

# Red-flagged as problem pupils, are boys misunderstood? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Viewed as too difficult to teach and too disruptive to control, the less help the male 'problem' pupil gets - especially in language skills and reading - the worse he does. Part 4 of a six-part series.

For most her eldest son's school career, Nicole Stamos has made so many trips to the principal's office she felt like she was getting a detention herself.

And although his math and science marks weren't bad, he was steadily falling behind his grade level in reading; his parents worried about his future and blamed themselves. They were hard on him, too. "You are so busy getting upset with your child not learning, and all of a sudden he's in Grade 5."

This is the all too-common tale of the boisterous, restless boy "red-flagged" as the problem pupil that nobody wants in their class. Viewed as too difficult to teach and too disruptive to control, the less help this boy gets - especially in language skills and reading - the worse he does.

For his parents, it was one complaint after another from the school: Noah was ripping up erasers at his desk, making a mess. Noah interrupted the teacher. Noah wouldn't sit still. Noah had to stay in at recess. One teacher put his desk in the front so he was facing the rest of the class.

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Nature is certainly a player in these stories - boys tend to be more active than girls, and mature later - but studies have found relatively small overall brain differences between girls and boys. The bigger player may be environment - the nurture side of a boy's life, where parents and teachers have a major influence to either help him reach his full potential, or box him into a role that holds him back.

To boost math scores among girls, the youngster had to get the message that their hardwired brains weren't holding them back. "Now we are doing the opposite to boys: Boys are immature, boys can't sit still, boys can't read and write. That can't help them," says Lise Eliot, a neuroscientist studying gender difference. So in large part, the solution for boys may be changing that message.

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"A lot of problems come from misunderstanding a boy's energy," says Daniel Rolo, a teacher in Chatham, Ont. And then when boys fail - or fall behind - "it often gets normalized." In fact, Mr. Rolo says, the best advice for parents is to step in quickly, and early, before a reading delay widens the grade-level gap, and before trouble in school turns a boy off learning altogether.

This year, Mr. Rolo has a Grade 5 class with six girls and 19 boys. Noah Stamos, whose family moved to Chatham this year, sits among them, and for the first time, says his mother, "I can breathe." She has already had several meetings with his teacher, not to discipline her son but to help him learn. Mr. Rolo is known for his boy-friendly teaching style. "When I work with kids, it's so apparent that girls learn differently than boys." In group work, he says, girls discuss and plan; the boys jump in and make mistakes until they get it right - so he gears the work to accommodate a variety of approaches. There are medicine balls and soft toys for any children who'd like to use them, and pupils throw balls at a smart board to select math questions.

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