



Boys Going to School

(A brief guide)

A Boys' Development Project publication



This booklet has been written for parents of boys who are about to go to school.

It accompanies the Boys into School project (BiS).

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Boys into School

This booklet aims to help parents prepare their sons for school. The reason to focus on boys is because they find it harder to make the move into school and, once they are there, to get as much out of it as girls. This isn't of course about all boys, but there are some trends that are worrying.





First the bad news

- To get most good jobs now requires qualifications. For example, to get a plumbing apprenticeship you will need five GCSE A*-Cs.
- There are an increasing number of young men who leave school with few or no qualifications and many more who leave with fewer than they should.
- Some of the causes can be seen long before they sit their GCSEs and include low levels of literacy and numeracy; disruptive and/or aggressive behaviour; conflicts with other pupils or teachers; difficulties in communication; and having little or no motivation.



- Boys are much more likely to be excluded (both permanently and for a fixed period) at a younger age than girls, with a rising number of boys under eleven being excluded.
- Nearly a quarter of boys have some difficulties with talking and understanding speech compared to 13% of girls under five.
- Estimates are that at least four boys to every girl suffer from conduct disorders and ADHD and as many as nine boys to each girl in those under ten.



What you need to know as a parent

- Going to school requires certain skills. If boys have them then the move is easy, however if they do not they can struggle.
- The classroom situation works if everybody does the same activity. If boys won't conform it WILL cause problems.
- If some boys do not settle in their first year, then it can impact on their whole school experience.
- The more boys are prepared for the move into school, the easier it usually is.
- Once boys are at school the teacher has to deal with a crowd. Therefore you are the best person to teach your son these skills even before he gets there.





What skills does a boy need at school?

There are six skills areas that boys need when they arrive in school:

1. **Communication** (especially speech): four out of five children with speech delay are boys;
2. **Ability to take instructions:** understanding rules and accepting the teacher's authority;
3. **Understanding how a class works** (especially in terms of different class areas e.g. carpet, table and playground): essentially they need to know what school is for;
4. **Concentration level:** initially this is in terms of play, but should develop into more formal classwork;



5. **Not being aggressive, loud and over-boisterousness** (boys who move too much; get upset easily; have trouble sharing; make too much noise; like to be the centre of attention and are physically bigger than others of their age);
6. **Ability to react positively to teacher and other children:** boys should learn not to strop, sulk, or react in any way just to get attention or their own way.



How do I help him develop these skills?

Each of these sections is addressed below. **Remember, your son is likely to learn through doing**, rather than being told. Most of the suggestions below involve role-play and actions. This is because your son is much more likely both to learn and to remember what he has learned. If you have played 'teacher' with him then he is much more likely to come back from his first week at school telling you the teacher was like you had been.





1. Communication skills

Boys struggle more with language for many reasons:

Girls generally talk earlier than boys and they rely much more on language to find out about the world. They will ask about potential pitfalls ('Can I climb on that?') and about relationships ('Do you like that person?'). Boys are more likely to find out by experiencing. They will climb and subsequently fall in the case of climbing frames. And they will comment on relationships ('You don't like that person'); Some boys develop a form of sign language and if that gets them what they need then they are not motivated to learn to talk; Language and communication develops with practice and boys are often reluctant to make the effort to practice; Boys whose play does not involve much talking are often more reluctant to practice their use of language.



There are a number of steps which overlap that children follow as their language develops, but generally these include the following:

- Mimicking sounds
- Making sounds
- Repeating sounds and words
- Remembering words
- Learning meaning (single) and visualisation
- Building a working vocabulary
- Remembering meaning
- Putting words together
- Making sentences
- Structuring words (syntax)
- Inferred understanding even if a word doesn't immediately make sense
- Learning rules of language

What you can do?

