

# SANTA FE BOYS

TRIENNIAL PUBLICATION ABOUT THE SITUATION OF BOYS IN SANTA FE

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## Back to (Boy Friendly?) Schools

By Paul Golding  
SFB Editor

Several Santa Fe elementary school teachers were asked to describe the issues that most concern them with respect to boys in their classrooms. A representative sample of responses:

- “Boys in my class need more support and encouragement than girls.”
- “For the most part, the girls are confident, cooperative and learn quickly. The boys have been slower to learn, more resistant to suggestions and doubt themselves greatly.”
- “Boys have low self-esteem, and regularly make comments such as ‘I hate myself.’ ‘I can’t do it right.’ ‘I’m not smart.’ ‘I don’t care.’”
- “Boys are marked by competitive behavior, including criticism and arguments. Verbal interaction is frequently aggressive among some, and there is a heightened sense of what it is to be ‘fair’ that seems to be out of control sometimes.”

These comments represent personal observations by some

local teachers. When we look at the situation of boys on a less personal level (through statistics from the Santa Fe Public Schools) these observations are confirmed more generally. For example, we see that boys do not learn to read and write as well as girls, they become discouraged and dropout of school at a higher rate, and they are bigger “problems” for the Santa Fe Public Schools as evidenced by suspensions and expulsions.<sup>11</sup> In short, boys now are rare at the top of academic performance in Santa Fe Schools (13 of the forty-four 2004 “Super Scholars”) and abundant at the bottom (67 percent of the approximately 1,500 students in non-gifted Special Education).

This issue of *Santa Fe Boys* will examine why it is that so many boys perform in these ways in school and will discuss how the school system may become more effective at meeting their needs. It should be noted at the outset that the difficulties between boys and schools are clearly not intentional on the schools’ part. Even the most diligent teachers and administrators are often puzzled by the boys in their classrooms, as captured in the quotes above. Furthermore, this

effort to explore what is happening to boys in schools does not imply that girls are without problems. Clearly the often cited “loss of voice” that occurs with girls, and their difficulties with math and science, to mention only two girl-issues, require constant attention. However this article will focus on the fact that many boys, as evidenced by their numbers in special education, by their presence on the

continued on page 6



### The Boy Code

A set of unwritten rules passed on (often subtly through adult expectations) by parents, TV, teachers, and others about appropriate behavior for boys. Usually emphasizes traditional masculine values about withholding expressions of sadness and emotional pain by covering up true feelings.

## The Usual Suspects: boy behavior in the classroom

By Jamie J.  
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Each year since my son began kindergarten I have observed that there are approximately five children in his class who are frequently in trouble at school. I call these children “the usual suspects” and yes, my son is one of them.

The usual suspects have a lot in common besides a knack for getting into trouble at school. They are intelligent, inquisitive, creative, energetic, independent and funny. Oh yes... and the usual suspects are all boys. In the three years my son has been in public school, a girl has never been one of the usual suspects.

The usual suspects’ behavior problems can usually be categorized as disruptive (talking out loud, moving around and distracting other students), disobedient (not listening or following instructions) or aggressive (pushing in line and being too rough at recess).

Sometimes I witness the usual suspects’ problem behaviors first-hand while I’m helping out in the classroom. Other times I overhear strained conversations between the teacher and the parent of one of the other usual suspects while I’m gathering up my son’s things after school. Since my son is usually the prime suspect, I receive daily verbal and written reports about his specific behavior problems.

continued on page 7

### Inside This Issue

Ed Gorman and Hands-On Learning at Agua Fria . . . . .	2
Why Are Today’s Boys Suffering? . . . . .	3
A Better Classroom For Boys . . . . .	3
Dr. Gloria Rendón on Boys in the Santa Fe Schools . . . . .	4
Is Your Son’s Classroom Boy Friendly? . . . . .	6
Suicide in New Mexico by Gender . . . . .	8

# Ed Gorman and Hands-On Learning at Agua Fria



Ed Gorman

Ed Gorman is a real “hands-on” kind of elementary school teacher and perhaps that is what the kids want and what boys especially hunger for in elementary school. This is fortunate since for the last two years, Ed’s bilingual fourth grade

class at Agua Fria has had over 70 percent boys.

Where does Ed’s enthusiasm and creativity for hands-on projects come from? Perhaps it’s from his own boyhood; as Ed says, “I hated to sit still when I was 10 years old, and I know it’s tough for them, especially in the afternoons.”

So Ed gets his kids involved in some pretty off-the-wall stuff, but there is always a method to his madness: that the kids should learn how to use language better, both their own and the foreign one they are being exposed to, that they should learn some math along the way, and that they should interact, plan together, and cooperate with respect for each other.

