

## Potential Danger for All Boys: New Evidence

Since 1997, we have worked to defeat six bills written by our California State Legislature to lower the age of compulsory education from age six to age five. Gratefully, the first five of these bills were defeated. However, the sixth bill, AB 1236 (introduced this year) is now on hold, waiting to be heard again by the Legislature this coming January 2008.<sup>1</sup>

While the age of compulsory education is still 6 to 18 years of age, 95% of all five year-olds in California already attend kindergarten voluntarily. So we ask: What is wrong with being forced to start your children in a formal education program at 5 years of age? And more specifically, how does it tend to affect boys? And to a large extent the answer is: It's becoming increasingly clear that all children in our culture, especially boys, are in danger of having their proper development hindered by our culture's methods of early educational instruction.

First, realize that this issue of boys falling behind is not somehow universally inherent to every modern country or society. According to Dr. Leonard Sax, in his new (2007) book *Boys Adrift*, America ranks 25th while Finland consistently scores at or very near the top of the ranking on international academic achievement tests most widely administered around the world. Since America greatly outspends Finland on education, Dr. Sax asks, "What is the most distinctive characteristic of public education in Finland?" And he answers - "Very simple: Children in Finland don't begin any formal school until they are seven years old."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, California children, generally begin their formal schooling as young as 4 to 5 years old. What happens when we force children into formalized education at too early an age?

Back in 1987, Dr. David Elkind, professor of child development at Tufts University, wrote the book, *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk*. In his book he states, "When we instruct children in academic subjects... at too early an age, we miseducate them; we put them at risk for short-term stress and long-term personality damage.... There is no evidence that such early instruction has lasting benefits, and considerable evidence that it can do lasting harm."<sup>3</sup> While this harm is prevalent in both boys and girls, boys generally suffer more from the misguided approach inherent in kindergarten and early childhood education. Forcing boys into formal education at too early an age frequently results in a multitude of problems, including the lowering of their self-esteem.

Many studies suggest that the decreased self-esteem experienced by boys has resulted in much of their anti-social and delinquent behavior. This can be traced to their failures in early school experiences due to their slower

development, as compared to the rate of development of girls.<sup>4</sup> In *Boys Adrift*, Dr. Sax wrote, "For many boys, there's a huge difference in readiness to learn between age five and age seven...."<sup>5</sup> Dr. Sax discusses the fact that five-year-old boys are only developmentally able to learn to read and write at the level of three-and-one-half-year-old girls. Placing an expectation on boys to read and write at a level one-and-a-half years beyond their developmental capability results in most boys becoming disenchanted with academic learning very early in their lives.<sup>6</sup> This sets them up for failure later on in life.

Why don't young boys learn at the same rate as girls? As Dr. Sax pointed out in *Boys Adrift*, boys and girls really are "wired" so differently that five-year-old boys are "only developmentally able to learn to read and write at the level of three-and-one-half-year-old girls....Gender really happens in the brain." As recently reported in Pi Lambda Beta's *Educational Horizons*, gender is hardwired into our brains. Initially, it is hardwired into a person genetically as "chromosome markers are included in the genomes of girls and boys at the time of conception." Then it is hardwired into our brains endocrinologically, when "those chromosome markers compel surges of male and female hormones in the womb that format XX brains to be female and XY brains to be male."<sup>7</sup>

Just as an individual's genetic make-up causes the body to develop differently and create gender-specific physical differences, the brain's genetic make-up also creates gender-specific learning and mental processes. For instance, the parts of the brain most involved in integrating information (i.e. sight, touch, taste, smell, hearing) develop in girls at a rate roughly two years ahead of boys.<sup>8</sup> The more rapid development of the left hemisphere of the brain in girls enables them to learn to read and write earlier than boys. The left hemisphere keeps track of details. "Its primary responsibility is auditory processing and verbal expression, such as listening, speaking, and writing. The right hemisphere, which develops sooner in boys, sees the big picture. "It has the primary responsibility for visual-spatial and visual-motor activities, such as [are used in] sports, architecture, sculpture, painting, and carpentry."<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to reading, boys today do not read as much as they used to, and, in fact, significantly less today than girls. In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts issued their report, *Reading at Risk: a Survey of Literary Reading in America*. Commenting on this report, a *Washington Post* article "Why Johnny Won't Read", made the observation that "From 1992 to 2002, the gender gap in reading by young adults widened considerably." The *Post* article pointed out that a disparity in which

