

Why are Teenage Boys Lagging Behind Girls in School?

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As I sat with other proud parents through the introduction to our two day orientation for the incoming freshman class at the University of Georgia, I was treated to a series of statistics. There were 4,800 freshmen, mostly from Georgia, but also from 30 other states. Their average GPA was 3.88. Wow! Their SAT average was 1300 (Verbal and Math combined). Fifty eight percent were girls. Forty two per cent were guys. That's a 16 point difference. No one seemed surprised. I suppose it didn't evoke a response because this has become commonplace over the last 10 years—the phenomenon of vanishing boys. I had heard this kind of data before. Several years ago I recall that the percentage of girls being accepted to UGA was inching up so much higher than guys that the admissions office was raising the bar for girls and lowering it for boys, just to try to approximate a 50-50 ratio. When I was in college, in 1969, women made up only 41% of students on college campuses.

Yet in 2003 *Business Week* reported that in every state, in every income bracket, every racial and ethnic group and in most industrialized Western nations, young women were the dominant force on college campuses, earning 57% of B.A.'s and 58% of all master's degrees in the U.S. A revolution had occurred. This trend has been most pronounced among Hispanics, African Americans, and students from low income families. In 2003 the female-male ratio was 60-40 at the University of North Carolina, New York University, and Boston University. In 2003 there were 133 girls getting B.A.'s for every 100 guys. That number is projected to grow to 142 girls in 2010 to every 100 guys. Women are closing the M.D. and Ph.D. gap, according to *Business Week*, and are now making up half of law students.

Boys are more likely to drop in and out of college and boomerang back home to mom and dad. The British call these young men the "sink group." I have come to call them "the slackers." It is a trend that I have seen for the last 10 years in my practice—young men who seem to be drifting through their adolescent and young adult years with little motivation or direction. They are unmotivated in school and spend long hours playing video games and just "hanging out." We can't blame it on the families. Their parents are typically educated, hard working people who have given their sons every advantage and consistent support in their schoolwork. In fact, I have observed that these boys often have sisters who are top academic achievers. It is only the boys who seem, well, immature and adrift.

How can we account for this trend which characterizes not just American society but other industrialized nations as well? Next we'll review some research on this question.

Different Rates of Maturity

Many experts think that part of the problem is that boys and girls mature at different rates, putting boys at a disadvantage in the early years of elementary school. Students who tend to do well in pre-k through first grade are those who have advanced fine motor skills and who find writing easy, who can sit still for long periods of time and attend to the teacher's instructions. They also have good verbal skills, allowing them to understand the teacher's directions, to ask

the teacher questions and respond appropriately when called on. Young children who are successful in the early grades are those who can use their verbal skills to resolve conflict on the playground, rather than fighting. These attributes describe little girls. They do not describe little boys.

In 2006 a distinguished team of neuroscientists at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, published the results of a lengthy and remarkable study of children's brains. They found that in some regions of the brain, such as the area most involved with integrating information from different sensory inputs, the pace of development in girls is roughly two years ahead of that of boys. In other areas, such as the area most involved with spatial perception, girls and boys develop along similar trajectories, but the pace of the boys' development is slightly faster

than girls. In yet other areas, such as the visual cortex of the brain, the rates of brain development are remarkably different. In this area of the brain, girls between six and ten show rapid development, while boys in the same age group do not.

In other studies of brain development, girls appear to show a very advanced rate of development in the language area of the brain at age 5. The language areas of boys at this age look like the language areas of three and a half year old girls. Even the nerve endings in the fingers of boys develop later than girls, making it difficult for young boys to hold a pencil and write legibly.

Boys and Girls Have Different Needs

Boys and girls are different. Boys have higher needs for movement and interaction with materials compared to little girls. They tend to learn best by feeling, touching, and engaging things, as opposed to sitting and listening or reading about them. For example, girls may do well at reading a section in a science book about tadpoles and frogs, but boys are more likely to find this tedious. They are more eager to learn by wading into a pond and scooping up jars of tadpoles, catching frogs, and examining them. Unfortunately, the escalating trend toward lawsuits against schools has resulted in fewer and fewer field trips to ponds. They are just too risky.



Boys also enjoy competition more and are often more motivated in class by making learning into a contest between two teams. They have shorter attention spans and do not fare well with teacher+plus+chalkboard teaching methods. They also have a strong need to engage in fantasy play that has violent themes.

While these differences have always been there, there have been changes in the expectations for behavior in America's classrooms over the last twenty years. Children in kindergarten are expected to do the kind of sedentary, fine motor tasks that used to be given to first graders. They are expected to take home and do homework in the first grade. Recess has been reduced or eliminated in many schools. They are not allowed to talk in the hallways but are required to walk in silence and not touch each other. Many have to eat in silence as well. My son, who was not able to sit still and learn in pre-k (18 years ago), explained the teacher's behavior modification system this way. "The teacher puts beans in your cup if you're good. Girls get beans. Boys don't."



