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For more information visit [www.aboutourboys.co.uk](http://www.aboutourboys.co.uk).

## **ENGAGING BOYS**

Boys and girls are different – we see that every day. But how much do we understand how boys tick, and how can we get them to be their best?

The majority of boys are energetic, physical and action-oriented. They like to run, jump, jostle and shout. Even the quieter, less physical boys are mentally active and inhabit imaginary worlds full of excitement, fun and adventure.

Boys' and girls' brains and bodies develop in different ways and at different rates. Boys tend to develop fine motor skills later than girls. A girl may find buttons and buckles easy when a boy of the same age still struggles with them. She might enjoy sitting at a table using pencil and paper, while he would be more comfortable lying on the floor with a fat felt tip pen and a larger sheet of paper.

To succeed with boys we need see the world through their eyes. Listen to your boys' conversations to find out what they are into. When playing they may imagine they are knights slaying a dragon or part of an invading army. Use this information to get them interested in the classroom. Capture a boy's imagination and you capture his attention.

Unless you are telling them a good story, boys don't like to listen for long - they prefer to get on with the action. So break work up into small tasks, make instructions concise and give short timescales. Choose your words and tone to make tasks sound exciting: "I'm setting you a challenge. You've got three minutes to do this, starting...now!"

Boys love humour and having fun, and bringing this into the classroom can aid learning. Begin a session with a riddle or a joke – they do not need be particularly good as a groan is as good as a laugh to lighten the atmosphere. Ask the children to bring their own jokes in – this can encourage their reading, writing, listening and memory skills. And make sure there is a joke book in the class library! Some teachers use puppets as 'alter-egos' with funny voices and characters, allowing them to be

'naughty'. Using these props can bring out a side of your character that is not normally seen in the classroom.

Small boys, you have probably noticed, are bundles of energy. It can be difficult and often counter-productive to try to suppress such energy – we need to welcome it and learn to channel it. One way of doing this is to encourage boys to use up this store of energy by moving their bodies. Have in your portfolio a series of small 'energy breaks', for example action songs demanding limited specific moves such as 'Heads and Shoulders, Knees and Toes'. Asking the class to walk around without making a sound is another challenge that focuses energy.

Having welcomed boys' energy into the classroom it is important that boys know what the boundaries are. So 'laughing with' is ok, but laughing at someone else's expense is not; running in the playground is fine, whilst running in the corridor is not. The good news is that boys not only need, but also want firm boundaries; it makes them feel safe. However it does not stop boys pushing up against boundaries and testing them out. Could this be their way of checking whether boundaries are in place? I think so. This seems to be a natural mechanism, so try not to get upset or angry when it happens. By staying calm and reminding them what the boundaries are you will be in control and earn their respect.

Boys often seem more robust than girls, but they are just as sensitive inside, so don't be fierce with boys, just firm when needed. Set them positive expectations and praise them as they move towards these. Step back to notice what boys are doing right, and make a point of telling them. This makes them feel they can win, so it's worth them making the effort. If they aren't doing quite what you want, you can encourage them to by describing what they have done, e.g. "You've written the first line". This can seem a little contrived, but often works extremely well since it leads them to do more of the same – in this case a second line!

As boys are sensitive souls, they are easily embarrassed and can try to hide it by misbehaving. If you see a boy doing something you don't want, catch his eye and smile, then, without drawing others' attention to him, make it clear it's time to stop.

Because boys spend more time in action and less time communicating than girls, their emotional vocabulary is not as wide ranging, so if things go wrong they are more likely to respond physically. Help them build an emotional vocabulary so they have another way of expressing themselves. "You

spend ages making that model and now it's broken. You must be disappointed/frustrated/angry." This gives them words they can access in similar situations.

It really helps teachers when parents are able to use similar strategies at home. After doing an INSET for a school, I am often asked to do an evening session for parents. This is along the same lines as the staff training, telling parents how boys' tick and giving them tips on communicating with their sons at home. One parent reported that the atmosphere in her home had transformed as a result of understanding her son better.

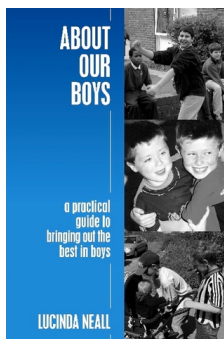
When parents and teachers recognise and enjoy the special qualities boys bring, they can help lay the foundation for a positive experience of school.

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BOOKS BY LUCINDA NEALL



FOR TEACHERS and TEACHING ASSISTANTS:  
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FOR PARENTS AND NON-TEACHERS:  
**About Our Boys: a practical guide to bringing out the best in boys**  
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