young women read more than young men had existed since the mid 1900's. "But for the gap to have grown so much [from an 8% difference to a 16% difference] in so short a time [10 years] suggests that what was formerly a moderate difference is fast becoming a decided marker of gender identity: Girls read; boys don't."<sup>10</sup>

More significantly, in this same *Post* article, the authors refer to a 2004 report by the U.S. Department of Education, which indicates that "In the fall semester of kindergarten in 1998 ... girls outperformed boys by 0.9 points. By the spring semester, the difference had nearly doubled, to 1.6 points." Attending kindergarten resulted in a significant increase in the differences in reading comprehension between boys and girls the same age.

To sum up the impact of kindergarten on boys, who are inherently curious and want to learn, they are being demotivated to learn and to excel. Many boys are being persuaded by bad experiences in their early years that they can't learn. This lack of motivation and decreasing desire to learn will greatly impact them for the remainder of their lives.

### **Do these initial experiences in early childhood education keep boys from reaching their full potential as young men?**

It is troubling to note that, after years of increases in government funding of kindergarten and preschool, there has been a significant decrease in the number of boys who

go on to attend college. And then only a few of those actually graduate. Dr. Sax cites a 2006 professional article, *The State of American Manhood*, which reports a steady decrease in college attendance by males since 1949. In that year, 70% of undergraduate students were male. By 2006, the number of male undergraduate students had decreased to 42%. Dr. Sax then goes on to point out that "Male students attending four-year colleges and universities today are now significantly less likely than their female peers to earn high honors or to graduate. Just 30 years ago [mid 1970s], the opposite was true..."<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion: Starting sooner is not the answer to educational woes.**

There is an abundance of evidence, beyond what we could cover in this article, which demonstrates that lowering the age of compulsory education ultimately is at cross-purposes to providing boys (and girls for that matter) with a good education. Lowering the age of compulsory education will not encourage boys to be self-motivated learners and it will not prepare them to become responsible successful adults.

Any apparent academic gains on the part of boys and girls from formal education, prior to ages 6 or 7, have been shown to be short-lived. However the negative effects linger for a long time, especially in the lives of boys.

For additional summarized and documented facts on this subject, see the paper *Institutionalized Early Childhood Education and Development: Background and Issues* at [www.childandfamilyprotection.org](http://www.childandfamilyprotection.org).

### **End Notes:**

1. SB 893 (1997), AB 25 (1998), AB 513 (1999), AB 634 (2001), AB 56 (2002), AB 1236 (2007).
2. Dr. Leonard Sax, Boys Adrift, 2007, p. 20.
3. Dr. David Elkind, Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk, 1987, p. 69.
4. D. P. Flammer, "Self-Esteem, Parent Identification and Sex Role Development In Preschool Age Boys And Girls," Child Study Journal 2 (1971): 39-45.  
D. L. Mumpower, "Sex Ratios Found In Various Types Of Referred Exceptional Children," Exceptional Children 36 (1970): 621-22.  
N. Cutts, and N. Moseley, Teaching the Disorderly Pupil In Elementary and Secondary School, 1957.
5. Sax, p. 21.
6. Sax, p. 18.
7. Michael Gurian, and Kathy Stevens, "How Boys Learn," Educational Horizons Vol. 84, no. 2 (Winter 2006), pp. 88-89.
8. Sax, p. 17.
9. Betsy Gunzelmann, and Dianne Connell, "The New Gender Gap: Social, Psychological, Neuro-biological, and Educational Perspectives," Educational Horizons Vol. 84, no. 2 (Winter 2006), p. 98.
10. Mark Bauerlein and Sandra Stotsky, "Why Johnny Won't Read," Washington Post, January 25, 2005, p. A15.
11. Sax, pp. 8-9.

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