

Trend Lines: What's Going on with Boys in Schools?

Fall 2024

By David Panush



This article appeared as "Finding the Lost Boys" in the Fall 2024 issue of Independent School.

When my daughter started kindergarten in 2021, she came home with stories about her new and wonderful experiences: what she was learning, who her teachers were, what the other kids were like. Almost within days, she began telling me another part of the story.

"The boys are always in trouble," she'd say.

"The boys are always at the teacher's desk."

"The boys are so loud and distracting, I can't concentrate sometimes."

I began to worry about my then 3-year-old son. What was in store for him in two years' time?

As both a parent and an educator, I felt compelled to answer this question, “What’s going on with boys in school?” And as I researched and learned, the answer became clear and simple: Boys are not doing as well in school as girls.

In *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It*, Richard Reeves provides evidence to back up this claim. Reeves explains that boys make up about a third of the top 10% of GPAs in high school and two-thirds of the lowest 10% of GPAs. Boys are twice as likely as girls to say that school is a waste of time, three times more likely to be expelled, and two times more likely to be suspended. Boys are less likely to do their homework, by about an hour less per week. In reading, girls are ahead by about one grade level, and Reeves points out that reading and verbal skills are a strong predictor of college matriculation. So it should come as no surprise that young men attend and graduate from college much less often than young women. In 1972, the year Title IX was passed, 57% of college graduates were men, and by 2022, only 42% of college graduates were men.

As I learned more and more about these alarming trends, I reflected on how rarely in my 26 years in independent schools we have explored issues that affect boys and tried to understand what might be contributing to their particular struggles in our schools. By understanding what’s going on with boys right now—how their brains develop and what they are experiencing in today’s world—we can meet the moment to provide effective support for boys’ success inside and outside the classroom.

Why Do Boys Struggle in School?

One clue to help us understand what’s going on with boys in school lies in the significant differences in the timing of brain development of boys and girls. The first major gap in brain development occurs around kindergarten. Reeves cites a study showing that at age 5, girls are 14% more likely to be school-ready than boys. In *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson describe typical young boys as having “high activity, impulsivity, and physicality.” They claim that, unfortunately, this behavior is “often seen by teachers as something that must be *overcome* for a boy to succeed in school.”

So from their very first school days, many boys are starting off on the wrong foot. This is exacerbated by research showing that, on average, female teachers are more likely than male teachers to view boys in their class as disruptive, while male teachers tend to have a more positive view of boys and their capabilities. But, the percentage of male teachers has been trending downward, and the teacher gender gap is particularly acute in early education, exactly when it would be beneficial for boys to have male teachers.

The gap between girls' and boys' brain development widens drastically during puberty. As Reeves explains, a typical girl's prefrontal cortex matures about two years before a typical boy's. The prefrontal cortex plays a role in planning, strategy, and executive decisions, inhibiting primal survival responses, and regulating emotional states. Reeves also notes that the cerebellum—which modulates the emotional, cognitive, and regulatory capacities that we might commonly refer to as executive function—reaches full size at age 11 for girls and age 15 in boys.

This offset in brain development and executive function has a direct impact on boys' educational outcomes. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "Study after study suggests that the best-performing students are 'good' students ... who have high levels of self-regulation," which is exactly the area where boys display, on average, a deficit compared to girls during adolescence.

In *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business, identifies two other sources of boys' recent struggles in school: diminishing independence and free play; and massive amounts of time online, playing video games, consuming pornography, using social media, and learning about masculinity from what is called "the manosphere"—a miasma of bloggers and influencers often hostile to women and feminism.

The voices of the manosphere such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, influencers with large followings including teen boys, advocate a limited vision of what it means to be a man. According to the "[State of American Men 2023](#)" report published by Equimundo, "the *more* a man subscribes to cultural norms about manhood that support emotional repression, self-reliance, dominance, and control, the *less* mentally strong and adaptable he is." The more likely he is to have higher rates of depression, anxiety, bullying and sexual harassment of women, and suicidal thoughts.

Haidt estimates that roughly "1 in 13 boys are suffering substantial impairment in the real world because of heavy engagement with video games," and "boys consume porn to the point of impairing daily function more than five to 10 times more often than girls." Compounding the harms of these activities, time spent online crowds out healthier, more constructive uses of time.

Redesigning School with Boys in Mind

In the face of these challenges, what can schools do? A 2008 study of teaching and learning in boys' independent schools conducted by Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley concluded that teachers must cultivate a positive relationship with their boys. Even when

boys make this challenging, it is crucial that educators overcome their own frustration and remind themselves that the relationship is *their* responsibility, not *the boys'*.

The study painted a picture of a successful independent school teacher of boys, one who: employs transitive teaching (“the capacity of some element in the lesson ... to hold student attention in a way that leads to understanding and mastery,” such as creating products, games/gamification, role-play and performance, teamwork/competition); builds a strong relationship; shares a common interest; accommodates a measure of opposition; is willing to reveal vulnerability; and holds students to high standards.

Alongside the academic program, schools must also reconsider advisory, counseling, and co-curricular programs with boys in mind. Schools must provide the space, instruction, and practice so that boys can develop a wide-ranging emotional vocabulary to both understand themselves better and communicate their feelings more effectively. For boys of all ages, we should constructively channel their high activity level and give them positive ways to express it. These are the first steps in a journey to help boys identify and create what Reeves calls “a prosocial masculinity.” Kindlon and Thompson suggest several concrete strategies for formulating this identity: Talk to boys in ways that honor their pride; be direct with them; cast them as partners in problem-solving; teach them emotional courage; use discipline to build character, not to alienate or humiliate; model and practice emotional attachment; and teach boys that there are many ways to be a man.

Given how influential the online world is in the lives of boys, schools must also address their use of technology head on. Schools have a responsibility to educate boys and their parents about healthy technology use. Schools can recommend to parents that they set limits on video game use and encourage boys to spend more time in the real world, engaging in activities that are highly correlated with both academic success and overall well-being: sleeping, studying and doing their homework, hanging out with friends, playing, moving their bodies, being outside, getting a job, volunteering, helping out around the house, and entering the romantic world on their own terms. Schools can also teach and model how boys can build healthy views of sex and masculinity.

My journey into understanding the struggles boys are facing in schools today started from a personal place of concern for my son, but we should all be concerned for all our boys. Equipped with knowledge of the current state of boys and some strategies to point the way forward, I am confident that independent school educators can work together to change the story. As my children make their way through school, I hope they will tell me more stories about energetic, engaged, emotional, courageous, and awesome boys.

Go Deeper

Explore the topic of boys and education further with the author's recommended reading list.

- *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* by Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson
- *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It* by Richard Reeves
- *Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys: Strategies that Work—and Why* by Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley
- “**State of American Men 2023**,” from Equimundo
- *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Illness* by Jonathan Haidt

David Panush

David Panush is director of innovative learning and technology at the Edmund Burke School in Washington, DC.

From

https://www.nais.org/magazine/independent-school/fall-2024/trend-lines-what%E2%80%99s-going-on-with-boys-in-schools/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Fall%20Mag%20Teaser%202&utm_content=Fall%20Mag%20Teaser%202+CID_3c4e5ac6997e5d404abc676dcf0de123&utm_source=c&utm_term=why%20boys%20are%20struggling