- Look at the list above and see which of these your son does regularly and which he needs to practice.
- There is no substitute for practice; the more he practices the better he will become.
- If he tends to do shorthand with you (points, grunts or anything that you understand, but no one else does) make it more difficult for him to do this by insisting that he says what he wants.
- Practice, practice and practice. Talk, talk and more talk. In the same way as learning a second language requires as much practice as possible, your son will develop his communications skills by talking as much as he can.





2. Ability and willingness to take instructions

Some boys arrive at school and are only used to certain types of discipline and instructions. If their parents are strict they are used to firm instructions, while if their parents negotiate, the boy may be used to being asked rather than told. He needs to be able to deal with both.

What you can do?

In the months before school starts, play at being teacher. Introduce this as a game (for short periods) and give clear instructions ('Can everyone move to the table please?' 'It's playtime, everyone outside.'). Let him get used to the words and the tone and the type of instruction he will be expected to take when he is in a crowd / classroom.

Vary these so he gets used both to strict approaches and more 'asking' styles; he will meet lots of both in his school life.



Often a boy's difficulties in taking instructions are linked with a broader problem of discipline and boundaries. Some of the reasons this is more difficult with boys are because:

Girls talk, boys walk

Boys usually walk before girl and girls usually talk before boys. This means that girls ask adults about the world.

We shout more at boys

We talk to girls when we want to discipline them and are much more likely to shout when we discipline boys. Many parents think that boys need firmer discipline and therefore don't see shouting as a problem.

Learn by exploring

Boys explore and parents find themselves trying to discipline a boy from afar, which means speaking louder and sometimes shouting when they are some way away.

Learn by experimenting

Boys want to experiment; they want to take stuff apart, see how it works and do things repetitively. This can be annoying and often leads to conflict.

Learn by reacting

Boys learn about relationships by reacting. If you get annoyed, your son may do the same thing again, because he is trying to work out why you become annoyed. A girl is more likely to ask why you got annoyed while a boy will do it again, so he can watch your reaction.

Boys see the world as a playground

Boys often see the classroom, supermarket, train, or bus as an opportunity to play. We think they should be aware that these places are not playgrounds, but boys don't or don't want to. If it isn't a playground we have to tell them that it isn't.

Boys need boundaries

While most girls can be talked to, encouraged and cajoled, most boys usually need very clear boundaries. This is why some boys have difficulties when they get to school; if they have not been given strong boundaries they are much less likely to accept the teacher's authority and respond to instructions.





Techniques that work

Here are eight techniques that work with most boys. They are not difficult, but the more you try them the more they will work.

Touch and talk

If you want his attention, touch your son on the arm. Even if he looks away his ears will open. This isn't a grip or a tug, just a touch.

Low and Slow

If you want him to listen to what you say, you will need to deepen your voice and slow down your speech. This is just low and slow, not aggressive or angry.



Fewer words

Whatever you want him to do, strip it down to as few words as possible without commentary. If you go from 'I've asked you ten times to put those toys away, you're doing my head in,' to 'TOYS AWAY PLEASE.' then you can drop all of the 'can you', 'would you'.

Right words

Boys take words literally. If you say 'in a minute' he will think you mean 'in a minute'. If you say 'you can walk on ahead' without saying 'near enough so you can hear me if I call,' he will go further than you want. This will only increase, so get used to it now.

Know the rules

Boys need to be told the rules; they rarely ask what they are. Assume he doesn't know how to behave in a supermarket, so tell him 'here we walk,' 'the trolley is pushed slowly,' 'we put in the basket what is on the list.' Boys often see the world as a playground, so if there are rules they need to be told them, and often more than once.

NO

Especially if you tend to give him a lot of explanations and certainly if he knows he should not be doing it, a very firm NO will do the trick. If he is about to throw something at someone, say NO firmly, but not aggressively or threateningly. An explanation can follow later, but he needs to know there is no negotiation.





Nip in the bud

Some parents say they ask their sons to do something ten times and end up shouting. Sometimes this is about timing; if you use the techniques above when you can see that something WILL become a problem, then both of you are more relaxed. Sort it out before it becomes a drama.

