What's the Problem with School?

While there has been great (and valid) concern about the achievements of girls in our educational system, most of the gains in American education over the last thirty years have been achieved by girls. So what's happening to America's boys when they go to school?

The average boy is less mature than the average girl when he starts school. By school age, the average boy is less mature socially, less verbal, and more active than most of the girls. "We ask too much of boys developmentally in the early years and they taste too much failure and frustration in school," says Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

Schools, not boys, have changed. Children are now taught to read in kindergarten when many young boys are not as skilled verbally as girls. "At age five, many boys are not ready to learn to read," says teacher Jane Katch, author of *Under Deadman's Skin*. "When I began teaching in the '70s, children were not expected to read in kindergarten. Some first grade teachers actually preferred that children learn the alphabet in first grade, where they could learn to do it 'the right way'!"

The elementary classroom is four-fifths language based, and girls are, on average, stronger than boys in language."Boys start slower in the areas of reading and writing. This is true not only in the United States, but also in each of the 30 countries involved in a recent international study. I feel that boys in the United States develop an idea early on that they are not good at the kind of literacy schools require. And then a deficit or problem becomes an identity. By the time boys reach middle school, or even the upper elementary grades, they lack the fluency and sometimes practice to be
successful. When they reach high school they develop coping strategies where they fake it," comments Thomas Newkirk, Ph.D. author of *Misreading Masculinity*.

**Boys are more active than many girls and have trouble sitting still for long periods of time.** Experts agree that physical play is essential for boys and girls, particularly young children in the motor stage of development. In fact, moving around helps them learn. But many schools have cut down on recess and outdoor play in order to make time for meeting state academic requirements. "Today, most kindergarten curricula expect boys to sit still much of the day and to do written work that many of them cannot master. Our demand for more and earlier skills, of exactly the type that boys are less able to master than girls, makes them feel like failures at an early age," says Jane Katch. "The most tiring thing you can ask a boy to do is sit down. It's appropriate to expect for kids to sit still for part of the day, but not all of the day," adds Joseph Tobin.

**Many schools don't offer enough hands-on learning opportunities.**"There is evidence boys learn best when learning is hands-on. Boys may be disadvantaged when they don't get to learn through their bodies, by touching and moving. However, with the new academic push and focus on literacy we see that type of learning relegated to 'play areas,' and even these areas have been taken out of some kindergarten and even preschool classes. So with the emphasis on reading, there is an imbalance — an over-focus on reading instead of manipulating actual things," explains Tobin.

**Most elementary school teachers are women.** Therefore, there are few male models for learning as a masculine pursuit."Many boys don't feel that they can grow up to be masculine men by being good at school. Girls often feel that you can be a successful girl and woman by doing well in school,"
adds Thompson.

Many female teachers may unconsciously prefer girls' interests (diaries and first-person narratives) over boys' interests like comic books and science fiction. "I've visited schools and taught teachers for over twenty years," comments Tobin. "I've observed that in many preschool or early grade classrooms, teachers will try to be balanced in their choice of read-aloud books, but it's only natural and inevitable that they fall back on favorites. Since almost all teachers of young children are women, books they are most enthusiastic about are generally more feminine than masculine in taste. It's not that boys aren't interested in a good story, but their non-narrative interests are not always supported and female teachers are often uncomfortable with the narrative themes boys find more interesting, like science fiction, robots, machines, etc."

Understanding and Raising Boys

Why don't young boys do as well as girls in school? Do the requirements of school make it hard for some young boys to get along with teachers and succeed at learning? Is the problem at school — at home — and in the media?

Boys act out in school to assert their masculinity. "Boys tend to resist female authority, in order to feel sufficiently masculine," says Tobin. "A lot of boy behaviors considered resistant or naughty are simply boys' ways of asserting their masculinity. And the resulting punishment feels like an attack on the boys' masculinity, so the battle escalates."

Boys get into more trouble in school than girls. Boys are more likely to end up in the principal's office for disciplinary reasons because they are so active when they are with other boys. Boys can come to resent school for that
reason.

**Physical activity is limited in many schools.** Budget cuts and inadequate facilities have caused some schools to limit gym facilities, or not to offer quality physical activity. And often, recess is taken away from children as punishment.

**Many fathers only show up for athletic events.** They are not closely involved with academic pursuits. Boys whose fathers do attend PTA meetings tend to get better grades than boys whose fathers don't pay attention to academics.

**The media shows few images of academically successful men.** Television, movies and video games focus on men of action, men with guns, and especially men who are good at sports.