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The Early Education of Males: Where Are We Failing Them?

Educators need new ways to deal with the aggressiveness and lower achievement of young males if—ready or not—they are to become full participants in early schooling.

Five-year-old Ramos shifts his gaze uneasily to the paper of the child next to him. Their task is to identify a symbol similar to the one that begins each column on the page, and he is having trouble. How some of the other children can tell the difference is beyond him! When he looks at the line of symbols, he can identify only a few of the embedded similarities and differences. But Ramos *is* learning to cope—by cheating, a skill he will need to get through an educational system already growing impatient with him. And, if the truth were known, he's also experiencing some impatience, along with considerable stress.

By grade three, we could likely find Ramos in a resource room for the emotionally impaired or learning disabled. Boys account for 70 to 75 percent of the children in these special education categories, and there is growing concern that males are vastly over represented and unfairly categorized.

Recommended retentions in the early grades are also predominantly male. For example, in the 1985 mid-year evaluations of one large school system with 2,192 kindergarten children, teachers recommended that 425, or 19 percent, of the children be retained. Not surprising, approximately 60 percent were boys. The Stennett and Earl (1984) study of 253 retained children indicated that they were disproportionately boys who had been born in the latter half of the year.

Either nature has played a cruel hoax on the young male of our species, or we are erring significantly in our planning for and evaluation of male children in our educational system. Given what we know about the psychosocial, cognitive, and developmental differences between young males and females and the current trend to ignore these differences, the latter is probably the case.

He and She: How Different Are They at Five Years of Age?

There are four significant areas of gender differences that affect the way children approach formal education:

1. *Psychosexual differences.* The preponderance of evidence on gender differences argues conclusively that males across all observed cultures exhibit greater aggressiveness and females greater nurturance, due to differences primarily in three gonadal hormones that act on brain centers: estradiol and progesterone in the female, and testosterone in the male. While these hormones exist at lower levels in early and middle childhood, they do exist at or before birth, producing psychosexual differentiation that affects both behavior and the

brain (Konner 1982). These differences have been found as early as two or two-and-a-half years of age, when social play begins (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974), with boys clearly expressing more exploratory behavior and liking for vigorous rough-and-tumble activity.

Thompson (1986) suggests that males today may be taking traditional masculine attributes such as independence, pride, resilience, self-control, and physical strength to extremes, turning them into socially costly attributes such as dominance, toughness, aggression, daring behavior, and even violence. In short, desired masculine behavior becomes anything that is the *antithesis* of such traditional feminine values as nurturance, cooperation, and the resolution of conflict in nonaggressive, noncompetitive ways. Also, the glamorous depiction of highly aggressive male behavior on television, a powerful socializing force in the lives of children, cannot be discounted. Being masculine today means being "ram-tough," and it's becoming increasingly obvious that most classroom teachers aren't willing or able to tolerate these behaviors.

2. *Structural differences in the brain.* Though the idea of brain lateralization is controversial, evidence is strong that sex differences *do* exist, with girls exhibiting superiority in language and earlier left-brain development. Boys, because of greater exposure to testosterone *in utero*, experience slower growth of the left hemisphere but more synaptic connection and development of the right hemisphere (Garmon 1985). This is seen in their general ability to perform better than girls in tasks requiring mechanical and geometric skill and visual-spatial imagery. Though greater research is needed for confirmation, the delayed growth in the left hemisphere may somehow be linked to the young male's greater risk for developmental disorders of language and speech, stuttering, and allergies. Boys are also three to five times as likely to experience the kinds of symptoms that, by themselves, do not constitute a serious problem but, when combined, are associated with dyslexia (i.e., reading/spelling difficulties, oral language problems, attention and concentration deficiencies, directional confusion, secondary psychosocial problems such as hypersensitivity to criticism, and memory sequencing problems) (Pavlidis 1986).

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3. *Developmental differences.* Girls are more physically mature at every age. Significant skeletal differences between boys and girls can be seen in x-rays of children's bones taken at all childhood ages, and general maturation may lag anywhere from one to two years. The total impact of this phenomenon on the overall developmental differences between genders is not certain. However, it is believed by many early childhood professionals that such lags may also hold true in important areas such as control of eye movement.

In terms of successful early school experiences, vision is growing increasingly important, since much of what children learn is by way of their visual sense. While 80 to 90 percent of all children continue to be hyperopic, or farsighted, until age 6, children much younger than that are required to spend most of their time doing activities that require near point containment and mature binocular coordination. When children are asked to follow a line of print or symbols, they need the ability to make rapid eye fixations, releases, and refixations. This requires more than just the acuity often measured from 20 feet using the simple Snellen test. The lag that young males experience is reflected in the different gender norm on several developmental tests of visual motor integration.

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In terms of cognitive development, boys may lag behind girls anywhere from 6 to 18 months in approaching accelerated stages of thought. Thus, a boy who is 5.5 years of age competing with a girl the same age may be *developmentally* as young as 3.9. These boys would benefit most from school entry programs that include flexible approaches to social, physical, and logicomathematic knowledge. Their educational experiences must be ripe with action, repetition, variation, hands-on activities, and opportunities for self-regulation. In reality, most children are pressured to learn new facts and unfamiliar symbols and to adapt to new environments. For entering boys who may lag considerably behind their female peers, these pressures may be overwhelming.

4. *Differences in academic achievement upon school entry.* Sex differences have also been shown to be strongly correlated with academic achievement. Beattie (1970) cited research that found that the differences in achievement between boys and girls upon school entry were as great or greater than the differences between younger and older entrants, particularly in the area of language skills. Gredler (1980) noted that the differences in academic achievement between younger and older entrants often were found only for boys.

In a pilot study in 1985, 792 kindergarten children in Lansing, Michigan, were screened for potential risk. Boys' scores were consistently lower on the Daberon and Brigance instruments. Disaggregation of data from the two screening instruments showed statistical differences between the total scores for boys and girls. Out of a possible 121 points, the boys' mean score on the Daberon was 95.6 (N-120); the mean score for entering girls on the same test was 99. Similarly, on the Brigance, 180 boys had a mean score of 77.6 out of a possible 100 points while 181 girls had a mean score of 83.

It's Our Business

Obviously, we have work to do. We need to ask ourselves why there are such disproportionate differences in children who are experiencing failure. We need to keep careful data on the characteristics of children served in our resource rooms and ask whether they really belong there.

We also need to improve teacher training and certification. In the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University, we are striving to train future teachers to handle a wider range of developmental abilities. We are advocating that artificial division of entering kindergartners into "ready" and "not ready" categories be eliminated and that professional readiness to work with these children be strengthened instead. This calls for more intensive professional development in the ability to assess children's developmental levels and plan relevant curricular activities that range sequentially from highly concrete, to representational, and then to abstract—only when children have mastered prerequisite skills to move forward.

This approach expands the professional's ability to work with advanced children as well as those requiring more time and practice with certain concepts. We are recommending that, rather than being sectioned off into a year of developmental kindergarten and another of "regular" kindergarten, children stay one or two years in the entry-level program, depending on growth and development. If the additional year is needed, children should stay with the same teacher: a professional who has become familiar with their strengths and weaknesses and therefore can provide optimal support.

Early childhood educators must direct more attention to research and revamp early learning environments to accommodate a wider range of legitimate differences in children. We need to know more about how young children develop and to create the assessment, curricular, and evaluation tools that will enhance their human potential. And, when we find children unresponsive to those tools, we must adapt the tools to better meet the children's needs. After all, that's our business.☐

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