Three-week rule

Boys form habits quickly. If you use any of these techniques consistently for three weeks they will become habit and you will find you need to use them less and less.

There are a number of other techniques that work particularly well with boys, but we have concentrated on those that boys are likely to be expected to respond to at school. For more techniques see our booklet titled 'Discipline and Boys who are Under Five' (a brief guide), www.boysdevelopmentproject.org.uk



3. Understanding how a class works

Some boys will see the world as a playground and if they are not TOLD that some places are not a playground they will assume they are. That means that some boys see supermarkets as a brilliant place to play (wheels, trolleys, stuff on shelves, long alleyways) and so we have to make sure they understand that they are not. The classroom is just the same – they need to learn and rehearse what a classroom is for, we cannot assume they know.

What you can do?

The easiest way to do this is to divide your home into areas. Kitchen for eating; bedroom for sleeping; make another area for playing. This will involve removing televisions from bedrooms, and not allowing eating in front of the TV. If you do this for two weeks your son will get used to different areas being for different activities, which is a critical part of how a classroom works.





4. Concentration level

For a lot of boys sitting quietly and concentrating on an activity is difficult unless they like the activity. Classrooms require boys to concentrate on a range of activities, some of which they will not be that interested in. While motivation and movement are also important, their ability to concentrate for periods will also be an issue.

What you can do?

Take an activity he is a little interested in (reading or drawing perhaps) and give him the challenge of sitting at a table and doing the activity for five minutes and when he does that appreciate him. The next day challenge him to do the same activity for eight minutes, building this up slowly. Boys are likely to respond initially to the challenge, but are likely to get involved in the activity as they do it more. Appreciate his efforts as much as the result of his efforts.

Concentration levels need to be built up, but this can be done successfully with most boys over a number of weeks.





5. Not being aggressive, loud and over-boisterousness

There is not really a problem for boys being loud and boisterous if they are out in a field or play area where they are unlikely to hurt themselves or anyone else. Problems arise when they are in settings where they need to concentrate, focus and be able to get on with others. So the aim is not to stop boys from being loud and boisterous, but to build up their ability to contain this part of them when required.

Aggressiveness has a number of different strands. For some boys it is related to their poor communications skills (see above); for others it is related to the way they have learnt to manage their emotions; for others it is the way they see people deal with conflict; and for still others they can get aggressive when they get tired, get over-excited or eat certain foods.

What you can do?

This is likely to involve a number of elements. Boundaries and discipline will be two, so the techniques shown above will be appropriate. Concentration is likely to be another, so challenge him as with point 4 above.

At first, concentrate on the times when he slows down anyway. Introduce good bedtime routines (bath, food and stories). Make the most of that quiet time before bed to encourage him to relax, enjoy book-related activities and work up from there.





6. Ability to react positively to teacher and other children

A teacher has to deal with 20-30 children in a class, which means that certain behaviours are a problem. Children who do not sit when the rest of the class does, children who are too disruptive and children who sulk and get lost in their emotions are the three most difficult types of pupils for a teacher to deal with.

What you can do?

Play at being a teacher, giving directions in as few words as possible. Remember, this is an opportunity for your son to rehearse being in a classroom situation. But be playful.



Don't react to sulks or strops by getting annoyed or trying to talk him out of it. Most boys abandon certain strategies if they do not work. So, whatever he does it has worked for him at some time. For you to change the way you react to him is likely to change his response. If he is not seeing the same reaction he is likely to pull himself out of the sulk and get on with something else. Some girls in contrast do not always pull out of the sulk or stop so quickly, but that is another story!



Boys into School Course (BiS)

This booklet has been written to go with courses targeting parents with sons. The course aims to provide parents with an opportunity to see what skills their sons will need at school and how they can make sure they have them, before they get there. These skills will ensure that he has the best possible start.

The course also aims to increase parents' understanding of their son's development and increase their confidence in dealing with the transition into school.



Further information

If you have liked the information in this booklet go to our website www.boysdevelopmentproject.org.uk for other publications.

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