

For many boys - and their parents - the latest set of exam results may be a disappointment. Writer Lucinda Neall asks whether boys really are less academically able than girls, or if they are being failed by the present system.

Social change has encouraged girls to have high expectations and become confident at school and at work. Since GCSEs were introduced in 1988, results for both boys and girls have improved. However, girls have drawn ahead of boys, and for the last ten years about 10% more girls than boys have achieved five GCSEs at grade C or above.

The increase in attainment of girls is to be welcomed. But there is concern about the level of disaffection with school among boys, and how this may play out in society when they leave. So what is it about our boys, and about the current system, that allows them to fall behind?

From a young age boys and girls display different characteristics. The nature of boys, typically, is that they are active, energetic and physical. They are natural risk-takers, love adventure, have a great sense of humour and a low boredom threshold. Many have a brash sense of confidence, over-estimating their ability, and find it difficult to ask for help. They want to fit in with their peers, and don't show much interest in pleasing adults. The here and now is what matters to them, so they give little thought to the future.

These qualities do not set boys up to succeed in the present education system, which values good behaviour, conscientiousness and presentation over energy, humour and creativity. Skilful teachers understand this: introducing topics in an exciting way; encouraging discussion, movement, competition and fun; applying firm boundaries with a light touch.

The drive to get children into education early works against boys, as the difference in development means that, by four years old, girls find it easier to sit still, hold a pencil and use language than boys. Since most staff at nurseries and primary schools are female, there is a danger that boys' attributes and needs go unrecognised. If boys decide early on that school isn't a place they can succeed in, they may adopt the attitude 'I can't win, so I won't play'.

The lack of male role models in learning both at school and at home is also relevant. If boys see only women reading, they may decide that reading is not something that men do. If they have few male teachers, or it is only their mothers who take an interest in their homework, they may decide that education is the domain of women, and not an area of importance to men. Male teachers who combine discipline with humour, and respect with high expectations can make a huge difference to a boys' education.

And how do the exam systems themselves affect boys?

The pressure of league tables means that a disproportionate amount of class time is spent preparing for SATS. This can deaden teaching during SATS years, leaving boys bored and disengaged. After the tests have taken place in May, the pressure is off and teacher and pupils have a well-deserved rest; the holiday follows and by September some children have dropped back to pre-SATS levels. It would be far more productive to use the full year for real learning, allowing teachers to periodically assess the progress of each child and address any learning needs that arise.

'AS' levels cause a similar problem. Introduced to broaden the curriculum and give a qualification to those who don't go on to 'A' level, students now have the pressure of public exams for three consecutive years. In June, after the AS exams are over, study for A2s begins. In practice it is difficult for students, particularly boys, to get re-motivated at this stage, and valuable course time is lost.

Most GCSEs, 'AS' and 'A' levels have been assessed using a mixture of coursework and exams. Written coursework suits girls more than boys, since boys are generally less conscientious, less organised, and find it harder to work for sustained periods and to meet deadlines. The proportion of written coursework is now being reduced, and this is likely to benefit boys.

When it comes to exams, boys often leave revision to the last minute, hoping they will pull the result out of the bag. Bright boys can get away with this strategy, but it is unlikely to work for the rest. These boys need to understand that school is like a game of bluff: a boy

may choose to give his peers the impression he doesn't work hard, but behind the scenes he should do what it takes to get the best results he can.

If boys find the prospect of exams daunting they don't usually admit to it, and distract themselves with TV, computers, texting friends, or playing sport. When a boy becomes aggressive or spends a lot of time on his own, it may be a sign that he is anxious or depressed. We need to look out for signs of stress and provide the support and structure boys need.

Boys' characteristics make them less likely to succeed in an education system that has become obsessed with testing. The constraining effect of the system on teaching is bad for girls as well, but they are better able to cope with it. Less emphasis on testing would free up teachers' time and energy to focus on giving pupils what they need to flourish at school. This would be good for both our girls and our boys.

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