One example is a project Ed employs early in the year to encourage his students to use a more varied vocabulary: a burial ceremony for “baby” words. His students actually bury words written on paper in the ground behind the school. “Once the words are deceased and buried, they understand they can’t use them again.” The students from that time forward have to find substitutes for “then,” “good,” “bad,” “sad,” “bueno,” “luego,” and “feliz,” and other words in their speaking and writing. This isn’t easy, of course, as old habits die hard, so when the words creep back, as they now and then do, there is a simple response from classmates: “You can’t use that word. It’s dead and buried!” To commemorate the importance of their linguistic growth, Ed and his class occasionally pay visits to the grave site, marked by a cross, and recall with sad fondness their former exhausted vocabulary.

This past year’s major project was the publication of “Our Neighborhood/Nuestro Vecindario.” With a grant from Partners In Education, the 10-year old students each received a disposable camera. They took pictures of what was important in their lives and then wrote short essays about the photos. Not surprisingly, the photos and writing fell into three areas: family, pets, and faith.

In bilingual classes the goal is to strengthen children in their home language first and this also happens in “Our Neighborhood/Nuestro Vecindario” where the kids’ essays in either Spanish or English have been cooperatively polished for grammar and spelling. Because of the public nature of the project—it’s on sale for \$2 a copy with the funds destined for a cause the class chooses to support, this

year the Animal Shelter—Ed’s students are very careful and motivated to put their best foot forward. Ed says, “Even though they are just 10, the fact that this would be published, made them treat it as a treasure. A book that people would buy!” (If you would like a copy, call Ed Gorman at Agua Fria, 467-1300.)

He uses the enthusiasm his students show for his projects to teach not only writing, but also planning, problem solving, math and general socialization. The kids’ math for example is challenged both on the budget work they do for project planning and also in the “favorite” recipes part of the booklet that includes all kinds of precise measurements and the use of more sophisticated vocabulary like “dissolve,” and “blend”. The recipes range from “Camarones Viva Mexico!” to “how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

One bi-product of Ed’s classes is noise, which he seems not only to tolerate, but enjoy. Indeed, Ed sees noise as essential for kids learning another language. The more he can generate, in a structured way, the better. It may also be a bi-product of teaching a class predominately of boys, which raises the question of whether the girls are being left out. Ed finds that while boys often take the lead in these activities, all students jump in once the ball gets rolling. “Boys’ enthusiasm for these kinds of projects is infectious for the rest of the class.”

Humor seems to be a major part of the class. Last year Ed’s students entered the “Path of the Painted Potties” contest. They decorated one of the discarded high-flow toilets to resemble a low rider, with fluffy dice, a windshield, headlights, chrome wheels, stereo and car keys and called it “Low Flow Rider.” This project of 10-year olds took first place in the under age 16 category. It engaged the kids completely in planning, writing, and math.

Using approaches that are “boy friendly”, Ed finds, also reduces the discipline problems that are commonly found with boys and makes for a smoother running classroom for all students. He seems to understand how boys need to be given a certain amount of slack from the potentially rigid structure of school and yet he is still able to keep the pace of learning on schedule. Undoubtedly this is helped along by a respect he garners from his students. In one of the early classes, he tells the kids that one of the rules is that no one will ever say anything bad about a mom. And then he tells them how his own mother died right after he was born. He is not afraid to show them how he feels about this.

Part of Ed’s enthusiasm comes from his love of the Spanish language and his appreciation of Hispanic culture, and this adds to the enjoyment that comes from the interaction with his students and their families. Ed considers himself an extremely lucky person with a tremendously satisfying job in a great community. The children and their parents seem to feel the same.

## SANTA FE BOYS

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PO Box 273

Santa Fe, NM 87504-0273

Phone: 505-988-9582

Email: santafeboys@comcast.net

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If you would like to receive *Santa Fe Boys* in the future, please contact us at the addresses above.

## Why Are Today's Boys Suffering in Comparison to the Previous Generation and Relative to Their Female Peers?

What is different for boys between the situation today and that which existed twenty and thirty years ago? The following material has been adapted from "The Boyhood Advocacy Teacher Training" developed by Supporting Our Sons and Dr. William Pollack in an attempt to answer that question.

First, we live in a time when, thanks to the Women's Movement, gender roles are less rigid; for boys, however, there are still a lot of **mixed messages** which contribute to a disconnect and cause self-esteem issues. For example, today boys are expected to help with housework and be emotionally sensitive, but at the same time the old "Boys Code" tells them to "keep a stiff upper lip," "not show feelings," and "act real tough."

Second, **academic standards have changed**. Curricula have become more demanding during the earlier years when boys are less capable of meeting expectations, especially around reading and writing. Furthermore, increased homework and longer hours of homework require boys to sit and focus after school when they need to release pent-up energy. For many boys this is a frustrating situation after struggling all day to conform.

