

It's a beautiful autumn 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 the morning 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, others are wielding makeshift wooden swords above their heads while 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 increasing concerns that a combination of digital technologies and female-friendly teaching methods are combining to create a culture of increasingly 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 in year in, year out, all around the world. 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 their year in Reception Class and, even at this early stage, evidence indicates that boys are falling behind. In 2015, fewer than six in ten 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. While their attainment in Maths almost matched that of girls – 74% succeeded compared with 81% – they reached far lower standards when it came to writing, with only 63% meeting expectations compared with 78% of girls. Literacy is the key area in which boys are falling behind: one in three boys begin Year 1 unable to write simple sentences with a few correctly spelled words.

Although, compared with previous years, these figures represent a slight narrowing of the gender gap in attainment, they will still ring alarm bells in many homes and schools. Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-School Learning Alliance, points out that 'the difference in outcomes between boys and girls remains significant – clearly there is more work to be done to tackle this trend', while 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. In 2016, 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. Boys take it easier, work less hard and are distracted more quickly, while girls persevere more. Boys', she concludes, 'need more encouragement.'

Motivating writing

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 – it's becoming more and more apparent.' 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.'

So are boys affected by teaching methods that fail to bring out the best in them? 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 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 easily drift. Sara and her colleagues at All Saints are experimenting with a new approach to engaging boys' attention.

'When children arrive in the classroom in the morning 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 of them 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. The last thing we want to do is put them off writing.'

'Boys need reasons to write,' Sara explains, 'Something to inspire them to start and to follow it through to the end – they need to have a purpose. The forest school activities this morning enabled them to act and communicate as a team and this experience makes a difference to their writing. When there is no *reason* for writing boys lose interest completely.' The idea that children should write purposefully is at the core of the school's approach to learning: 'If you give boys a scenario for their writing then immediately they've got a reason why they have to talk to each other', says Sara, 'They're trying to do something to make a difference – they're starting to explore the language they will use when they are writing.'

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 in the woods, labelling diagrams and listing materials. 'Boys can be motivated to write if 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, 'Then they can come back inside once they've decided the content they want to communicate in their writing.'

'The thing that really makes a difference for boys is for teachers to approach writing tasks with an open mind', she concludes, 'Teachers need to find out what their interests are. They need to create an environment where there is inquisitiveness, open questioning, investigation and teamwork.'

Helping at home

So as parents, do we need to think more carefully about the way we support boys' learning? Gary Wilson is a leading expert on raising boys' achievement and the author of three books on the subject. His interest in the attitudes, behaviour and performance of boys stems from his experience as both a teacher and parent, and his current work ranges from early years settings to secondary schools.

'At the heart of the work we need to do to help our boys has to be the desire to create a more caring masculinity, which is of course in everyone's interest', he argues, 'And it's not just on the agenda for boys. Anything that we do that addresses the attitude, behaviour and the performance of boys will have a positive, knock-on effect for girls, as it's often boys that behave in ways that detrimental to everyone's learning.' When it comes to developing and maintaining a positive attitude at home, Gary identifies a number of ways in which parents can help.

Step one, he says, is to encourage independence – let boys start to work things out for themselves. While it's often quicker to clean up after boys rather than persuade them to do it themselves, in the long term parents are giving boys the message that they need not take responsibility for their actions. Step two, says Gary, involves a hands-on approach from both parents – this is more than mums' work: 'Parents need to know the significance of male role models in the family – fathers, grandfathers uncles, older brothers – and the important role they have in supporting their boys' education. Whilst 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 a father lives at home or not.'

And while teachers such as Sara Bedford explore innovative strategies for engaging boys with writing tasks, Gary reminds parents that they also have an important role to play when it comes to developing boys' literacy. Above all, we should encourage boys to maintain their reading habit as they grow older: 'Don't stop reading to him or with him, just because he can read.' After all, at the end of a tough day building shelters in the forest, boys still love to hear a bedtime story.

Sidebar – Gary Wilson's top five tips for getting boys to read at home

- 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 him to re-tell the story
- Don't stop reading to or with him, just because he can read.

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

