

# GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell



## Boys and Men Teachers

### Teacher Bruce and Darnell—

When Darnell entered our program, he was fairly nonverbal and very big (already 75 pounds as a three-year-old). He lived with his grandparents, and we three teachers guessed they did not hold him in their laps much, let alone pick him up. We could see Darnell craved physical attention; he tried to climb onto our laps and wanted us to carry him all the time. But it was hard to meet his needs because of his size and the way he had of demanding attention. The other teachers tried to encourage Darnell to talk more and to build relationships that way, but he responded very little. It was like he spaced us out. Something more had to be done.

I am not a particularly large guy, but I knew I had to give comfort to this child, at least hold him on my lap a few times a day and carry him once or twice. After several weeks of this, Darnell began to open up. He talked more and began to try things on his own. On the playground he started to run with the other kids and me and play chase. For the first time, we saw Darnell pleased to be part of the group—and he asked to be carried less. He adjusted, and the other teachers did too. They came to accept Darnell as a typical three-year-old boy who was just learning how to ask for and give affection.

### Teacher Jay and Scott—

Scott was a smallish four-year-old. Every day in class he struggled to be accepted and to get attention. Scott was a whiz at building things and with large muscle activities, but he had trouble interacting with others and often resorted to hitting. I worked

with him on using words and friendly touches, and the hitting got less. Still, whenever he got upset, he would throw himself backward against a wall and then either totally ignore everyone or storm off in anger.

One day Scott had a struggle with a peer, and I intervened, not letting him hit the other child. Scott started to close down, and I quietly encouraged him to use his words. Just this side of throwing himself against the wall, Scott stopped, clenched his fists, and screamed as loud as he could, “I’m angry at you, Jay!”

I was thrilled, and as I gave him a big hug I told him so: “That’s wonderful, Scott!” He stayed for a moment in the hug and visibly relaxed.

That moment marked a sea change for the child. Scott used his words fairly consistently after that. He would often come to me and ask for a hug. He had many engaging conversations with his peers, more fully enjoyed the activities he had done so well before, and was enthusiastic about trying new things.

---

**SEVERAL YEARS AGO U.S. EDUCATORS REALIZED** that we were not encouraging young girls in math and science. Today girls are catching up, but another void in our classrooms has appeared. Some children, especially high-energy boys, face increasingly inappropriate programs, which offer lots of seatwork and little movement. It is as if some teachers are rehearsing their young students for the sit-down academic world to come. Children who are *kinetic* or total-body learners suffer. They need active classrooms that affirm and accept them. This column is for the guys—for three reasons.

**Dan Gartrell**, EdD, is director of the Child Development Training Program and professor of early childhood and elementary education at Bemidji State University in northern Minnesota. A former Head Start teacher, Dan is the author of *The Power of Guidance*, *What the Kids Said Today*, and *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom*.

This column was written in consultation with Bryan G. Nelson, director of MenTeach and member of the psychology faculty at Metropolitan State University in Minneapolis. Bryan is the author of *The Importance of Men Teachers and Why There Are So Few*.

Thanks to Bruce Sheppard of Salem, Oregon, and Jay Price of San Diego, California, for sharing their stories and for their caring.

Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to [dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu](mailto:dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu).

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

**REASON 1.** *Many boys are being left by the wayside.* The cover story in the January 30th issue of *Newsweek* was “The Trouble with Boys” (Tyre 2006). Conventional wisdom holds that boys develop more slowly than girls, but eventually catch up. The article cites studies indicating that many boys do not catch up, even by college age. They have troubles in school and life that go way beyond the early years. According to the article, “Often boys are treated like defective girls” (Tyre 2006, 46). The implication is that boys’ slower developmental rates, physical response styles, and kinetic learning behaviors are seen as deficits. Rather than accepting these characteristics as *who most boys are*, some teachers see them as faults to be firmly and swiftly “corrected” (Viadero 2006).

When early childhood educators overemphasize “acceptable” behavior (which many adults are still learning) and prescribed programming, we slight children’s physical and emotional needs. At first, Darnell’s teachers may have thought of him as defective. Bruce accepted Darnell, though, and through simple hugs and friendly touch helped the boy see that in this safe classroom he could learn and grow. The foundation for showing thoughtful, empathetic behaviors is to experience them yourself. Boys in particular need regular physical affection as a part of the nurturing mix (King 2004).

**REASON 2.** *Active boys are not finding classrooms encouraging.* Boys are almost five times more likely than girls to be expelled from preschool programs (Gilliam 2005; see *Guidance Matters*, January 2006, for discussion about the National Prekindergarten Study.) We, as early childhood teachers, tend to give young boys less nurturing (especially physical) than we do young girls, and our classroom discipline for boys tends to be harsher (King 2004). A reasonable inference is that too few teachers have learned how to positively guide young boys’ behavior. Rather than learning and taking an active classroom approach, we often find it more convenient to ease boys out—or medicate them.

In the second anecdote, Jay clearly bucks this trend. He understands Scott’s needs and works actively to make the program developmentally appropriate for the boy. Jay builds a relationship with Scott that includes guiding him through his emotional outbursts. Over time Scott learns that he can manage his strong emotions and become a member of the classroom community. The child’s learning skills blossom as a result.

