

Thrive in 2025: Help Your Son Succeed in School

Today's classrooms are geared toward girls, and it's easy for boys to get discouraged at an early age.

By Jennifer L. W. Fink | August 26, 2014

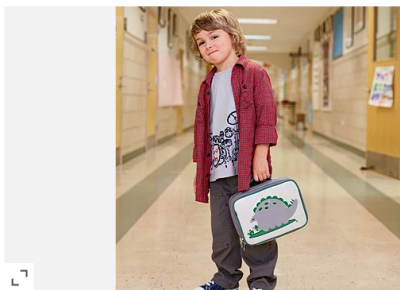


Alex was a typical active, exuberant 5-year-old boy, but his preschool teachers didn't approve of his energetic personality. "They worked hard to calm him down," says his mom, Susan Giurleo. "The teachers didn't appreciate his busyness and thought his academic abilities were below average, even though he knew all the colors, the entire alphabet, and how to count to 100." As a child psychologist, Giurleo was reasonably sure that her son didn't have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), yet Alex continued to have behavior and performance problems at school.

Lots of boys do. Statistically, they're at least four times more likely to be expelled from preschool than girls, and they're twice as likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability or to be held back at some point during their education. Girls rule in today's classroom. On average, they have outperformed boys in standardized reading and writing tests for years and have recently caught up to boys in math and edged ahead in science. Indeed, the gender achievement gap grows over time. Boys lag in almost every subject by middle school and are four times as likely as girls to drop out by high school. Now, more than 58 percent of all U.S. college students are women, who obtain the majority of associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees.



Why are boys being left behind? In part, it's because they start out at a disadvantage. "Three out of every four boys in a typical kindergarten class are more physically active and developmentally immature than the girls are," says Parents advisor Michael Thompson, Ph.D., coauthor of *It's a Boy!* But schools (including many preschools, which have shifted their emphasis to academics rather than teaching social skills) may require students to quietly complete worksheets rather than let them run around and play. This trend has made the classroom a far less friendly place for boys. Understanding the obstacles in your son's academic path is critical for helping him thrive -- now and in the school days ahead.



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Boys are less mature than girls.

Studies have revealed intriguing differences between girls' brains and boys' brains at age 4. In general, a girl's frontal lobe, the area that monitors impulses, is more active than a boy's and matures at an earlier age. Female brains are also coded to secrete higher amounts of serotonin, a brain chemical that fosters self-control. "Generally speaking, girls begin school with a greater ability to maintain focus for extended periods of time and to follow multistep directions," says David Thomas, the director of counseling for men and boys at Daystar Counseling Ministries Inc., in Nashville, Tennessee, and coauthor of *Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys*. "Boys are more likely to drift off in thought or become restless." While boys' ability to concentrate improves by age 8, their sustained focus typically lags behind that of girls until adulthood.



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Boys have more trouble sitting still.

Boys seem to be hardwired for activity in a way that girls aren't. As a result, staying seated is a far more challenging task for a young boy than for a girl of the same age. In fact, half of 5-year-old boys are incapable of being attentive for more than a 20-minute stretch, according to Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D., author of *Boys Adrift*.

Boys also possess noticeably higher levels of dopamine, the chemical that helps direct both body motion and the flow of information within the brain. A study in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* suggests that movement improves boys' working memory, especially among those with ADHD. Male brains typically enter a period of minimal activity (known as a neural rest state) more often than female brains, so fidgeting and wiggling around may actually help boys learn.



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Boys need more time to learn how to read.

Odds are, you were taught how to read in first grade. Today, though, children are typically expected to master that skill by the end of kindergarten. While the literacy standards have changed, the nature of kids hasn't, and the push toward early reading seems to be impeding boys more than girls. Why? The parts of the brain that process words develop more slowly in boys than in girls. A large study at Virginia Tech University, in Blacksburg, found that a typical 5-year-old boy's language area is comparable to that of an average 3?-year-old girl. (By contrast, the brain region tied to math and geometry matures a bit earlier in boys than it does in girls.)

Pushing boys to read before they're biologically ready can do them more harm than good. Girls often become the classroom stars in the early years, whereas many boys struggle to keep up and become frustrated. "The acceleration of the early-elementary curriculum has soured a lot of young boys on school," Dr. Sax says. "By age 6 or 7, many of them have decided that it's a waste of time."

Try this blueprint for boys.

Getting your son off to a good start in school remains the best way to help him secure a bright future. To find

the optimal setting and work with his teachers to create opportunities for success, follow these suggestions.

