

# Building an Encouraging Classroom

## with Boys in Mind

Margaret King with Dan Gartrell

**F**or reasons of development and temperament, a lot of boys have difficulty fitting the traditional classroom expectations of many teachers. *Active, aggressive, challenging, and noncompliant* are words teachers often use to describe

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young boys. Even the most competent teachers are sometimes challenged by the behavior of some boys, and many find it difficult to distinguish problem behavior from typical "boy behavior." Educators frequently describe boys as socially immature or developmentally young. In a recent study (Pastor & Reuben 2002) researchers found that boys too frequently are labeled as having ADD

(attention deficit disorder) or ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).

Teachers tend to view boys who are energetic and active as difficult to manage. In fact, many boys do need more physical activity and may be developmentally younger by 6 to 18 months than girls (Soderman et al. 1999). Active, energetic children, notably boys, seem to spend a lot of time engaged in off-task behavior, looking for and finding mischief. The following example describes such a situation.

**In a well-organized preschool classroom with well-defined areas and activities based on children's developmental levels and interests, a group of boys are causing their teacher to question her skills. They dump containers of small Legos or Unifix cubes on the floor when she isn't looking. They wrestle with each other during group time—with horseplay sometimes escalating into serious conflicts. When asked the reasons for their behavior, they say, "It's fun!" and then giggle.**

**The adults are not amused, but the boys seem to enjoy their mischief. The overall pattern of behavior is persistent and disrupts the flow of the day's routines and activities. The teacher worries about the effects of the frequent conflicts on the boys themselves, the rest of the children, her assistant, and herself. She wonders, "Is the problem the boys? Is it the way I teach them? How can I create a classroom that is more responsive to the children—especially the boys?"**



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### Rethinking environments and activities

After observing the children's interactions in different parts of the environment and at different times of the day, the teacher reflected on what she had seen and heard. She realized that the boys were off task because they were not interested in many of the activities the teaching team provided. She decided to make changes

in the learning environment to address the boys' development, interests, and activity levels.

Some of the ideas on these pages worked for this teacher, and they could help other teachers plan for and respond to young boys. Making an environment more encouraging for boys is likely to empower girls to become more active, independent, and creative as well.

## Large Motor and Whole Body Experiences

Physical activity is necessary for all children, but it is especially important for young boys who enjoy running, jumping, and moving their bodies. There are many ways to foster opportunities for large muscle activity and whole body experiences in the indoor and outdoor classroom environments. Here are some suggestions:

**Extend classroom learning to the outdoors.** At center time plan at least one adult-led, small group, outdoor activity. The outdoor activity might be as simple as taking a nature walk or conducting a scavenger hunt, or as complex as creating a water system using pipes and joints. When the weather allows, spend lots of time outside. Respect this period as an opportunity for children to learn what their bodies can do (to develop their "physical intelligence" [Gardner 1993]). Remember that children tend to get more lower body exercise than upper. Climbing, building with various materials, and gardening develop the arms, shoulders, and trunk muscles. Use teachable moments to make outdoor time educational.

**Plan activities to occur during regular outdoor playtime.** Have at least one outdoor teacher-planned and -led play activity each day. Present several options—let the children choose whether to build and then negotiate an obstacle course, wave huge bubble wands and chase the bubbles, or play a climbing game.

**Create an indoor large motor environment outside the classroom.** For example, transform a large storage

area into an indoor large-muscle activity room. Place safety floor mats, balls, and climbing equipment in the room, and use it for rough-and-tumble play, dancing and movement, and climbing. (See "The Inside Information about Safety Surfacing," *Young Children*, March 2003, pp. 108–11, for guidelines on safe indoor surfacing material.)

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**Create a large-motor/physical fitness center in the classroom.** Besides the all-important climber and safety surfacing, include beanbags for throwing, carpet squares for jumping, boards for walking and balancing, and music for dancing. Construct a classroom physical fitness center featuring a homemade weight table (for weights, fill plastic bottles with sand and attach them to a sawed-off broom handle) and a floor mat for calisthenics. With a little creativity, you can devise a mini-exercise-bike. Make the fitness center as permanent a part of your room as the housekeeping area.

**Integrate whole body movements into activities.** Offer tools such as feather dusters or paintbrushes to use indoors with tempera or diluted finger paint on large pieces of Plexiglas or cardboard or outdoors with water on the walls. Include large hollow blocks or cardboard blocks in the block area. Lead daily music and movement activities.