Some early childhood teachers find it easier to be “developmentally appropriate” with girls than with boys. In my view this is not developmentally appropriate practice at all. Young girls are often more compliant than boys, who are more likely to chafe under constraints on their behavior and learning styles (King 2004). Programs are developmentally appropriate only if they support *all* children, not some or even most. When teachers clamp down on—or turn away from—children for being “needy” like Darnell or “aggressive” like Scott, they tell those children that they cannot succeed in the education process.

Other teachers, of both genders, have an amazing knack for reaching boys and girls alike. They enjoy young children who are energetic and just learning how to become members of the group. They like being outside with children and make outdoors part of the classroom. These teachers positively handle boisterous play, restlessness when things get passive, and physicality in communication—and they are to be treasured.

A message of the two anecdotes is that energetic classrooms, rich in nurturing and encouragement, are good for all children. Let’s face it: classrooms in general (particularly in light of the obesity epidemic) need to be less like Sunday school and more like summer camp—which of course would make them more developmentally appropriate and healthier. Teachers can prevent many *institution-caused* conflicts (resulting from a poor match of the children and the program) when we remember that young children—boys *and* girls—learn through movement.

**REASON 3.** *Too few men teach in early childhood classrooms.* In a 2002 study, Nelson states that only about 4 percent of NAEYC members are men working directly with children (98 percent of Nelson’s sample of NAEYC members believed it is important for men to be early childhood teachers) (Nelson 2002). Beyond the chronic issue of low pay in the early childhood workforce, Nelson’s study suggests that stereotypes about men teachers have kept male application, hiring, and retention rates all sadly low (Nelson 2002).

With today’s emphasis on sit-down lessons, the kinetic learning needs of boys are the unacknowledged Tigger in the classroom. We need more teachers who know Tigger, who speak *the language of boys*. Teachers Bruce and Jay speak the language. They communicate that nurturing relationships with young children—especially boys—comes first, before traditional behavioral and academic expectations. They model that physical activity is a natural part of a young child’s life and that active learning should be a natural part of the daily program. Nurturing men who enter the field are kindling and rekindling an awareness of the language of boys in the rest of us, both women and other men. This is why Nelson (2002) concludes that it is crucial to have these guys in our classrooms, even if they don’t know all the ropes when they begin.

---

For a year or two, Darnell and Scott were in encouraging classrooms. What about now, I wonder. And what of the early years at school for countless children who are expected to succumb to mostly seat work and paper drill (and go home to watch TV and play computer games)? Boys and girls who are allowed to engage positively in an active education process learn more. A courageous kindergarten teacher points out, “My job is not to prepare children for first grade. It is to provide the best possible kindergarten experience for each child.” And the best kindergartens and preschools encourage children to move and learn, in the classroom and out.

To the men teachers who naturally speak the language of boys, or have recalled it, and to the women teachers who always have been, or recently have become, “second-language speakers,” many thanks. You serve as examples to us all.

### To increase your knowledge:

Read the *Newsweek* article “The Trouble with Boys” (see references). Check out William Pollack’s *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, Michael Thompson’s *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, and Bryan Nelson’s *The Importance of Men Teachers and Why There Are So*

*Few* (see references). Also, read Margaret King’s and my collaborative chapter, “Guidance with Boys in Early Childhood Classrooms” (see references). Think about how boy-friendly and girl-friendly classrooms for young children are different and/or alike.

### A step you can take:

Recruit, support, and retain men teachers. Model and practice ideas for building man-friendly and boy-friendly early childhood classrooms. Look into support systems locally and through Web sites such as [www.MenTeach.org](http://www.MenTeach.org) and its links. Support children’s active learning and the teachers who make it happen!

## References

---

- Gilliam, W.S. 2005. *Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center. Online: [www.fcd-us.org/PDFs/NationalPreKExpulsionPaper03.02\\_new.pdf](http://www.fcd-us.org/PDFs/NationalPreKExpulsionPaper03.02_new.pdf).
- King, M., with D. Gartrell. 2004. Guidance with boys in early childhood classrooms. In *The power of guidance: Teaching social-emotional skills in early childhood classrooms*, ed. D. Gartrell, 106–24. Clifton Park, NY: Delmar/Thomson Learning and NAEYC. Online: [www.hcs.ohiou.edu:16080/boys/BOY%20GUIDANCE%20PAPER%20for%20WEB%20PAGE.htm](http://www.hcs.ohiou.edu:16080/boys/BOY%20GUIDANCE%20PAPER%20for%20WEB%20PAGE.htm).
- Nelson, B.G. 2002. *The importance of men teachers and why there are so few*. Minneapolis: Men in Child Care and Elementary Education Project.
- Tyre, P. 2006. The trouble with boys. *Newsweek* (Jan. 30): 44–52. Online: [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10965522/site/newsweek](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10965522/site/newsweek).
- Viadero, D. 2006. Concern over gender gaps shifting to boys. *Education Week* (Mar. 15) 1: 16–17.

---

Copyright © 2006 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at [www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp](http://www.journal.naeyc.org/about/permissions.asp).