Zero Tolerance Policies

The tragic occurrence of school shootings in the 1990's brought forth a nationwide crackdown on violent behavior at school as well as threats of violence and bullying. Schools now have a zero tolerance policy about any behavior remotely suggestive of violence or bringing any object to school that could be used as a weapon. Boys can't play "War" or "Cops and Robbers" on the playground. If kids engage in violent, fantasy play on the playground, or if they hold a Cheeto in their hand and say "Pow, Pow," they are charged with threatening the safety of other students. Any roughhousing is considered a serious violation of school rules. This trend begins even as early as preschool where boys are expelled for aggressive behavior at a rate that is 4.5 times higher than that for girls.

In short, the emphasis has been on tighter and tighter restrictions on children's behavior—a process that favors girls and results in boys being disciplined for what are essentially age appropriate and normal behaviors. I recently saw a five year old boy, Nicholas, who came into my office after two weeks of kindergarten and announced, "I've been in kindergarten jail all day!" It is no wonder that five to seven year old boys I see in my practice universally dislike school, and that four times as many boys are diagnosed with ADHD than are girls.

Girls Please the Teacher, Boys Please Themselves.

Let's face it. Girls and boys are different in how they relate to others. Five year old girls are more able to do what the teacher wants them to do. They can sit still. They can be quiet for 5 to 10 minutes without jumping up and down. But more importantly, they have a strong desire to please the teacher. They are strongly motivated to get along with others, to fit in. They are more motivated by praise. Boys are more motivated by the acceptance of other boys. They like to do things that are exciting, just for the thrill of it. They are motivated by competition, by power over others.

Girls tend to view authority in simple terms. Adults set the rules. If you associate with adults, and follow the rules, you get more of what you want. Therefore it is a good idea to pay close attention to them. Boys tend to see rules as obstacles put in their path by adults.

They are more grudgingly accepted. Girls are motivated to pay close attention to adults and try to copy them. Boys are inclined to want to please themselves. Girls are more intimidated by disapproval, by punishment. Boys, as a group, are not nearly so bothered by disapproval. Girls are more likely to see the world through the eyes of adults. Boys view the situation through the eyes of their peers.

Along with the desire to please adults, girls are also more able to delay gratification. This is very important. In today's world, the capacity to defer pleasure today in favor of long range goals is vital to establishing a successful life. It takes many years of schooling to get through high school, many more to get training in technical school or to graduate from college. When we were cave men and women, hunting animals, it made sense to live in the moment, in the now. We only focused on what was right in front of us. The focus on immediate gratification had survival value in life and death situations.

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania (see: Duckworth & Seligman, 2006) have found that girls' greater self control and self discipline are strong factors that have enabled girls to excel in school over boys. Studies show that girls are much more likely than boys to do the assigned homework, in every subject. In one study, eighth grade girls and boys completed several paper and pencil questionnaires that measured impulsivity versus self discipline. First they were asked to answer questions such as "Do you say things before thinking them out?" and to rate themselves on traits such as "I do certain things that are bad for me, if they are fun." Then they were asked questions such as "Would you rather have \$55.00 today or \$75.00 in 61 days?" On all measures, the girls' scores on self-discipline were higher than those of the boys.

The Trend is Set by Middle School

The slower rate of maturity for young boys and the increased demand in the classroom now for fine motor skill, advanced verbal skills, and self restraint result in boys lagging by girls academically by fourth grade. Studies show that by fourth grade girls as a group enjoy school and boys are beginning to check out. They are much more likely to be put in special education classes for behavior and learning disorders, and to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Girls are pulling ahead of boys with higher grades and higher scores than boys on standardized tests of Reading and Writing.

By middle school these two traits—the desire to please adults and the capacity for delay of gratification—combine to make girls much more successful in academic settings. Boys, by middle school, tend to see school as "uncool" and academic success as "girlie." Their immaturity in middle school, in terms of poor organizational skills and poorer short term memory, further contribute to poorer grades as compared with girls.

By high school the trend has become fixed. High school girls are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities than boys. They are more likely to take A-P (Advanced Placement) classes than boys. By 10th grade they are thinking seriously about their future. They can see a connection between doing well on this Algebra test and getting into the college of my choice two years from now. Boys as a group don't get this connection. High school boys are more likely to become involved in risky behaviors (i.e., driving too fast, binge drinking of alcohol, skateboarding off ledges, smoking marijuana) than girls. They are more likely to be suspended from school or expelled for their disruptive behavior. Nationally, 72% of girls graduate from high school, compared to 65% of boys.

Video Games— The New Addiction for Adolescent Boys

Perhaps the final contributing factor for boys' failure in middle school and high school is their tendency to become addicted to playing video games. Here there is a strong gender difference.

One national study estimated the average time spent playing video games each week was 13 hours for boys and 6 hours for girls. Problem gamers will routinely spend 20 to 30 hours per week gaming. If you have wondered if this preoccupation with gaming is not good for your son, you are not alone. Parents, particularly mothers, ask, “Why does he have no motivation for schoolwork or trombone practice, yet he will devote himself intensively to a video game for 8 hours a day if I’d let him?”