Third, there are **increasing social pressures** which seem to work negatively for boys. Dual career households mean parents have less time, and so emotional connection can be more difficult with boys who are

often not as verbal and forthcoming as girls. There are also heightened security concerns around schools which lead many boys to demonstrate bravado, acting as protectors and demonstrating macho behaviors. Lastly, there is less structured play and less room to roam around, which cause boys to become more frustrated. Boys, more than girls, are likely to act out if contained and constrained.

A fourth reason has to do with the **lack of funding for boys' programs** during the last decades. At the national level, boys feel a squeeze. The Gender Equity in Education Act in 1994 categorized girls as an "underserved population" and paved the way for millions of dollars in government grants for girl-specific programs. Title IX in 1972 eliminated many boys' programs (or made them co-ed) on the grounds that they discriminated against girls. The recent No Child Left Behind legislation does not recognize poor academic performance by gender as a cause for concern.

In conclusion, we are in quite a different world than twenty or thirty years ago, and much of the change is for the better. We are now more aware of girls' needs and know how to address them. In light of the above, however, something of a similar effort needs to occur for boys, if we are to continue to strive for a more equitable society.

## A Better Classroom For Boys—Boyhood Advocacy Training for Teachers

Three Santa Fe Elementary School teachers attended a 3-day training session in San Francisco addressing how to make the classroom more "boy friendly". The workshop was run by a team of facilitators headed by Dr. William Pollack author of *Real Boys*, and included a psychiatrist, a communication specialist, an occupational therapist and a teacher who has had experience applying Dr. Pollack's ideas in the classroom. Some of the Santa Fe teachers' comments:



left to right: Joe Abeyta, Anita Navrot and Sarah Wachenheim

**By Joe Abeyta, Carlos Gilbert Elementary School, 3rd Grade Teacher:**

"Because of this new approach, changes must be made in the classroom and in the way we as teachers relate to the boys in our charge. These are a few of the changes I will employ this coming school year. I will invite fathers, grandfathers, uncles and other male role models to volunteer in the classroom and read or help in other activities. I will not use the withholding of recess as a consequence for inappropriate behavior or failure to complete work. I will not use control to discipline. I will look beyond the behavior and use 'timed silence' and listening to make connections and get to know the reasons why the boy acts the way he does. I will not tease or embarrass boys in public. I will recognize the danger and negativity of shaming, and direct my teaching with respect and understanding. I will give boys space in the classroom to move and supply them with opportunities for appropriate boy play. I will discuss problems with individual boys in a 'safe place' where they will not feel shame or embarrassment. Last of all and most important, I will discuss

with the entire class, boys and girls, these ideas of mutual respect, the dangers of teasing, shaming and embarrassing and not listening. We will also discuss the importance of creating an environment where bullying, teasing, and public put-downs are not acceptable, and where the unique qualities of every individual are appreciated and celebrated."

**By Anita Navrot, El Dorado Elementary School, 6th Grade Teacher:**

"I feel that I too often fall into the trap of publicly redirecting one or two students during lessons. My statements may sound calm or more stern and intense, but the temptation is to redirect the behavior in an efficient manner and use the student 'as an example.' In contrast to this, the communication specialist on the facilitator team promoted the consistent use of 'frontloading' or anticipating certain behaviors and addressing them in discussion and role playing with the entire class. This can take place during a class meeting or at other times outside of traditional content, but should be treated as formal and purposeful lessons that occur 'away from the emotion' and without blame or putting the spotlight on specific students. An example might be addressing transition time between classes outside of the homeroom. Anticipating the possibility of

continued on page 6

Santa Fe Boys has a website with previous issues in PDF format:  
[www.santafeboys.org](http://www.santafeboys.org)

### HELP WANTED

Santa Fe Boys is looking for individuals in our community who share our concern with the welfare of boys and are motivated to write and interview others on the subject. If you are interested in participating in this effort as a writer or as a member of the editorial board, contact us at [santafeboys@comcast.net](mailto:santafeboys@comcast.net) or 988-9582.

# Dr. Gloria Rendón on Boys in the Santa Fe Schools

The following are excerpts from an interview which took place with Dr. Gloria Rendón, the Superintendent of the Santa Fe Public Schools, on July 22, 2004. The interview was conducted by Paul Golding.

The purpose of the interview was to talk about how boys are doing in the Santa Fe Public Schools and what if anything might be done to improve their performance. The singular focus of the interview on one gender did not imply that girls are without problems in the schools, but merely that while girls' problems—loss of voice, performance in math and science, dropping out because of pregnancy—have received considerable attention in the last two decades, little attention has been focused on the decline in performance of boys.

Dr. Rendón has worked for the Santa Fe Public Schools for over 25 years as a teacher, principal and administrator. Educated in the Santa Fe public schools, she grew up as the eldest of 13 siblings. Her father was a custodian in the school system. She has a son and daughter, and resides with her husband, a former Capital High School Principal and current Espanola Valley High School Principal, in Santa Fe. Dr. Rendón received her Doctor of Education degree in 1999 from the University of New Mexico.