- **Seek out a boy-friendly preschool.** Ask the director to define the school's philosophy. Since boys tend to learn best by doing, an "academically rigorous" approach is probably not as good a fit for your child as a "play-based" environment. To get a true picture, visit the classroom in action. "You want to see the boys building things and looking happy and productive," Dr. Thompson says. Ideally, the teachers will find fun ways to introduce skills to help children develop the fine motor skills they'll need for handwriting. For instance, Judy Ronzani, director of the Sonshine Patch Preschool in Janesville, Wisconsin, has the boys thread bolts and twist small screws onto a wooden board that has holes drilled in it. "It's a fun, boy-friendly way to develop the muscles that are used in writing," she says.
- **Ask about recess.** Free play gives kids an opportunity to burn off excess energy while fostering important social connections. It also helps boys, in particular, develop self-control and can help boost their memory and language capacities, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, a child-advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. While many districts are reducing or even eliminating recess in the name of academic progress, Dr. Thompson recommends that schools expand it to twice daily to benefit boys' learning.
- **Let your child follow his passion.** Whether it's dinosaurs, trucks, or baseball, odds are your son is fascinated about something. Nurture his hobby by checking out books on the subject as well as visiting museums and libraries, building models, and watching documentaries. Your son will pick up valuable language, math, science, and social-studies knowledge, and he'll become a more self-motivated learner. You could even suggest some ways that the school might be able to incorporate his special interest into the curriculum.
Susan Giurleo, whose son, Alex, was struggling in preschool, ultimately decided to switch him to a different program, where he's doing well. She's impressed by his new school's flexible approach, including the fact that once his teacher found out that Alex loves monster trucks, she brought in books about them to read to the class.
- **Give him downtime.** Though you want to encourage your child's education at home, resist the urge to practice reading or letter-writing right after school. After a long day in the classroom, boys need some time to run around and play. "Let your son climb, throw, bike, or shoot hoops -- whatever he needs to do," Thomas says. Giving him a chance to move will also increase his alertness when it's time to work.
- **Resist early labels.** High-energy, emotional boys are easy magnets for the ADHD label. But doctors and psychologists warn that it's often difficult to accurately diagnose this disorder in children under 6, since their attention span at this age isn't naturally long anyway. If your son's teacher expresses concerns about his behavior or attentiveness, ask her to be specific. Squirming during a long lesson isn't nearly as concerning as if he displays an inability to follow directions, constantly talks out of turn, or displays dangerous, impulsive behavior (such as running into the street after a ball during recess). Your child's doctor can help you separate normal boy behavior from a potential problem and, in the case of ADHD, can recommend a helpful course of action to minimize its effects.
- **Consider waiting an extra year.** "Redshirting," the practice of holding off for an extra year before starting kindergarten, has become an increasingly common way to give kids an academic and social edge. And it might make perfect sense for your son. Talk to his preschool or day-care instructor to gauge whether he's poised for the next step. If he plays nicely with other children; displays an interest in books, letters, and numbers; and can focus on a puzzle or a drawing for at least five minutes, he's probably ready. Should you decide to wait, don't worry about his falling behind his peers. "Education is not a race," Dr. Sax says. "The goal isn't to see who can do something first but to develop a love of learning. If that means allowing a 5-year-old boy another year to lie on his back and look at the clouds, so be it."

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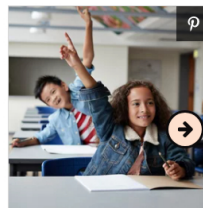
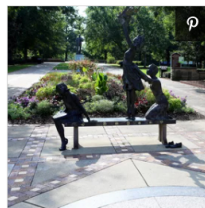
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HOME — Big Kids — Education

Could Summer School Be the Answer to the Pandemic Academic Slide?

Summer school might be just the thing to help students who faced setbacks due to COVID-19—but the benefits go far beyond just education.

By Melissa Mills



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With experts calling for the [safe reopening of schools](#) for in-person instruction, especially as more Americans—and educators—are getting vaccinated against COVID-19, the focus is now shifting to [summer school](#) and how beneficial it could be for kids who've struggled through a year of remote learning.

President Joe Biden's [American Rescue Plan](#) aims to provide schools with the funds and resources needed to reopen quickly and safely, with a focus on summer and enrichment programs to help students who have been especially impacted by COVID-19.

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"It is my top priority to get students back in the classroom for in-person instruction safely and quickly," Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona said in a [release](#). "I continue to hear from students and educators across the country who are eager to get back to in-person learning, and these resources will help schools not only reopen safely, but also to support students who were falling behind even before the pandemic. As states and schools use American Rescue Plan funds to reopen their doors, the Department of Education is committed to helping them build successful programs that will reach students most in need this spring, summer, and into the fall."

The Value of Summer School

The [benefits of summer school](#) are nothing new. From keeping up with schoolwork to having fun with peers, it's important to make sure that kids are engaged when the school year is through—and having summer school happen *in person* is key.

