step, says Gary. 'Male role models in the family – fathers, grandfathers, uncles, older brothers – are crucial in supporting boys' education. While mothers have a huge part to play, research suggests that a father's involvement in their boys' education can have a major impact on achievement, attitude and behaviour, whether dad lives at home or not.'

Gary also underlines the role of parents in developing boys' literacy. Above all, boys need to be encouraged to hold on to their reading habit as they grow older. 'Don't stop reading to him or with him, just because he can read,' advises Gary. After all, at the end of a tough day building shelters in the forest, boys still love to hear a bedtime story.

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Gary Wilson's *Breaking through Barriers to Boys' Achievement: Developing a Caring Masculinity* is published by Bloomsbury Books.