*Given boys' poor performance in Santa Fe Schools as measured by dropout rates, scores on language arts tests, predominance in non-gifted special education, and discipline problems, why hasn't there been any focus on boys' issues at school board meetings, school board study sessions, and Superintendent's Special Issues Advisory Team meetings?*

... I think there is more focus on the achievement gap among ethnic groups than there is among the genders... and also on the whole issue of poverty. Are poor kids doing better than kids that are not so poor? Are Hispanic kids doing less than kids who are not Hispanic? I think because there has been so much focus on that there hasn't been as much focus on the gender groups. Right now the "No Child Left Behind Act" really wants us to look at those sub-groups that I just mentioned. So the priority is right there right now. I think that once there is some movement... or some improvement in those areas, the next priority group is going to be on the genders. And you know that there has been talk even in our school system... having an all girl class and an all boy class to see how that would work. I think there is some interest in this area. I don't know if there is enough support for doing that.



Gloria Rendón

*Why is the dropout rate so high for males in Santa Fe?*

We've known for a long time that the way we present instruction isn't always appealing to boys. Boys would rather sit and tinker and do things with their hands and try to figure out how things work and then make their own assumptions about how things are done. That's how they do their best learning. I think the majority of boys, not all boys, but I think a good majority, and especially Hispanic boys which are the majority in our district, really do learn best by doing. Yet our school system, and I am not just talking about Santa Fe, I am talking about school systems across the board, are not set up that way. They are set up more to where kids sit quietly in the chair and listen to the teacher and do their reading, do their writing. It's not as appealing to boys as it is to girls... (Also,) I think... that boys more than girls tend to start driving earlier. They're more interested in having a car and that sort of thing and those things are expensive. So boys learn at an early age that they can get a job pretty easily that will help them pay for these toys that they want. While I think as parents we're more likely to purchase those things for our girls or to delay that than we are with boys.

*Whose responsibility is it that boys feel more comfortable in the classroom—the boys who perhaps need to learn to conform better, or the classroom style which perhaps needs to accommodate the boys better?*

The classroom should conform because I also think that we are beginning to see a change where more girls are needing an active classroom and no longer can we have instruc-

tion presented in one way. We have to have multiple methods so that kids can come in at different points, i.e. the point that makes the most sense to them.

*On boys' performance: why are boys the ones who need the vast majority of discipline in the schools—from losing recess in elementary school to receiving the majority of suspensions in middle and high school?*

... I think it has to do with their energy levels. I think it has to do with their, I don't want to say "refusal," but inability to conform. Because I think that boys want to conform. I mean lots of them do. They figure out that that's the way to stay out of trouble and that sort of thing and when they don't, then it is seen as a being disrespectful, as being misbehavior, all of these sorts of things.

*Given the disruptive behavior of boys in the classroom, do you think that trying to accommodate boys better would be a way of achieving the goals of "No Child Left Behind," i.e. that making the schools more boy friendly might promote the learning of all the kids in the classroom?*

I think that anytime that you eliminate or reduce discipline problems, you are going to have more time to teach and kids are going to have more time to learn and the environment is going to lend itself to more learning. So yes, I think that anytime that happens you are going to have more time for learning and any time you can improve the environment so that kids feel that what they are doing is respected and valued then they are going to be performing. They're going to try to figure out how to produce and how to demonstrate what they're learning because they feel respected and they feel valued.

*Why do boys perform worse on the language arts test, the one standardized test last year that showed a persistent and growing discrepancy between male and female performance? This disappointing performance is later reflected in the 10th grade NM High School Competency Exam which shows a similar significant and consistent difference in failure rate between males and females.*

I think that where the difference is is that again boys need to be a little more active. They need to have some freedom in the classroom to be able to show what they know maybe in ways that are not traditional sorts of methods... We're all struggling with trying to figure out how we make these things just as interesting for boys as they are for girls. I (also) think... from

an early age, as I said before, we encourage girls to sit quietly with books and pretend how to read and we show them how to hold a book probably earlier than we do with boys. We just kind of feel it's OK for boys to be running around with these little trucks or... whatever it is... and running around and being rambunctious. So that while girls maybe have started from an earlier age to be expanding their vocabulary and exploring language and that sort of thing, we haven't encouraged our boys to do that as much from an early age. And we all know that when kids start school with a larger and better vocabulary, they're going to continue to do well all through their school year.

