Supporting the Social and Emotional Health of Boys

Dr. Anthony Rao is a pediatric psychologist and an expert on the development of boys. His book, *The Way of Boys: Promoting the Social and Emotional Development of Young Boys*, is an insightful primer for parents on how to handle the unique—and at times exasperating—challenges of raising sons. A blend of scientific information and practical advice, the book highlights the many ways that today's society often puts a range of normal boy behaviors in the problem category.

“Boys receive the vast majority of special education services, in part because teachers report their behaviors as problematic. While this has been true for older boys for quite a while, what we are seeing now are IEPs for three- and four-year-olds, most of whom are boys.” – *The Way of Boys*, by Dr. Anthony Rao

It’s Nurture and Nature

For example, how many parents know that girls seem to be wired from birth to look at faces far more often than boys? This neurological difference translates to behavioral differences that can get boys in trouble once they reach preschool, where making eye contact is expected and becomes a litmus test for normal social development.

Along with differences in genetics and socialization, boys must also contend with the demands and biases of today’s fast-paced, highly competitive, digitally overloaded world—forces which often work against boys’ learning styles and natural development.

Time outdoors exploring the natural world is a healthy beginning for both boys and girls—and something that is increasingly hard to find as even preschool programs become academically oriented.
How School Can Support Your Son

Drawing on Dr. Rao’s work, the chart below explains six common areas of difficulty for young boys, and how the right school can help support boys’ social and emotional growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>School Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unreasonable Development Expectations:</td>
<td>• Age-appropriate curriculum mapped to children’s development stages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys are expected to act like young adults before their time, which can undermine their self-esteem and increase anxiety.</td>
<td>• Preschool and kindergarten classes offer ample creative free play and time outdoors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition: Constant comparison to others (often driven by social media and commercial ads), can push boys to try too hard, too often.</td>
<td>• School culture emphasizes collaboration and inclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Specialization: School, sports, and activities get serious too early. Performance expectations are not age-appropriate. Burnout and sports injuries are common.</td>
<td>• Children progress at their own pace and are not measured against externally mandated milestones or results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Anxiety and Stress: The brain gets strained by information and stimulus overload. Things are moving too fast. Boys’ mental bandwidth can’t handle it all, which can lead to worry, fear, and obsession.</td>
<td>• An arts-integrated curriculum engages students and balances the demands of core academics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Virtual Experiences: Pervasive screen time undermines social, emotional, and physical health. More sedentary, indoor time.</td>
<td>• No letter grades or high-stakes standardized tests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accelerated Academic Expectations: More time seated at desks, on task and remaining quiet, along with pressure to meet state benchmarks that begin in preschool.</td>
<td>• Plenty of recess, gym and movement classes, and time outdoors exploring the natural world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Screen-free classrooms and limited media use (or none) encouraged at home. Adamant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading and writing instruction begin gently in first grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Curriculum is animated with drama, music, woodwork, and other activities that foster self-expression and engage multiple learning styles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tips for Parents

• Model healthy screen behavior—your kids are watching and learning from you.
• Don’t multi-task—you end up doing many things badly and tiring yourself out.
• Get your family moving—studies show that we all benefit from active outdoor time.
• Get kids helping—participating in household chores and meaningful work is a healthy way to channel energy and develop self-confidence.
• Advocate that your school support boy learning preferences.
• Don’t let 21st century anxiety compromise your parenting—trust your intuition and use your common sense more.

Additional Resources

“Why Kids Shouldn’t Sit Still in Class,” New York Times
“Screen Addiction Is Taking a Toll on Children,” New York Times

Thank you to the Fessenden School for generously sharing some of their content for this article.
The Trouble with Technology
Experts have for years been warning of the dangers of tech overuse, including the very real phenomenon of tech addiction. It’s a problem even Apple’s board must face, as two of the company’s largest investors have pressed Apple to address how addictive iPhones are to children.

The problem is that a little—which seems so reasonable—can inexorably lead to a lot, which quickly becomes a must-have. And by then it’s hard to dial back the habit. Waldorf schools advocate minimal or no tech use in the early elementary years, with limited and supervised use in middle school.

When to Worry Checklist
Dr. Rao, author of The Way of Boys: Promoting the Social and Emotional Development of Young Boys, has developed this checklist to help you identify when screen time, particularly gaming, is becoming an issue for your son.

- Won’t shut off devices when told
- Gaming becomes his default activity
- Has trouble delaying access to screens
- Ability to tolerate frustration is lower across the board
- Is typically sedentary/low movement
- Sneaks/lies/uses screens (in bed)
- Prefers virtual world to real life
- Exhibits aggression/depression
- Tends to isolate

Additional Resources
“Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?,” The Atlantic
“What One Boy’s Story Tells Us About Video Game Addiction,” Richard Freed, Huffington Post
“Apple investors urge action on iPhone addiction among kids,” NBCNews.com
“Bill Gates is surprisingly strict about his kids’ tech use — and it should be a red flag for the rest of us,” BusinessInsider.com

Wired Child: Reclaiming Childhood in a Digital Age, Richard Freed
Waldorf School of Lexington’s Media White Paper, thewaldorschool.org/media
Core Educational Values

We are the journey
We believe in an unhurried childhood, where education is not a race or an outcome, but a personal process of discovery.

We are independent thinkers
Our rigorous academic program teaches students to consider ideas from multiple angles, weigh conflicting information, and form their own conclusions. These skills are the foundation of complex problem-solving.

We are all musicians, artists and actors
Our students do not audition. Every student joins in class plays, chorus, orchestra, woodworking, movement, painting, and handwork.

We are outdoors
We value fresh air and outdoor play for children of all ages.

We are unplugged
Our classrooms are screen-free and our students thrive. Teachers emphasize story telling, hands-on experimentation, and other forms of sensory-rich learning.

We are civic minded
We shake hands, hold the door, and look people in the eye—human connections that our modern world needs.

We are lifelong learners
We believe that learning can be, and should be, a lively and joyful experience—one that lasts a lifetime.

“We never imagined that a superb education could be so natural and low-stress for our kids. They wake up every morning eager to go to school, and come home every afternoon excited to share what they’ve learned. Our kids have outstanding teachers, are part of a close-knit and caring community, and benefit from a curriculum that is perfectly in tune with each year of their lives. Waldorf is truly the best that education has to offer.”

— WSL parents