

Boys in School Fact Sheet

Exploring Boys' (Mis)Behavior



Society for the Psychological
Study of Men and Masculinities

THINGS TO KNOW

Boys and Behavior. Starting in elementary school and persisting through high school, boys as a group exhibit higher levels of “externalizing” behavioral difficulties such as fighting, aggression, yelling, inattention, and impulsivity.^[1] While these behaviors are frequently the result of a boy feeling sad, insecure, hurt, or restless, they can lead to many boys being labeled “a bad kid.”^{[2],[3]}

- Boys from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and other groups, including boys of color (e.g., Black, Latinx, Native American, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islanders) may experience elevated behavioral challenges fueled by lack of access to basic needs and/or external stressors, such as racial and ethnic bias in schools.^[4] Furthermore, when exposed to traumatic and adverse childhood events, such as physical and emotional abuse, neglect and household instability, boys of all backgrounds can exhibit elevated behavioral and social-emotional issues (e.g., aggression, impulsivity, mood instability, and lack of trust towards adults).^[5]
- Along with biological factors, like elevated levels of testosterone, that have been linked to behavioral difficulties for some boys,^[6] masculine gender socialization plays a significant role. Boys are commonly socialized to restrict vulnerable emotions, display power and aggression, and prioritize sports while devaluing academics.^{[7],[8]} Consequently, adherence to *the Boy/Guy Code*, along with the experience that their presence and contributions are not as valued, can contribute to many boys’ misbehavior and disengagement from school and educators.^{[3],[7],[9]}

Boys and Discipline. Boys experience higher levels and rates of discipline actions than girls from the beginning of elementary school through high school.^[1] Common mechanisms of discipline include time-outs, detentions, parent-teacher meetings, school suspensions, and expulsions.^[10] Boys can experience more severe punishment than girls for what are similar behavioral issues, including inattention, emotional dysregulation, and impulsivity.^[1] This discrepancy starts at a young age (4 and 5 years old) and can contribute to the experience and perception of school as unfriendly to boys, while setting in motion a host of negative school outcomes, including distrust, disengagement, truancy, and leaving high school early.

- The *criminalization* of boys of color occurs when teachers, peers, and other higher-status individuals misperceive the behaviors of boys of color as threatening due to racial bias and respond inappropriately, such as with disproportionate disciplinary actions and/or in ways not age appropriate (i.e., *adulthood*).^{[11],[12]} This issue has been identified as central to school policing, which can be discriminatory to students of color, and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline.^[13]
- Starting as early as pre-school, boys experience elevated rates (as high as 82%) of suspensions and expulsions, especially boys who are Black or have a bigger body type.^{[14],[15]}
- Boys of color experience minor and major disciplinary actions at higher rates (2 to 5x) than White male classmates.^[16] For example, suspension rates have been rising since the 1970’s and more so for boys and children of color.^[17] Boys who have been suspended or expelled more frequently are also more likely to leave high school early, which contributes to a range of social issues, such as involvement in criminal activities, incarceration, higher welfare costs, lower probability to enroll and complete a college degree, and poor overall health.^[18]

THINGS TO DO

Boys who struggle in school behaviorally and/or experience disproportionate disciplinary actions are at risk for a host of issues such as academic underachievement, expulsion, criminal activity, drug abuse, leaving high school early, and life-long poverty.^{[4],[11],[17]} So what can educators do?

Knowledge. Provide teachers, administrators and district leaders, caregivers, and boys with information, including through resources, workshops, and social and emotional learning (SEL) curricula, on factors that can contribute to behavioral difficulties for boys and disproportionate disciplinary responses. For example:

- Train school personnel on the emotional worlds of boys who exhibit externalizing or withdrawn behaviors and appear disengaged from school, e.g., **Developing Healthy Boys Training**.^[19] Due to pressures boys experience to hide emotions, these behavioral presentations frequently represent a boy struggling on the inside and/or experiencing external stressors, such as conflict at home or bullying.
- Empower school personnel to be empathic towards boys as they navigate the demands of masculine gender socialization and the Guy Code which can contribute to behavioral and academic challenges at home and school, e.g., **Healthy Gender Development and Young Children** protocol.^[20]
- Train teachers and other school personnel about how implicit bias can influence their interactions with boys and contribute to negativity towards boys and boys of color and disproportionate discipline, e.g., **Aiming Higher Together**.^[21]
- Provide all boys with ongoing social and emotional learning and healthy masculinities education, including emotional regulation skills, so they can be part of the solution, e.g., **Wise Guyz**.^{[22],[23],[24]}
- Examine/disaggregate school and district-wide suspension and expulsion data to understand if specific subgroups of boys are being disproportionately impacted (e.g., Pacific Islander, Latino, low SES, etc.).

Action. Empower teachers and administrators to effectively and flexibly intervene when a boy, or boys, is exhibiting behaviors that compromise learning and the classroom environment. For example, as some already do, consider approaching boys with curiosity and consideration as opposed to punitive responses.

- Replace zero tolerance discipline with compassionate interventions, such as early warning systems, mentorship programs, social and emotional learning, and restorative justice.^{[25],[26],[27]}
- Provide boys, and all children, with more outlets for energy release and self-regulation including longer breaks and innovative physical alternatives in and beyond the classroom.^[28]

Transformation. Invest in making schools feel equally welcoming for all students including boys.

- While not wanting to stereotype or essentialize any boys, lesson-planning strategies that can work for engaging boys who are less responsive to more mainstream teaching approaches include lessons with games, teamwork, motor activity, performance, and creating products.^[29]
- Many boys will feel more connected to and represented within school spaces with the hiring of more teachers and counselors who share similar lived experiences, such as more men of color.^[30]

TASK FORCE ON BOYS IN SCHOOL

Society for the Psychological Study
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The goal of the Task Force on Boys in School (TFBS) is to provide critical information to schools and their constituents to more effectively support the educational and social-emotional needs of a diversity of boys. While we advocate for the unique needs of boys, TFBS recognizes that all students deserve adequate school supports to optimize their success in and beyond the classroom. This Fact Sheet highlights what we know about behavioral challenges and disciplinary practices some boys experience in school across the US. To learn more and to access references and other fact sheets, please visit our webpage at www.division51.net/taskforce-on-boys-in-school.

References and Resources

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