Leonard Sax (2007) refers to the source of this motivation as the “will to power” or the drive to mastery. In simple terms, we all are born with an innate drive toward controlling things and people around us and mastering skills. We also have needs to affiliate or socialize with others and be accepted. Girls, as a group, are more driven toward establishing enduring, positive relationships with others. For boys, the drive to dominate, master, and have power over others is much greater. Forty or fifty years ago the will to power motivated adolescent boys to achieve in athletics, to be a leader among their peers, to put themselves through endurance tests. For many years, my older brother proudly displayed his commemorative paddle over his closet door, marked “Fifty Miles Down the Suwanee River.” He and my dad earned their paddles through a week long canoe trip with the Boy Scouts. I, as his kid sister, was in awe of his paddle. Other young men sought mastery through fixing up an old car to make it fast and powerful, going to work with their fathers, or joining the military at 18.



In the 1980’s video games arrived on the scene. Suddenly there was a new way to achieve mastery, dominance, success, and power without leaving one’s bedroom. Video games were built around the principles of what makes learning satisfying. You can start the game with no prior knowledge or experience. You learn at your own pace and master a level before going on to the next one so you can’t fail. The games are highly stimulating. They provide a stream of rich colors, realistic sound effects, and three dimensional moving images. They provide constant interaction (as oppose to passive listening) and constant reinforcement in the form of hits and points. Over the last 15 years, there have been numerous major national studies on the effects of video games on children, particularly violent video games. The results have been coming in for some time. With regard to schoolwork, the results are unambiguous. The more time your son spends playing video games, the worse his grades will be. Psychologists call this a “dose dependent” effect. We do not know if this is because unmotivated boys drift toward gaming, or if the time spent gaming simply competes with schoolwork. Probably it is a combination of both. Compared to video games, time spent writing a term paper, solving trigonometry problems, or memorizing Spanish verbs is incredibly tedious and boring. Teachers have noted anecdotally that they have seen a change in boys’ attention span in schools. They seem to have less tolerance for sitting and listening to

a teacher talk and write on a chalkboard. I have personally worked with several young men who flunked out their freshman year of college due to gaming more than 30 hours per week.

Leonard Sax interviewed football coaches in Northern Virginia who reported that fewer boys are trying out for football. “It’s too much trouble,” some of them say. It is much easier to play Madden NFL where one doesn’t have to dress out, to sweat, to be yelled at, and perhaps to fail. The time spent playing video games has been found to be associated with obesity in adolescents. This finding is perhaps obvious—more time spent gaming means less time spent outdoors.

Also of concern is the finding that long hours spent on video games are associated with disconnecting with other people. These adolescent boys are spending less time in extracurricular activities, and less time even just hanging out with their friends where they actually have to talk and interact with each other. They are also disconnecting from family activities. Many parents can’t get their kids to disconnect from these media to have dinner together or even to have a conversation. Teenage girls have begun to complain that when they go to parties with a date, the boy often ignores them and instead plays video games the whole time.

The biggest problem with playing video games for 13 to 30 hours per week, as Sax sees it, is that the games become more exciting than real life and our adolescent sons begin to detach from the real world and live in that virtual world. In the game one can enter a world where you can be a lord and liege, a king, a tank commander, a wizard, a star football player. It is more exciting than real life. You can win, conquer, reach the goal, vanquish your opponent. Unlike real warfare where you can die and see your buddies die as well, you never die, you just hit the “restart” button.

A boy who spends 15 hours a week on video games is spending 750 hours per year in that virtual world. Over the course of six years he has spent 4,500 hours there. That is time that has not been spent reading and studying, gaining the self-discipline to master high levels of analytic thinking (even when uninterested in the material) in order to succeed academically. That is time that has not been spent in learning the grueling work of physical conditioning, the ability to work as a team, and follow orders, and cope with defeat, which comes with participation in athletics. That is time that was not spent hunting and fishing where boys have traditionally honed the skills of complete attention, focus, and patience. That is time that was not spent with other people—learning to solve family conflicts, resolving arguments with peers, and figuring out what girls want in a relationship.

Sax argues that this deficit leaves young men adrift in the world in their late teens and early twenties. I, personally, agree, based on what I have seen in my practice.

Next issue: We will look at some innovative programs around the country which focus on boys’ needs and ways to keep them engaged in school and in life.

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and she is working on a third book titled *100 Lessons in Positive Psychology*. Her paper "Should an Adolescent be Compelled to Release Psychotherapy Records to a Parent in a Child Custody Case?" will be published in the distinguished journal *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* later this year. Her son Andrew is 23, and her daughter Sarah is a freshman this year at UGA.

Dr. Ellis' most recent paper, "A Stepwise Approach to Evaluating Children for Parental Alienation Syndrome" was published in the *Journal of Child Custody* in January 2008.

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Coming Soon...

More About the Boys...

Next issue: We will look at some innovative programs around the country which focus on boys' needs and ways to keep them engaged in school and in life.