

Do Teachers Dislike Boys?

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Could it be true that some teachers just don't like boys? When I raised this question just briefly in another column, a flood of e-mail came pouring in.

Some readers told me I was all wet, and that this was a ridiculous idea. Others pointed to research that shows that teachers actually pay more attention to boys, shortchanging girls in the process.

And then there were the messages from parents, fathers and mothers both, who felt that their children had been treated badly at school specifically because they were boys. "It is almost as if the boys' presence is less appreciated, and even burdensome," wrote the mother of a young boy.

Tales from the mailbox

A father writes about his youngest son, a rowdy seven-year-old who loves to laugh and make other people laugh, too. This father had his son change teachers because the teacher punished the child academically for incidents that happened on the playground.

"I tried to explain to her that his behavior on the playground was certainly worthy of punishment, but it should not conflict with his learning time," the father says. "She actually refused him a test, saying that throwing sand on the playground meant he got a zero."

The father happened to be at school to witness the incident that was the last straw: "As I approached, my son and another boy were giggling as they walked in line. The teacher yelled at [my son], who instantly turned and walked in line, but the other boy shoved him as they passed a trash can and he fell against it. The teacher yanked him up by his arm and practically dragged him along until they got to class. Once at the class, she had him stand against the wall outside of the door and told him that he did not deserve to be allowed in with the other students (including the boy who pushed him!)."

The father went to his son, hugged him, and then told the school office staff that he had witnessed the incident and was taking the boy out for ice cream. There, they had a long talk about behaving at school, and the boy told him, "Dad, I try my best, but she hates me. I can never do anything right for her."

Other voices

Alyssa Jenkins, a high school teacher and the mother of two young boys, writes, "I am beginning to agree with you that many teachers do not like boys, although I rarely see that at the high school level. I think it's more of an elementary school thing."

Jenkins says that she talked to a kindergarten teacher about this recently and was told, "Because some teachers are exasperated with trying to control boys' energy, they [sometimes] recommend holding a boy back until his body catches up with his brain."

This teacher also told Jenkins that if all a young boy hears all day are comments like "Sit down" and "Stop that," he may be labeled as a problem child and his self-esteem could suffer.

Jenkins says a first-grade teacher raised another issue that causes problems for some boys: turning kindergarten into first grade. "Kindergarten is supposed to be a transition year," she writes, "and by asking children to already know how to 'do school,' the system disadvantages boys, who mature slower than girls."

A fifth-grade teacher and father who lives in rural Iowa writes, "As far as teachers disliking boys, I think that is too general a statement. A teacher is going to be 'annoyed' or 'inconvenienced' by any student that is disruptive in the classroom, whether it is a boy or girl."

He says teachers need better "people skills" and need to learn tolerance and patience in dealing with all students. But he added that a supportive parent

plays an important role in how these "difficult" students are handled in class.

He also points out that the teacher's gender, whether or not that teacher has children, and the gender of those children all are factors that can influence how a teacher relates to boys. "Having two boys ages three and five makes me a bit more tolerant of the behavior of boys because I deal with it daily and have managed to acquire skills to obtain the behaviors I think are appropriate," he writes. "This does not always work with other people's kids, but it is always worth a try."

Part II: Is Boyhood a Disease?

I have two boys and neither one has ever had a teacher who I thought disliked him, or who made him feel bad about being a boy.

However, I have come to believe that elementary school is a very female-centric environment, one that does not suit many young boys very well. My older son went all the way through elementary school without once having a male teacher, and the younger one did not have a male teacher until fifth grade.

Akira, my older son, was bored and frustrated by an endless parade of worksheets in the first grade, when he was having a hard time sitting at a desk and writing for long periods of time. I was also concerned about the common practice at his school of keeping kids in from recess if they had misbehaved in class.

My feeling is that an active young child who gets into trouble because he cannot sit still needs more time running around outside, not less.

I have come to believe that schools need to do much more to adapt to the way boys learn. This belief has been bolstered by the stories of other parents, who tell me that they are being pushed to put their active young sons on Ritalin. "Being a boy is not a disease," one parent writes.

I also think it is important that parents not turn their efforts to get the best for their sons into a war between boys and girls. Doing a better job for boys should not mean shortchanging girls.

But when I see a row of little girls, sitting quietly, listening to the teacher, following instructions, working cooperatively in a group, and neatly completing their assignments, it is hard not to see how much better elementary school fits the typical girl than it does the typical boy. And since I was one of

those little girls, always trying to please my teacher, I know from the inside how easy it was for me to fit into school.

Meanwhile, some of the little boys are pushing and shoving, turning in homework that looks like it was dropped in a mud puddle or worse, and making toy guns out of the manipulatives in the classroom.

My feelings about boys and learning have been influenced by the book *Real Boys* by William Pollack, Ph.D. Pollack is a clinical psychologist and the codirector of the Center for Men at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School.

"Our schools," Pollack writes, "in general, are not sufficiently hospitable environments for boys and are not doing what they could to address boys' unique social, academic, and emotional needs. Today's typical coeducational schools have teachers and administrators who, though they don't intend it, are often not particularly empathic to boys; they use curricula, classroom materials, and teaching methods that do not respond to how boys learn; and many of these schools are hardly places most of our boys long to spend time. Put simply, I believe most of our schools are failing our boys."

Read Pollack's book, in particular the chapter "Schools: The Blackboard Jumble," for a detailed analysis of how he thinks public coed schools are failing boys. His most compelling arguments are simply numbers: Research shows that most of the students at the bottom of the class are boys, most of the students in remedial classes are boys, most of the students suspended are boys, fewer boys than girls go to college, and many more boys than girls have serious difficulties with reading and writing.

"These statistics show that there are many more boys at the lowest rungs of the ladder of academic achievement than we had ever imagined or been led to believe," he writes.

One answer, Pollack suggests, may be all-boys schools or all-boys classes within coed schools. It's an intriguing suggestion, one I've certainly never considered for my children. But it has proved to be the right answer for some.

One mother writes, "I just had to pipe in on the teachers don't like boys theory. I know it's not all schools, but it is certainly like that at our grade school! My son is now in high school (an all-boy parochial high school), and he is so happy because of the difference in the way the boys are treated that for the first time he is starting to enjoy school."

What parents can do

Would schools benefit from a better understanding of how boys and girls learn? Of course. In the meantime, parents who want to make sure their boys are being treated fairly can do a couple of things:

- Don't tolerate putdowns of boys.
- Know your child. Learn to present your son's strengths when talking with teachers and others. To help you do this, keep a diary, just for a week, in which you write down all the good things your son does, the things he's good at, the things he likes, the things that make him happy. This is valuable information for your child's teacher.
- Work closely with your son's teacher. Ask the question, "How can I help my child succeed in your classroom?" One parent says, "If the teacher starts talking about negative things about my son, I just turn it around by saying again, 'How can I help my son succeed in your classroom?'"

Realize that this is new ground for many parents and teachers. Reread Pollack's book and others as often as you need to. And keep reminding yourself that the school should bend to the needs of students—not the other way around.