

Boys and girls bring different qualities to the classroom. Boys are often more lively and seem harder to handle. Whilst every boy has a unique personality, it helps to be aware of the characteristics and preferences of boys in general in order to be able to adapt your teaching style to boys' needs. Here are some tips on how to engage boys in the classroom so that everyone - the teacher, the boys and the girls - can enjoy a productive learning environment.

Boys get up to mischief when they are bored, so the key to keeping their interest is in the planning. Look for ways to explore a topic so that it will appeal to the boys as well as the girls. For example, the topic is Florence Nightingale and we're talking about improving medical practice. What angle could help this topic appeal to boys? Blood and guts, of course – a graphic account of the Crimean War, the weaponry used and the kind of wounds that would result. What would it have been like to have been a wounded soldier on the battlefield, surrounded by the sounds and smells of war; or to have been in the field hospital about to have a limb amputated with people around you dying of cholera or typhoid? Before you know it, you'll have a lesson that not only explores the history of medicine, but also includes creative writing, emotional literacy and an exploration of war and peace!

Boys have lots of energy. Many prefer practical subjects because they are able to move around during the lesson. When planning lessons, ensure a variety of activities including, for example, discussion, IT or practical work. If a class becomes boisterous or glazes over, stop and do a few minutes of physical movement or brain gym to get everyone back on track. Use physical activity as a reward for getting work done. *'If you can get this finished in fifteen minutes, we'll go outside at the end of the lesson.'*

Boys like a laugh; if you don't bring humour into the classroom, rest assured some of the boys will. When they do, allow it to contribute to the atmosphere – learning is easier when it's fun. If things get out of hand you might need to take a few minutes out to discuss how to use humour constructively. *'You do make me laugh, but you're going to have to work on your timing!'*

Boys are competitive, take risks and like challenges. Describe tasks in exciting ways: *'I have a challenge for you', 'I don't know anyone who solved this problem first time', 'There's a prize for whoever picks up the most litter in the next two minutes'.*

Boys respond well to short time-scales and concise instructions. *'I'd like you to do the first three questions on the worksheet. You have seven minutes to do them – starting now!'* Many need interim deadlines on coursework so they have something concrete on which to focus. *'Hand in your first draft on Friday.'*

Boys don't like being nagged or shouted at. Rather than dwelling on a misdemeanour, tell them what needs to be done to put it right: *'I'm going to split you two up: Jamie go there, Michael go there'.* Make a point of noticing and privately commenting on what boys are doing right: *'Here's a paragraph where all the words are spelt correctly, good work'.*

Boys need firm boundaries and often test them to find out how firm they are. Don't waste energy getting angry when they do this, simply restate the boundary in a firm and positive way: *'Walk in the corridor'.* Choose your sanctions carefully; if a boy's misbehaviour is due to an excess of energy, then keeping him in at break or lunch means he will not have been able to work this energy off, so is likely to create problems later in the day.

Boys have a keen sense of justice. When they get caught for something, they usually accept it as a 'fair cop'. However if they perceive an injustice – you are unduly harsh, they feel picked on, girls' misbehaviour is overlooked – explosive anger can result. Wading in at this point usually makes things worse; back off and look for the perceived injustice. You can accept his feelings even when his behaviour is unacceptable: *'I know you feel it's unfair that only you had to stay behind, but it's still not ok to swear'*.

Start from where boys are – their interests, their energy, their humour – then move into other areas. You want a boy to read, write, calculate, draw or learn a foreign language and he seems unmotivated. You find out he's into dinosaurs, Pokémon, football, vampires, playstation games, fishing or war. That's the place to start: you'll be amazed how much he'll do when he's interested in the topic.

Overall Approach

- Try to see the world through the eyes of a boy
- Show admiration for their positive qualities
- Notice and comment on what boys are doing right
- Reward enthusiasm and vigour as well as conscientiousness and obedience

Planning

- Select work which will capture boys' imaginations
- Relate what you teach to boys' interests
- Set stretching but achievable challenges
- Use a variety of activities and teaching methods
- Devise learning experiences which include physical activity

Communication

- Limit what you say and keep it positive
- Speak calmly, avoid shouting, be respectful
- Use concise instructions and short time-frames
- Describe ordinary tasks in exciting ways
- Say what needs to be done rather than what hasn't been done

Lucinda Neall is the author of 'Bringing the Best out in Boys – Communication Strategies for Teachers' Published by Hawthorn Press, ISBN 1-903458-29-3

For details of 'Bringing the Best out in Boys' training days please contact:

The Neall Scott Partnership, 4 Tornay Court, Church Road, Slapton, Leighton Buzzard LU7 9BZ
Tel: 01525-222600 Fax: 01525-222700 E-mail: boys@neallscott.co.uk