"It is important to remember that 2020 was not a 'lost year' for kids," says [Dennis R. Maple](#), president and CEO of Goddard Systems, Inc. "Young



children are resilient and continued to learn and grow through the pandemic. There are, however, benefits of a structured learning environment and of children being able to engage socially, face-to-face with their peers. In-person learning, over the summer and through the fall, provides children with an opportunity to playfully get back to some fun and familiar routines and confidently explore the world again."

Sandra Graham, director of training for [Kiddie Academy Educational Child Care](#), agrees that in-person education plays an important role in children's educational achievement, health, and well-being: "When students learn from home, they miss out on instruction from their best teachers: Their peers."

Battling the COVID slide

While some students excelled with remote learning, many parents have felt the stress of the out-of-the-norm school year—and many students are [falling behind](#) because of it. According to a survey by the National PTA and Learning Heroes, [62 percent of parents](#) think their children are behind where they'd normally be right now.

Students who were already at risk of typical learning loss over the summer are now facing more setbacks due to COVID-19. And as the [New York Times](#) reports, while upper-middle-class families can lean on museums, camp, and athletic programs over the summer, kids from low-income families are more likely to fall behind even more without the same enrichment opportunities.

- [RELATED: Black, Latino, Low-Income Students Take Biggest Hit in Math And Reading](#)

That's why Secretary Cardona is working on the launch of a [Summer Learning and Enrichment Collaborative](#), with funding specifically going toward summer programs to benefit "students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, students with disabilities, English learners, students experiencing homelessness, and students with inadequate access to technology."

Emotional and social well-being

Besides academics, students receive healthy meals, mental health support, and other services at school that haven't easily been replicated at home during the pandemic—but being present in a classroom also allows for the learning of social and emotional skills.

"Over the last year, there has been an important shift in awareness of the critical opportunity for social-emotional learning in school," says [Helen Hadani](#), Ph.D., fellow at the Brookings Institution and member of the Goddard School's Educational Advisory Board. "In face-to-face settings, we see children learn about problem solving, communicating, and testing out new ideas. It is also highly creative and joyful for children. During the summer, in-person learning often allows more flexibility in classroom activities and different opportunities for lesson plans. This enables children to soak up the wonder, discovery, and exploration built into a curriculum."

And with more children facing [mental health issues during the pandemic](#), summer school could be a good opportunity to help fight off the added stress, increased screen time, and especially the isolation they've have been facing.

"Students build relationships with their peers, which is particularly crucial at younger ages," says Graham. "Children learn from watching each other and from modeling what they see other children doing. That's a huge missing piece in remote learning because learning is a social endeavor."

Regaining a sense of normalcy

Families are clawing their way out of a year like no other, with [vaccine distribution](#) and safety precautions the only things helping parents and kids alike begin to get back to their pre-pandemic lives. Summer school could be one more way to help these families transition.

"Summer is often seen as a bridge period, from one structured-learning period to another," says Maple. "This year, in-person summer learning will offer an important path for parents seeking to help their children regain some normalcy, make up for lost developmental opportunities and, above all, have fun!"

He also points to the extra responsibilities placed on parents and caretakers throughout the pandemic, with virtual learning being one major factor adding to their stress. "We want parents to allow themselves some grace as they deal with the ups and downs of returning to a more normal way of life," says Maple.

- [RELATED: Summer Camps Are Open for 2021—Here Are the Safety Guidelines to Know](#)

Letting kids have fun

"School in the summer doesn't have to be the same as it is during the regular school year; it can provide the sort of play-based and exploratory learning experiences that are offered by camps," says Graham. "This summer, children need to do self-initiated activities that are rewarding for their own sake. This will create happier children now and lead to improved

their own sons. The aim of such happier children now and later to improve physical, cognitive, social, emotional and creative outcomes later in life."

Graham even notes arts and crafts, sports, swimming, riding bikes, and climbing trees as activities that can help your family focus more on fun and emotional health than stressing over school.

"Give your children as much space as possible and allow them to find their own way through the summer, possibly discovering new and exciting skills and interests that aren't measurable on standardized tests," she says.



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HOME — Big Kids — Education

How to Celebrate Women's History Month With Kids

Celebrating Women's History Month at home can foster a sense of respect for all women. Experts share how to recognize the month and answer any questions your kids may have.

By Beth Ann Mayer



CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES.

Every March, we celebrate Women's History Month. For 31 days, we take time to highlight the contributions women have made and continue to make to our society. Schools may incorporate Women's History Month into their curriculums, but experts believe it's important to talk about it at home, too.

"It focuses on the social-emotional development of being a good person, kind and strong. All of those components have led the women throughout history to be historical," says Joy Turner, vice president of education at Kiddie Academy, a franchise system of early learning centers with more than 250 academies in 30 states and the District of Columbia.

