Boys in School Fact Sheet
High Achieving Boys

Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinities

THINGS TO KNOW

Although many boys do well in school, data has consistently shown that girls, on average, outperform boys on nearly every academic outcome.[1] High-achieving boys have increasingly become outliers in a system that does not serve their needs nor promote healthy development. Understanding the factors that help boys succeed allows us to continue supporting these high achievers, identify potential sources of support for boys not doing as well, and encourages a better understanding of the full range of boys' school experiences and aptitudes.

Characteristics of High Achievers
- **High engagement, mastery (intrinsic), motivation and orientation.** Being attentive to, interested in, and committed to academics based on personal desire and enjoyment.[2]
- **Internal locus of control/ strong personal agency.** Having the desire to succeed based on the belief that they are the ones with the power to be successful in school.[3]
- **Growth mindset.** Believing that one's intelligence can be grown by intentional actions.[4,5]

Important Social Group and Identity Factors
- **Group identity.** Boys' sense of themselves can reinforce the desire to do well in school. Seeing oneself as a "nerd" or "gifted" (e.g., prioritizing homework over other activities, participating in academically oriented extracurricular activities) can produce a reinforcing cycle of success.[6,7,8,9,10]
- **Stereotypes.** Boys are often stereotyped based on the groups they belong to or are perceived to belong to. For example, teachers may consciously or implicitly expect lower academic performance from Black and Latino boys regardless of their prior academic achievement. This can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Minoritized boys who have teachers with high expectations often perform better.[11]
- **Pro-social/academically oriented peer groups.** High achieving boys are more likely to befriend other high achieving kids, creating a network of friends who emphasize academics and support each other's academic achievements.[12,13]
- **Access to/engagement with non-family mentors.** Non-family mentors who support and encourage boys' academic performance are also important. These individuals may serve as real-life role models (especially when a boy's parents were not high academic achievers), offer additional encouragement, and provide additional resources (e.g., tutoring, logistical support). Non-family mentors are especially important for boys from under-served and structurally disadvantaged populations.[14,15]

Family and School Dynamics that Support High Achieving Boys
- **Authoritative/tough love parenting styles.** Parents who consistently prioritize school and emphasize the importance of academic success to their children are more likely to have high achieving boys. This often coincides with particular parenting styles, such as Authoritative parenting, as well as culturally relevant styles that can appear stricter (e.g., "*Tough Love," "No Nonsense Parenting"*).[16,17]
- **Engaged fathers**. Fathers who are consistently involved in their sons' lives, and especially academically engaged fathers, increase academic motivation and overall school success for their sons.[18,19,20, 21]
- **Gender matching instructors.** Boys do better when they have at least one male teacher in elementary school. This effect is even more pronounced for Black boys who have Black male teachers.[22,23, 24]
- **Schools that balance control and support.** Schools characterized by warm and supportive teacher-student relationships, as well as appropriate rules and control, show improved academic outcomes for their male students.[25,26]

THINGS TO DO

Parents and Caregivers
- Model behaviors that encourage academic success, such as time management, goal directed planning, and growth mindset (e.g., highlighting process, effort, and the benefits of challenging activities).[27, 28]
- Be proactively engaged and advocate when necessary for school actions that support boys' academic success. Reach out to teachers, staff, and administrators to signal scholastic priorities. Ask to be notified of significant changes, challenges, and achievements in your son's academic lives.[2, 19]
- Develop formal or informal mentorship opportunities for boys outside of the family.[15]
- Encourage and facilitate connections toward more academically engaged friends.[7, 13]

Teachers and Administrators
- Be mindful of over-interpreting boys' behaviors as anti-social. Negative expectations regarding boys' (and especially Black and Latino boys') classroom behaviors can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. Attend or advocate for professional development training that helps teachers recognize biases regarding boys' behaviors and intent, while upholding high expectations.[29]
- Promote a growth mindset orientation for your students and yourself. Make it clear that difficulty and challenge are part of learning, and that intelligence is grown. Provide students with tangible academic successes to build up histories of reinforcement and academic self-efficacy–offer earned praise.[30, 31]
- Create academic and disciplinary policies that acknowledge the needs of faculty and staff safety, while also providing necessary training to mitigate bias and overly punitive reactions to boys' behaviors.
- Advocate, engage and support sustained outreach and training efforts to increase the number of male teachers in early education, with emphasis on increasing Black and Latino male instructors.[23,24]
- Support healthy gender development curricula for boys to counteract anti-school messages often promoted in boys' social identities that characterize school success as feminine. Schools should actively counteract those limiting gender socialization messages through the curriculum and campaigns.[32]

And for Boys, Themselves
- Make a decision to do well in school. Maybe you like to learn new things. Maybe you understand how school success will bring you closer to your goals. Either way, it's to your advantage.
- Choose friends who are interested in school, and push each other to do better in the same way you might compete with - and support each other - while playing sports, instruments, or video games.
- Remember that putting effort into something, even if it's difficult, is a great skill to have throughout your life. Working hard is a show of strength, and if you are struggling, seeking help is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign that you are smart and care about yourself.

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