



Learning Curve: Yes, it's OK to be a boy

By [Maureen Downey](#)

9:21 a.m. Monday, January 25, 2010

Many parents worry that their boisterous 4-year-old son will never be able to sit still and focus on algebra. Others fret that their aggressive kindergarten toy thrower will never have friends.

Some fear that their toddler son's refusal to make eye contact or engage playmates indicates Asperger Syndrome.

Now, a noted behavioral psychologist advises those parents to relax. Such behaviors are a normal part of boyhood and will typically fade over time in most children.

Anthony Rao, co-author of the new book "The Way of Boys: Raising Healthy Boys in a Challenging and Complex World," wishes everyone would take a deep breath, slow down and realize that boys follow a rocky development path that may include troublesome behaviors.

"Most boys will grow up healthy," he says. "When parents are too worried, they jump to conclusions that something serious may be wrong and focus exclusively on problems."

Today, normal developmental phases can be misread as disorders by classroom teachers. Then, their inexpert diagnoses are too quickly confirmed by pediatricians in 15-minute office visits.

Parents leave the doctor with a prescription in their hand and a label on their child.

As a longtime practicing psychologist, Rao says the number of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder diagnoses has nearly quadrupled over a 10-year period. "We used to miss a lot of learning problems in boys years ago," says Rao. "But now we are looking so aggressively for them and we are looking earlier and earlier."

The problem, he says, is that reliable assessments are difficult in boys younger than 6 or 7. That's why Rao recommends teachers, pediatricians and parents delve deeper and wait longer before applying labels and adopting such interventions as special education services, medications or class pull-outs for young boys.

The checklist for disorders — impulsivity, delays in socializing and language, resistance to eye contact, problems in transitions, extreme shyness, sudden fits — can also be a checklist of temporary development phases and setbacks, cautions Rao.

"Rather than rushing into a program to help troublesome behaviors, many boys benefit from a wait-and-see approach."

Over his career, Rao has seen less tolerance of the little boy who can't sit still or who is overly aggressive. Boys, for example, are expelled 4.5 times more often than girls in preschools — a rate that exceeds even high school expulsions.

This early pressure on boys to conform, a lack of free play and a surge in structured activities could explain why so many 23-year-olds are living in their parents' basement.

“One could make the case that pushing their development so fast is leaving boys burned out and exhausted,” he says.

His solutions are basic; don't push boys into competitive sports where dropping the ball brings not only personal disappointment but the disdain of teammates. Instead, Rao advocates that parents let boys try individual sports, such as martial arts, tennis or swimming.

Give high-energy boys a chance to release energy by letting them run around the house or out in the yard before school. In class, restore recess and give young kids 10-minute stretch and walk-around breaks every hour.

Rao endorses single-gender classes, saying new research from Florida suggests that boys benefit from it. Girls, he says, showed only a slight benefit from single-gender classes.

He also wishes there were more male teachers in schools, saying they understand restless boys and that boys often learn differently than girls.

“Girls use more words. They are heavy on reading and early literacy and more social cooperation,” he says. The boy brain is wired for motor skill development and spatial tasks, and boys learn more by touching and exploration. (There are exceptions, he says, describing himself as a compliant learner eager to do what the teacher wanted.)

Today's classroom is better suited for the ways girls learn, says Rao. “When you promote all this assessment and increasing standardization, you narrow the way you are going to teach kids, eclipsing the ways that boys learn better. You go to much less hands-on and manipulation of objects and to more sit down and lectures.”

Rao concedes that it's possible many boys he treated would have outgrown their extreme shyness or belligerence without his assistance, but their parents were desperate for help.

“Statistically speaking, most of them would have done fine, but their moms were anxious and worried,” he says. “My role was to help them get through it so they were not suspecting that everything their sons did was a problem and then creating self-fulfilling prophecies.”

Find this article at:

<http://www.ajc.com/opinion/learning-curve-yes-its-282583.html>

 [Print this page](#)  [Close](#)