

Red-flagged as problem pupils, are boys misunderstood?

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For most her eldest son's school career, Nicole Stamos has made so many trips to the principal's office she felt like she was getting a detention herself.

And although his math and science marks weren't bad, he was steadily falling behind his grade level in reading; his parents worried about his future and blamed themselves. They were hard on him, too. "You are so busy getting upset with your child not learning, and all of a sudden he's in Grade 5."

This is the all too-common tale of the boisterous, restless boy "red-flagged" as the problem pupil that nobody wants in their class. Viewed as too difficult to teach and too disruptive to control, the less help this boy gets - especially in language skills and reading - the worse he does.

For his parents, it was one complaint after another from the school: Noah was ripping up erasers at his desk, making a mess. Noah interrupted the teacher. Noah wouldn't sit still. Noah had to stay in at recess. One teacher put his desk in the front so he was facing the rest of the class.

Another teacher parked him in the back. While the rest of the pupils worked as a group, Noah worked alone. He would come home and tell his mom that the teachers had yelled at him - again. "He would just suck it up, and go," she says. "But when he was sick he was so happy to stay home."

Ms. Stamos read books and made suggestions. Maybe Noah could walk around when he gets restless, or the teacher could ease up on the shredded erasers. But the school was reluctant to accommodate one child. At home, he'd get the same lectures about listening and behaving in class.

Nature is certainly a player in these stories - boys tend to be more active than girls, and mature later - but studies have found relatively small overall brain differences between girls and boys. The bigger player may be environment - the nurture side of a boy's life, where parents and teachers have a major influence to either help him reach his full potential, or box him into a role that holds him back.

To boost math scores among girls, the youngster had to get the message that their hardwired brains weren't holding them back. "Now we are doing the opposite to boys: Boys are immature, boys can't sit still, boys can't read and write. That can't help them," says Lise Eliot, a neuroscientist studying gender difference. So in large part, the solution for boys may be changing that message.

Whether parents want to admit it or not, they treat sons differently than daughters, right from birth. Parents, especially fathers, are more physical with baby boys. Early on, boys get the message that certain "girly" toys aren't the best choice. Boy babies tend to be

fussier than girls, but studies have shown that parents respond more gently to their infant daughters, while shushing their infant sons - a trend that continues into preschool and beyond. **Barry MacDonald, a parenting expert in British Columbia and the author of the coming book *Boys on Target*, watched it happen at the door to a kindergarten class last week - an embarrassed father pushing his sobbing son into the room. "If it's a girl, parents bend down and support her, sometimes even taking her home." Boys, he says, are subtly told to "buck up." A world of Superman and sports ambition outlines the male image early: "What is everyone going to think?" the father asked, when Mr. MacDonald counselled him to accept how his son was feeling.**

"My husband and I always say just to soften your heart and don't expect them to be like little men. They have just as much right to cry as little girls," says Kerry MacLeod, a mother of three boys in Lavington, B.C. Each of her boys, ages 3, 8 and 11, is a unique personality - so she rejects the idea that one school solution would help all boys.

Ms. MacLeod had to study up on her sons, to learn that even when they don't make eye contact, they are still listening to her. But Ms. MacLeod worries about society pushing the nurturing side out of her sons. At school, she has observed, "people are a little more snappy with the boys. Quicker to judge them."

The most worrisome weakness boys demonstrate in school is in language and reading - they have always lagged behind girls in this area. But parents have a major role to play in developing those language skills in their sons. Imagine, says Mr. MacDonald, the exhausted

mom and dad on a Friday evening, with their daughter quietly colouring in the room with them, their active son banging Lego blocks in another room. "They think, 'let's just leave him well enough alone' - and partly it's survival." But it's also another opportunity lost for their son to hear and participate in language and social nuances. The same thing happens with reading. Research suggests that parents start out reading as much to sons as daughters, but they tend to read for shorter spells to boys. Their sons may fidget or find a toy on the floor, and the mom abandons the story. In fact, experts say, parents should keep reading; that, in most cases, their sons are still listening. And they should keep reading aloud to their sons, says Dr. Eliot, even when boys can read on their own - to jump-start their interest in a new book.



"A lot of problems come from misunderstanding a boy's energy," says Daniel Rolo, a teacher in Chatham, Ont. And then when boys fail - or fall behind - "it often gets normalized." In fact, Mr. Rolo says, the best advice for parents is to step in quickly, and early, before a reading delay widens the grade-level gap, and before trouble in school turns a boy off learning altogether.

This year, Mr. Rolo has a Grade 5 class with

six girls and 19 boys. Noah Stamos, whose family moved to Chatham this year, sits among them, and for the first time, says his mother, "I can breathe." She has already had several meetings with his teacher, not to discipline her son but to help him learn. Mr. Rolo is known for his boy-friendly teaching style. "When I work with kids, it's so apparent that girls learn differently than boys." In group work, he says, girls discuss and plan; the boys jump in and make mistakes until they get it right - so he gears the work to accommodate a variety of approaches. There are medicine balls and soft toys for any children who'd like to use them, and pupils throw balls at a smart board to select math questions.

These days, Noah is coming home from school a happy kid - not a perfect student, his mother says, but benefiting from a teacher who wants to understand him. Her son was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, and she is now waiting to see what happens this year in school to decide whether he needs medication. Before, she says, "he was shoved to the side." But through a combination of a good teacher and a vocal parent, he's being treated not like a boy, or a problem pupil, but like an individual. Says his mom, "Now I feel like he actually has a chance."