

LEARNING

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What about boys?

Some educators see
equity concerns

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This year, the Mark Lee Burbank Elementary in Belmont — a school that promotes gender equity awareness among its staff and students — offered its fourth-graders a chance to participate in a special play promoting reading. Both girls and boys were invited to participate, but there was a catch: The children had to give up recess once a week for rehearsal. The result was, out of 15 children who committed to the project, only two were boys.

Principal Rose Feinberg was disappointed by the imbalance, but says she has been enlightened. "We're going to have to work real hard next year to recruit and encourage boys," says Feinberg, "and this may mean adjusting for the recess issue."

Expecting boys to give up recess is just one of several school practices a number of child developmentalists are now labeling as discriminatory against boys' learning needs. As pressure has mounted through education reform to emphasize academics and test scores, recess in many elementary schools has been shaved down to

BOYS, Page F9

Equity for boys is a concern, too

■ BOYS

Continued from Page F5

as little as one 15-minute break per day, and sometimes even this little break is used for special academic activities like the play at Mary Lee Burbank. For many girls — who tend to enjoy and excel in language activities and fine motor skills — this may not be as much of a problem. But for boys, whose brains are better wired for spatial tasks and larger motor skills, it can be torture, according to clinical psychologist and school consultant Michael Thompson.

“On average, boys are physically more restless and more impulsive,” says Thompson, who is coauthor, with Harvard public health professor Dan Kindlon, of the forthcoming book “Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Lives of Boys.” “We need to acknowledge boys’ physical needs, and meet them.”

“It’s a developmental and physical issue,” says Burbank’s principal, Feinberg, who acknowledges that girls have developmental characteristics that make it easier to fit into the current elementary school environment. “Most girls have an easier time sitting for longer periods than boys, and they can play a quiet game and feel like they’ve had a break,” she said. “But boys seem to need a higher expenditure of energy in order to feel they’ve had the same break.”

An increasingly vocal chorus of gender researchers and learning experts believe it is time, after more than a decade of considering girls’ issues, to examine how boys are being treated unfairly in elementary school settings that are increasingly geared toward girls’ attention spans and learning styles and even role models.

In an elementary school setting “where most of the adults are women, there is this silent crisis of boys in our culture,” says Barney Brawer,

former project manager of Harvard’s Project on Women’s Psychology, Boys’ Development, and the Culture of Manhood. Brawer and other advocates such as Washington state family therapist Michael Gurian (author of “The Wonder Boys”) and psychologist William Pollack from McLean Hospital in Massachusetts decry several current school practices — such as harsher punishment boys tend to receive, the overblaming of boys for altercations, and, most importantly, overdiagnosis of boys with attention deficit disorder.

“Every teacher in just about every class in America has a boy on psycho medication,” says Brawer, a school consultant for educational change based at Tuft’s University. “The issue of how boys learn self-control and get civilized has been turned into a medicalized solution. It indicates a major shift in our attitude towards boys, which is very troubling.”

Not only are boys misjudged and mislabeled regarding their learning ability, say specialists, but they are punished more harshly than girls and blamed too readily for disputes between boys and girls.

Teachers at the Fisk Elementary School in Lexington, a school that has spearheaded many gender equity efforts, were surprised to find this happening at their school.

Four years ago, as part of an effort to promote equity for girls, the school hired an expert to observe for bias in the classrooms, the cafeteria, and on the playground. The good news was that Fiske teachers were making efforts to call on boys and girls equally in class, but the bad news was that boys were receiving unfair treatment on the playground.

“Our playground aides were always blaming boys for altercations,” says Principal Joanne Benton, “and we found out it was not always the

Continued on next page

Schools implementing changes to aid *both* genders

Continued from preceding page

boys."

"My faculty is always harsher on the boys than the girls," says Thompson, who has been psychological consultant to four coed schools, and is currently advising Belmont Hill and Charles River School in Dover. "Because boys are active, they tend to naturally illicit a harsher type of response from adults," says Thompson. He adds that adults are more likely to say "Cut that out!" to boys and "What happened?" to girls. "We need to understand boy behavior and manage it - not be punitive and harsh at all times, although they elicit that from all of us."