*What do you see are the contributions, negative and positive, of culture, family and community in creating the differences in performance between boys and girls?*

(I think the most important factor is) ... the whole breakdown of the nuclear family as we knew it, in that there are very few dads in the picture these days. I think that in those families where the dad is around, where the dad is active in the family, where there are expectations from dad about what you do in school, boys are probably doing better. We all know that when all kids and especially boys, and I know this from my own experience, get to a certain point they're going to be challenging dad probably more than anybody else. If dad can hold steady and continue to work with his son they're going to be able to work through that and move through that. The boy is going to be a lot better off in the long run if you can stick with it and work through all of these issues and problems that you know just happen naturally as kids move through adolescence. But when dad isn't around and a child grows up with mainly female role models then he doesn't know how to behave like a man. He doesn't know how, what is expected of him as a male. He knows what females are like and what they do and what the expectations are for them. But he doesn't really have that role model to fall back on. And strong as many of us are as moms, my feeling is that a child needs a strong male role model. It doesn't always have to be a dad. It can be a grandparent, it can be an uncle, it can be a friend. Whatever the case might be, but I think that a lot of our boys are having various problems and are suffering because they don't have a significant role model in their lives. I may get myself into trouble for saying that, but that's how I feel. I think that that has created the breakdown not only in our families but in the problems that many of the boys are facing these days.

...and then they come to school and you've

got a whole bunch of females in the schools because in the past couple of decades we've had less and less men in the schools. It used to be that you'd come to school and the principal was a man. And so even though you had a lot of female teachers, you still had that male role model that basically said, "No, this is the way we do things here." And that sort of thing... could kind of keep things in check, if you will, and now it's a good thing that we have a lot of female principals, but we also need, that child needs, to have a male role model somewhere.

*If you acknowledge, as you have been doing, that there are all these problems (with boys learning in the schools) maybe the whole school system would be better off if there were a focus on making the class more "boy friendly." We are talking about an energy which is fairly disruptive when not accommodated properly. How do you think the system might become better at meeting boys' needs?*

This is one area that we have been talking (about) in a professional manner and this (is) to look at how we differentiate instruction. Understanding that not all kids are at the same place at the same time and not every child needs the same thing at the same time. So how do you differentiate instruction, how do you look at what it is you are going to teach and then provide an avenue for different groups of children to be able to enter that instructional arena, if you will? I think that is the way we are going to be able to address some of these problems more so than just saying, which we try to do as well, is to say look at boys' needs, look at girls' needs. But I think to educators it's going to make more sense to look at how they differentiate instruction and approach it in that way than it will any other.

*It sounds like you are saying that you do not want to focus too much on gender differences. Can you not focus on gender differences and look at how individual students do because that (i.e. gender) has a great deal to do with the individual learner?*

I think that there are ways to do that without saying create this kind of activity for boys in your classroom and this kind of activity for girls ... because lots of that crosses over too. We can't just assume that girls are always going to learn in this way and boys are always going to learn in this way, but rather how do you look at the needs of all those learners in your classroom and provide a way for all of them to have an opportunity to be engaged in the learning. So I think that's where it needs to start, but in addition to that I think that we need to help our teachers to recognize that boys do have different needs than girls and so how do

you create an environment so that boys can be boys. Not in the negative sense that people use it, but that they can use their energy in a positive way.

*Dr. William Pollack, the author of *Real Boys* describes schools as "...some of the least comfortable, least friendly and least productive environments in boys' lives." He says this is not because of indifferent teachers or administrators, but rather because school is a place where, "we've misunderstood boys' energy for hyperactivity. We've tried to teach them how to read and write too early and in ways that don't work. And we've often used forms of discipline that are shaming and hurtful." What is your reaction to this statement?*

I agree. I mean I think that's what I've been saying throughout this interview... that we want every child to conform to one way. Even though we know we have to use different methods and approaches we don't do it on a consistent basis. We make attempts and efforts at trying to individualize instruction or differentiate and we make efforts at trying to understand boys. But take a group of teachers that come... into a classroom, that have had very little experience with boys, other than with their father. Maybe they didn't have any brothers and have very few boy cousins. So they come into the classroom and they are now in charge of the learning in that classroom. And they have a very good idea of how girls learn and so they use those approaches that they know and then boys come in with ... all their boisterous sort of activity and they're loud and they're moving around and knocking things down as they're moving around. (To) the teacher, and to the principal coming into observe that teacher, it's chaotic and so your inclination is to establish order.

*What are your thoughts and those of the school system about the issue of separate education for boys and girls?*

I see lots of studies of school districts that are piloting programs like that. I haven't seen anything definitive that says: yes, this is the way to go because then I think you would see a bunch of school districts jumping on the bandwagon and trying it out. I wouldn't mind seeing a pilot program in some of our schools to see how it would work out, but I think it would need to be voluntary. Because then I think you get into the whole issue of we're going to put all of those boys into this classroom, all of those girls in the classroom and so why those particular girls and those particular boys? Why separate them? But I think if there could be a way to have people volunteer, to do that in some kind of a pilot program, I think that we would probably have the best data in that way to see whether or not things might work.

book slamming, horseplay, shouting or excessive conversations, I can simply have the students demonstrate these behaviors along with more desirable ones in an effort to make the expectations very clear to each individual. The class can then decide on a nonverbal cue or signal used to alert classmates to transition behaviors that fall outside of the boundaries eliminating the potential for emotion-filled, public, verbal reaction.”