Experts agree that it's essential to celebrate Women's History Month with kids of all genders. "It's important for boys and young men to understand that women are just as powerful as men, and we have the ability to do anything, just like they can," says Justine Green, Ed.D, the principal of Tamim Academy in Boca Raton, Florida.

You may be unsure how to speak with your child about Women's History Month. Consider this your guide to get the conversation going and celebrate the month as a family.

- **RELATED:** [A Lesson in the History of International Women's Day to Share With Your Kids](#)

What Is Women's History Month?

Dr. Green suggests explaining Women's History Month in personal terms, such as teaching your child about women in their own family, like a grandmother. "That allows them to make connections with women's history," she says.

Once you've introduced that concept, Dr. Green suggests expanding on it by saying, "Women's history means all the people who came before us." It's about celebrating their contributions to society and commemorating historical milestones.

As children enter elementary school, you may be able to point to a woman in the news, such as Vice President Kamala Harris, or in a book, including *Women Who Changed History (History Makers)* and *Bad Girls Throughout History: 100 Remarkable Women Who Changed the World*.

How Did Women's History Month Start?

Women's History Month is actually a relatively new celebration. It began in the Sonoma, California school district in 1978 as a weeklong celebration of women's contributions to society. Students participated in a "Real Woman" project, where they interviewed women in their community and wrote



essay contest, several schools held presentations, and there was even a parade.

It caught on. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter declared the week of March 8 Women's History Week, and Congress passed a resolution the following year that established a national commemoration.

The National Women's History Project successfully petitioned the U.S. government to turn Women's History Week into a monthlong celebration in 1987.

Why Else Do We Celebrate Women's History Month?

Women didn't always have the right to do what they can do today, such as work, vote, have a bank account, and own a home. It also took nearly two-and-a-half centuries for a woman to become vice president of the United States.

"You can tell your children, 'We celebrate things so we don't forget them,'" suggests Regine Muradian, Psy.D., a California-based clinical psychologist and author. "We celebrate so we honor how hard women fought to get to where they are today."

Dr. Muradian suggests bringing up other holidays, like St. Patrick's Day, where your family may have traditions that have been passed down for generations.

"Then they will associate Women's History Month with importance, so they can keep it going," she says.

- **RELATED:** [Photos of a Baby Girl Dressed Up Like Influential Women From History Are Just Perfect](#)

Is There a Men's History Month?

This question may come across as insensitive, but remember that children may be genuinely curious. Take a step back and answer honestly and authentically.

Dr. Green suggests saying, "For a lot of our history, men ran the world. They were in charge of decisions, owned the land, and had the money. Women did not have these choices. We have a lot of catching up to do when it comes to learning about the women in our past. We know a lot about the men. Women deserve to be celebrated."

How to Celebrate Women's History Month at Home

Celebrating Women's History Month at home reinforces lessons learned in school and also emphasizes the importance of honoring and respecting women, all three experts shared.

Play a game

Dr. Green suggests turning family game night into a celebration of women's history. Together, research facts about famous women, such as poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou and Helen Keller, an educator, advocate for the blind and deaf, and co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Then write them down on scraps of paper and play "Guess Who?"

Read together

"Books start conversations," says Turner. Some of the books Kiddie Academy is recommending for Women's History Month include *Kamala and Maya's Big Idea* (Meena Harris), *Ambitious Girl* (Meena Harris), *I Am Enough* (Grace Byers), *She Persisted* (Chelsea Clinton), and *Ada Twist, Scientist* (Andrea Beaty). Dr. Green recommends *I Am Jazz* by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, a book about the real-life experiences of Jennings, who is a transgender woman and LGBTQ activist.

Write book reports

Dr. Green says older children can pick out a book or poem written by a female author, such as Emily Dickinson, and write a book report. In the report, you can also ask the child to write a bit about the author. "Read the book and look into her story, who she was and what she did," suggests Dr. Green, adding that this helps give children female role models.

Show gratitude

Women's History Month isn't just a celebration of famous women, but it's also a celebration of the women in our lives. Turner suggests having children write thank you notes to women who have helped them. "It teaches recognition of efforts," she says.

- **RELATED:** [7 Inspiring Black Women Throughout History You Should Know About](#)

Remember diversity

It's important to celebrate women of all races and ethnicities and talk about members of the LGBTQ community. "Women's History Month is a time where all women, regardless of their background, should feel validated, commemorated, and appreciated," says Dr. Muradian. "This is how we move forward."

Parents can do this by picking out books with diverse characters. Stories about Rosa Parks' life can also help spark conversations about the intersection of race and gender. Families can also talk about women like Rachel Levine, who is poised to become the first openly transgender person to be confirmed by the Senate.



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