## Conclusion

You can expect that the changes you make will modify the classroom culture. Previously bored and uninvolved boys will become more engaged, significantly reducing program-influenced mistaken behavior. As a result, the other children, less upset by frequent conflicts, may seem more relaxed and comfortable. They too are likely to enjoy new areas, such as those for large muscle activities and woodworking. Addressing the needs of boys can make the program more developmentally responsive for all the children in the class.

## References

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## Building and Construction

Boys tend to spend a significant amount of time playing with blocks, Legos, and other construction materials. Teachers need to help children plan their building and construction ideas as well as remind them how to use blocks appropriately. The ideas that follow can enhance the block area and offer new ways to build and construct.

**Focus on the block area.** Enlarge the block area to provide plenty of space for children to carry out their construction plans. Change block accessories to fit current themes and interests and include pads of paper and pencils so children can make plans and notes about their constructions. Some children prefer to draw before building; others plan by talking about what they will do. Use digital photographs and video recordings to document the building process. Share and discuss the documentation with children to help them reflect on what they did and plan new constructions.

**Create a woodworking area.** Many art activities are two-dimensional and of little interest to boys. Boys will, however, enjoy a woodworking area where they can use a variety of carpentry tools and materials to

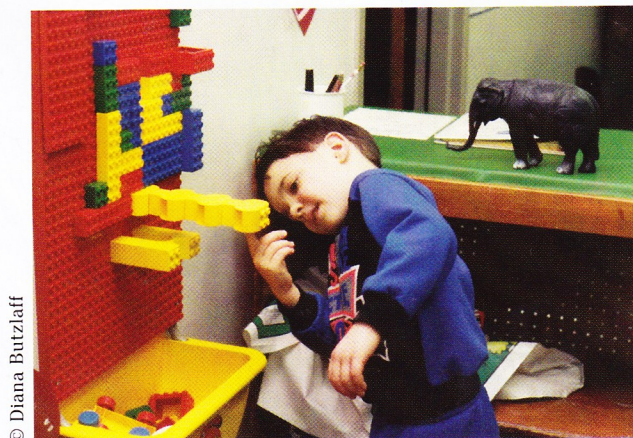
experiment, practice, and make three-dimensional constructions. Be sure to provide plenty of safety goggles. Invite parents and local carpenters to help plan and create developmentally appropriate woodworking projects.

**Offer variety in art and writing.** Add construction and building materials to the art area, thus allowing more choices for whole hand manipulation of materials as well as fine motor manipulation. Offer a variety of wide and narrow writing and drawing tools so children have a choice. Staple along the left edge of a stack of several sheets of paper to create blank booklets that children can turn into their own action picture books about their imaginary experiences.

**Assess and update manipulatives.** Although many boys like to build, some have difficulty using Legos. Large manipulatives such as Duplos are better for creative work, while Legos continue to be useful for fine motor skill development.

**Offer variety and new experiences.** Less dramatic changes to the environment can also be effective in engaging the attention of boys. From time to time reorganize and outfit the housekeeping area to become a dramatic play setting for camping, gardening, fishing, or restaurant play. Active and educational computer activities and games of strategy require boys—and girls—to work in cooperative groups. At group story times, teachers can vary the books read aloud by alternating information books on topics of interest to boys with favorite picture books.

**Boys tend to spend a significant amount of time playing with construction materials.**



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## Sensory Exploration and Experimentation

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Boys frequently enjoy exploring and experimenting—for example, digging in sandboxes or taking block constructions apart (Grossman & Grossman 1993). Offer these activities to encourage children to engage in spontaneous scientific exploration:

### Exploring and experimenting.

Create daily opportunities for exploration and experimentation such as an activity that allows children to answer the question, “What happens if . . . ?” (“What happens if you mix water with sand or cornstarch?”)

**Sensory play.** Include standard materials—sand and water,

playdough, clay—and create new ones such as glurch (a mixture of powdered starch and water) and a homemade version of Silly Putty (using fabric softener and white glue). Many boys are especially interested in combining and mixing substances as well as pouring and filling containers with solids and liquids. Invite children to help make the putty, playdough, and glurch.

**Cooking.** Cooking and food preparation create opportunities for children to experiment and explore, make predictions, and observe what happens. Plan a simple cooking activity weekly or more often, if possible. Fruit salads, raw vegetables, puddings, mashed potatoes, bread, and pancakes are just a few of the foods children can prepare. Have cooks—men and women—visit the class.

**Boys frequently  
enjoy exploring  
and experimenting.**

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