**By Sarah Wachenheim, Carlos Gilbert Elementary School, 2nd Grade Teacher:**

“This workshop reminded me that boys tend to lose their voice between the ages of 5-7, and they really do have difficulty expressing what they are feeling. They tend to repress their feelings, with the exception of anger. Dr. Pollack maintains that boys are shame-phobic. In other words, they will try to do anything to avoid shame. This makes sense to me. As a teacher, I will now allow this to guide my communication with boys. If I need to speak with a boy, I will aim to do so in a manner that is not shameful and single him out in front of the whole class. ‘Timed silence’ is another idea I will incorporate in my communication. This period allows the student (and teacher) time to gather thoughts, cool down, and reflect on a situation before discussing it. After this period, I will try to provide an opportunity where I can connect with the boy through action, or by doing something with him. I am intrigued by this process and also realize that it is going to mean being more creative on my part. (For example, making the time to connect while the rest of the class is engaged in an activity).”

## Is Your Son’s Classroom Boy Friendly?

The following checklist may be useful in determining if your son’s classroom is “boy friendly.” Does the school and/or the teacher. . .

- Take account of boys’ need to move around through classroom design and organization?
- Withhold recess as punishment?
- Tolerate and accommodate the different energy levels of students by providing “fidgits” (like rubber balls) and other stuff for children to play with during class time?
- Provide books that many boys prefer such as nonfiction and action stories (see web site: [www.guysread.com](http://www.guysread.com) for plenty of suggestions)?
- Take the time to understand the social behavior of boys by, for example, offering training to teachers on the “Boy Code”, and the “shame phobic” nature of boys and on the consequences of these for classroom behavior?
- Differ between fun/playful teasing and hurtful putdowns, between play and abuse?
- Avoid the messages that boys need to hear least:
  - Chin up, tough it out
  - Big boys don’t cry
  - Boys don’t play with girls
  - If you can’t play well, maybe you shouldn’t be playing

Adapted from Boyhood Advocacy Training for Teachers, Supporting Our Sons, Palo Alto, CA. ([www.supportingoursons.org](http://www.supportingoursons.org))

bench outside the principal’s office and by their higher dropout statistics do not “get” school. It is not that there is a “war on boys”, but rather that understanding boys in the classroom perhaps needs to be a higher priority.

The sources of the difficulties with boys are several. Because of the “Boy Code,” (described below in more detail), and how it is instilled in boys by families and the community, boys start school at an emotional disadvantage, removed from their own experience of themselves in a way less likely to be felt by girls and in a manner that often presents itself as an enigma to their teachers. Because, on average, their physical and emotional development proceeds differently from girls, because their brains develop differently, and because of the way schools are structured, boys are unwittingly placed at a further disadvantage. Add to this recipe for academic problems the shame-phobic quality that many boys bring to school and the lack of men in the schools and in boys’ lives generally and there emerges a number of behavioral issues where boys are constrained to match a role they do not fit. Without outlets, like the appropriate number of recesses, without emotional connection to their teachers that many girls have, boys often become behavior problems that result in punishment, being medicated, and/or placed in special education.<sup>[2]</sup>

**The Boy Code and School**—Research has shown that infant boys are more emotionally demonstrative than infant girls.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet, by the time they reach school many boys are disconnected from their inner lives and appear to have few emotional outlets besides anger. This disconnection starts with a set of outdated and dysfunctional gender stereotypes affecting how boys are raised. While much has been done to broaden what is acceptable behavior for girls, the “Boy Code”, as William Pollack the author of *Real Boys* calls it, has stayed steadfast and solid. Its roots appear early in a boy’s life, separating boys from their parents too soon, before most boys are emotionally prepared for it. It persists with the ideas that get passed along to boys about “keeping a stiff upper lip,” “not showing feelings,” and “acting real tough.” Perhaps the worst effect is that the Boy Code makes boys feel ashamed of themselves for having feelings. “By the time boys reach school age, years of training teach them that neither their mother nor their father will respond warmly to their expressions of emotion. By elementary school, most boys know and honor the Boy Code even if it deeply hurts them.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Because of the Boy Code, boys learn to tough it out, to mask their feelings as a coping strategy. When they get to school, where emotional intelligence counts, this strategy contributes to their falling behind. Boys who were once warm and loving learn to cover up for their sense of loss in this environment in ways that help them avoid shame. Most often these ways look defiant and teachers often respond with threats and punishment. In fact, what teachers are experiencing is a cry for help that is difficult to recognize. In contrast, if one understands the culture of boys, and can connect with boys, the result can be quite different. As one Santa Fe teacher put it, “Boys give me many signals throughout the day. Often their expression is nonverbal; it’s the silence that is so revealing and may offer an opening for connection to happen. When boys know that you notice them (their silence) they become much more willing to engage with you.”