In "Raising Cain," Thompson and Kindlon describe a kindergarten class where the girls would provoke the boys, the boys would hit, the girls would cry and go to the teacher, and only the boys would be punished. This system of one-sided justice breeds detachment that, Thompson says, can worsen behavior.

"If boys believe the decks are stacked against them and they are going to get punished and get blamed anyway, they figure they may as well go ahead and hit hard," says Thompson. "This is how boys disinvest in the system."

Acknowledging that boys as well as girls suffer inequities in the school environment is still a new concept in many schools. Most equity efforts still center on encouraging assertiveness in girls and supporting girls' math and science achievements. But some schools and school systems are taking steps to at least include boys' issues in the gender equity discussion.

Last September, Newton Public Schools changed the name of its systemwide "Gender Equity Task Force" to "Gender Issues Task Force," reflecting its broadening of equity efforts to include boys. At the same time, an administrative mandate went out to all 21 town schools requiring both a teacher and parent representative from each school to serve on the task force.

"Our first goal is to find or create

a curriculum for training teachers which heightens awareness of gender bias to both boys and girls," says task force cochairwoman Susan Aeschbach, a parent of a boy and a girl attending public school in Newton. "We are contacting other towns and universities to find out what they are doing."

One resource Newton is tapping for guidance is the Wellesley Centers for Research on Women, which issued a special report in 1993 called "How Schools can Stop Shortchanging Girls (and Boys): Gender Equity Strategies." Designed for kindergarten through Grade 12 educators, the manual advocates that teachers first assess themselves for unconscious bias, then offers practical strategies to combat bias in the classroom.

"A lot more schools are now focusing on prevention rather than intervention," says the manual's author, Katy Wheeler, who has participated in gender equity workshops in several Massachusetts schools, including Billerica, Bedford, North Reading, and Attleboro.

Although the intentions of most schools instituting gender equity programs is to support girls and make them more comfortable in a coed environment, many of the same programs are turning out to benefit boys by helping them to manage their behavior.

The "Bullyproof Curriculum" designed by Nan Stein, project director of sexual harassment and bullying in schools at the Wellesley Centers for Research, is one example. Since the Fiske Elementary School adapted the conflict resolution curriculum four years ago as part of their school improvement plan, Principal Joanne Benton has seen a major difference in how boys and girls behave toward one another and settle disputes.

"It has equalized the playing field," says Stein, explaining that in addition to giving girls the skills to stand up for themselves with boys, the Bullyproof Curriculum "gave the boys the skills to listen."

Giving boys better communication tools and management skills for their behavior not only makes school

a more comfortable and, therefore, better learning environment for girls, but it also does the same for boys, says Stein, whose most recent research has focused on boys mistreating other boys.

"You can't have much learning going on" for either gender "if you have a lot of disruption or hostility or fear," says Stein. "It impedes your right to an educational opportunity."

Recognizing this, Framingham High School now teaches every 10th-grade student another of Stein's curriculums - "Flirting or Hurting?" - which targets older boys' aggressive and sexist behavior. Not only has the curriculum empowered girls to speak up when they feel sexually harassed, according to Framingham High teacher Ellen Makynen, but it has simultaneously helped establish that all boys are not "bad."

"There are a lot of boys who don't harass," says Makynen, who heads the high school's Consumer and Family Sciences Department, which offers the curriculum. "Some

of the best moments in class are when [certain boys] are bragging about some of the things they do and say, and other boys say, 'Wait a minute, you can't do that!'"

As schools become better at helping boys manage their behavior through specifically designed gender equity and behavior awareness programs, another promising hope for improving boys' school experience lies with education reform. Although schools are being forced to pare recess in favor of more academic time, they are also being urged to create more active and diversified classrooms.

Feinberg says, "When you have a classroom where there are a variety of approaches including project-based and hands-on learning, and the children have options whether to read or to work on a project, and children are able to get up and to move around, you are accommodating a whole range of learning styles and abilities. Really good instruction addresses both girls' issues and boys'."