**The Different Development of Boys**—Biology is not everything, but scientific studies have shown that boys develop differently than girls. It is well known, for example, that boys learn to read and write on average about a year or more later.<sup>[5]</sup> Boys need to be active, and research shows that boys do better when they have frequent recess breaks and are able to move around the classroom. In addition, boys enjoy active, hands-on learning, argument and lively classroom debate. On the other hand, “girls are more able to stay on task, better able to pay attention, and more eager to learn when they enter kindergarten.”<sup>[6]</sup> Are we sure that our elementary schools are addressing these differences as much as they are able?

These are just some of the outward manifestations of what makes boys, on average, different academically. Increasingly clear is that the brains of boys and girls also develop differently. While these are not definitive of behavior or talents, they create important tendencies by gender that need to be taken into account by the school system. One example of this is that some aggressiveness is inherent in average boy behavior which can be seen, for example, in roughhousing.<sup>[7]</sup> While it is important that parents and schools teach boys how to harness this energy when it is appropriate, it is also essential that schools avoid blaming and shaming boys, implicitly or explicitly, for being aggressive. For schools to accomplish this delicate balance of understanding, tolerating and educating boys about a potentially disruptive behavior requires a concerted and conscious effort to know boys, and to comprehend that boys, in spite of their outward raucous behavior, cry out for a different school culture, "...with closer bonding, smaller classes, more verbalization, less male isolation, better discipline systems, more authority, and more attention to male learning styles."<sup>[8]</sup>

**Are Our Schools Boy Friendly?**—William Pollack describes schools as "...some of the least comfortable, least friendly and least productive environments in boys' lives."<sup>[9]</sup> He says this is not because of indifferent teachers or administrators, but rather because school is a place where, "we've misunderstood boys' energy for hyperactivity. We've tried to teach them how to read and write too early and in ways that don't work. And we've often used forms of discipline that are shaming and hurtful."<sup>[10]</sup>

The idea of gender bias in the schools, with all that that implies about deliberate neglect or favoring one group, is not relevant here. More appropriate is the concept of gender advantage; that the particular system, as it has evolved, is inadvertently more suitable to one gender's learning style than the other's.

Ultimately, what is important is for all students, female and male, to be treated with a clear sense of who she or he is. As Judy Y. Chu, who has studied boys' relationships says, "The idea is not necessarily to change boys but to understand how they decide to be the ways they are and do the things they do, to respect their decisions while helping them to explore alternate possibilities. . ."<sup>[11]</sup> The admirable efforts made on behalf of helping girls find their voices and achieve parity in science and math over the last two decades may provide a model for what is needed now for boys: to connect with them and understand them and their learning processes better. It may well be that other academic initiatives, such as closing the ethnic achievement gap on school tests, will only succeed when more attention is directed to this issue.

[1] For how male students do in language arts, see New Mexico State Board of Education, *Executive Summary Report for the New Mexico Articulated Assessment Program*, Spring 2002. With regard to dropout statistics, see *School District Report Card*, Santa Fe Public Schools, February 2002 and 2003. For more information and data on how males predominate in school suspensions and special education, see data presentations in previous issues of Santa Fe Boys, available at [www.santafeboys.org](http://www.santafeboys.org).

[2] The question of teachers touching young students is particularly revealing. Since the charge of sexual molestation is ever present in schools, supportive cross-gender touching (such as a hug of support or congratulatory pat on the head) by a female teacher to a boy is relatively rare, and from a male teacher to a boy even rarer. William Pollack estimates that boys receive this kind of support 20 times less than girls in elementary school. "Boyhood Advocacy Training For Teachers," San Mateo, California, June 15-18, 2004.

[3] Cunningham, J. and Shapiro, L., "Infant Affective Expression as a Function of Infant and Adult Gender," Unpublished manuscript, Brandeis University, 1984.

[4] From the web site [www.SupportingOurSons.org](http://www.SupportingOurSons.org)

[5] Michael Gurian, **Boys and Girls Learn Differently!**, Jossey-Bass Publisher, 2001 p. 59.

[6] Michelle Galley, "Research: Boys to Men", **Education Week**, January 23, 2002.

[7] For a discussion of testosterone and how it influences the differential development of the male brain, see William Pollack, *Rescuing Ophelia's Brothers*, "Chapter Two: Testosterone Tangle: The Biology of Boys," unpublished manuscript, dated June 15, 2003.

[8] Michael Gurian, **Boys and Girls Learn Differently!**, Jossey-Bass Publisher, 2001 pp 62-3.

[9] *CanadianParents.Com* interview with William Pollack, undated.

[10] "Q&A: Author says Schools Don't Accommodate Boys' Learning Style," **Education Week**, January 23, 2002, Vol. 21, number 19, pp 25-27.

[11] Judy Y. Chu, "Relating to Boys About Boys' Relationships," *Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity*, Bulletin of Div. 51 of American Psychological Association, Vol. 8, No. 2, Winter 2003.

The Usual Suspects, continued from page 1

Of course there are many boys who never exhibit problem behavior, but the fact that a significant number of the boys have trouble behaving at school makes me think that school (at least in its most common form) is not a good fit for some boys.

I hear complaints that school has gone too far to accommodate girls at the expense of boys. Perhaps this is true, but this makes it sound like a recent occurrence. Unfortunately, I think school has always been a tough fit for some boys. I distinctly remember the usual suspects from my elementary school years (30 years ago) and they were all boys. I think the mismatch between boys and school probably goes back as far as the one-room schoolhouse. Think of those old-fashioned, dunce-in-the-corner drawings. Did you ever see one where the dunce was a girl?

I've pondered what it is about school that doesn't work for some boys. In observing my own son, I see he repeatedly has difficulty behaving during certain activities. These include:

- Morning group time – hard to sit still and be quiet when he's just arrived all full of energy
- Any activity that is repetitive – once he's done it, he doesn't see why he has to do it again and again
- Any activity that is below his ability – practicing addition when he can do division
- Any activity that feels like busy work – most often worksheets
- Activities he's not particularly interested in or good at – in his case creative writing, handwriting and chorus
- Recess – like letting the cork out of a champagne bottle

I've considered home schooling and thought about what I'd do differently. In general, our day would be more active and we'd spend more time outdoors. We'd go outside and use pebbles, sticks and flower petals to construct math exercises. We'd visit local parks and museums to learn about nature, science and art. I'd register him for a computer-based learning program that would allow him to work at his own level and progress to higher levels as soon as he was ready.

However, after weighing the pros and cons, I've decided that home schooling is not right for my son or our family. Given this, I have to face the challenges of having a child who has trouble behaving at school. I will continue to look for ways to address the behavior problems that are truly serious, but I must also advocate for changes at school that will make it easier for my son to behave.

I wonder whether my son's school behavior (and my ability to cope with it) will get better or worse in the coming years. I wonder if it will always be this way (will his high school teachers send home notes with frowny faces on them?) or is this just a phase that will be a distant memory by the time he begins middle school.

Interestingly, I've noted that the number of usual suspects in my son's classes seems to decrease each year as the children get older. Do they just outgrow it? Do they conform to the pressure to be "good"? Do they start taking behavior modification drugs?

I don't know, but I do know that I would rather continue to deal with my son's school behavior issues (through college, if necessary!) than sacrifice any of the qualities that make him such an interesting child. In part, because I believe that many of the qualities that cause him problems in school (high energy, creativity, inquisitiveness, and impatience with limits) will serve him very well in the future, but mostly because he's my son and I love him just the way he is.

Santa Fe Boys has a website with previous issues in PDF format:  
[www.santafeboys.org](http://www.santafeboys.org)

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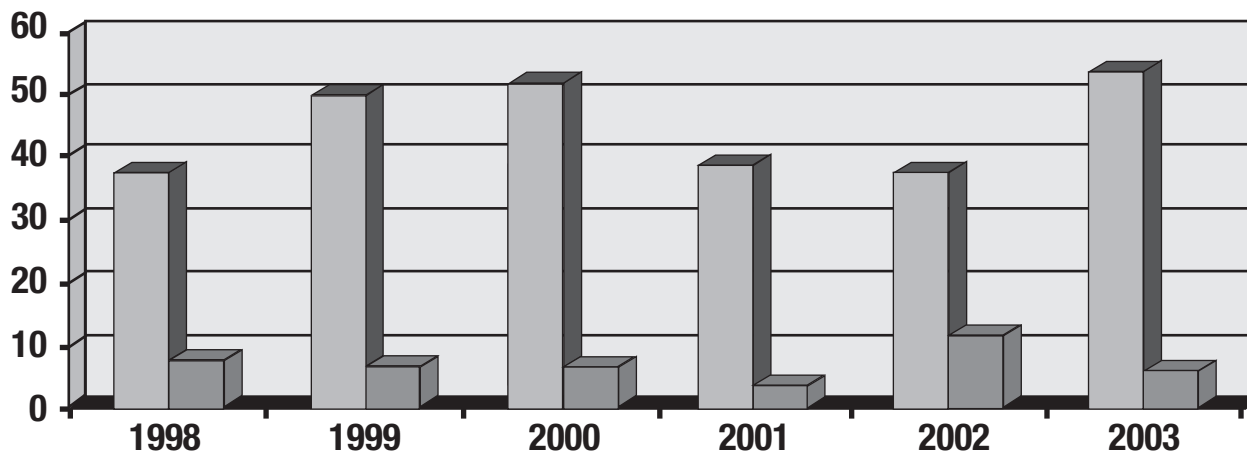
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## Suicide in New Mexico by Gender, 24 Years and Younger



Source: Office of the Medical Investigator for the State of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM

■ Male  
■ Female