

# Boys are more likely to play up at school, but it's more social than biological

January 14 2015, by Amanda Keddie

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Credit: Yan Krukau from Pexels

While [research generally agrees](#) that boys are more likely to be disengaged with school than girls, there is far less agreement as to why.

## Social expectations of being a boy

Many of the [studies](#) on [boys](#) and [school disengagement](#) look at the [social expectations](#) of how [boys](#) ought to be. Expectations that boys will be disruptive, defy school rules and collect more detention slips than girls, engage in rough and tumble play, be homophobic and sexually harass girls are rife in schools, homes and the broader community. These common expectations of being a boy reproduce these behaviours and tend to be informed by the cherished notion that "boys will be boys".

Boys are often expected to be "challenging" and to misbehave. We still regard much of this behaviour with affectionate tolerance – as research conducted nearly 30 years ago by Adams and Walkerdine into teachers' perceptions of boys' misbehaviours suggested:

*The high-spirited child is traditionally regarded with affectionate tolerance. Boys will be boys. A boy who never gets up to mischief, it is suggested, is not a proper boy.*

With the current limited range of gender messages about ideal masculinity, there's little wonder we see heightened levels of school disengagement in boys. Most [research](#) exploring [this area](#) of [gender and schooling](#) (while varying widely in its politics and agenda) would agree that boys exhibit more overtly disengaged behaviour than girls.

However, there's also research that highlights that girls are just as disengaged as boys. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli's study in their book [Being normal is the only way to be](#) found that girls expressed similar negative views to boys in terms of their resistance to school (especially in relation to authority) but that expectations associated with girls and traditional femininity meant they were less obvious about expressing it.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The point is how such disengagement is understood and addressed, particularly given the perpetuated stereotypes of boys and girls that inform how we see and address this issue. If we continue to hold to the view that boys will be boys and continue to affectionately tolerate boys' challenging or violent behaviours and value them for their physical strength, social dominance and risk-taking, then we will continue to see anti-school and anti-authority behaviours.

If we continue to toughen up boys, tell them not to be like girls and administer discipline through authoritarian and punitive measures, we will continue to see these behaviours because being studious, quiet and conforming at school [tend to be seen](#) as feminine traits.

## What are schools prioritising?

Rather than asking questions like "do boys dislike school more than girls?" we should be continuing to explore the broader issue of why so many students, both boys and [girls](#), experience school disengagement.

An abundance of [excellent research highlights](#) how schools and teachers are engaging students in meaningful, relevant and intellectually stimulating ways within environments that are socially supportive and inclusive. In these classrooms, students are too interested in learning to be disengaged. Teachers are focused on teaching rather than managing and controlling.

Creating these environments is an increasingly difficult task for schools and teachers in the current climate where a school's effectiveness has been reduced to its performance on external measures such as NAPLAN test scores.

Such measures and their punitive consequences have forced schools to narrow their curriculum and degrade their teaching to a back-to-basics non-creative approach.

## Social inequity

Creating these environments is also ever more difficult given Australia's increasing social inequality. Teacher quality is currently seen as the [most important factor](#) in lifting educational outcomes. While [teacher quality](#) is important, as much [research](#) has told us for many years, the most significant variable impacting on levels of school engagement and attainment is [students' backgrounds](#) – what they bring with them to [school](#).

No amount of quality teaching will ameliorate the broader structural inequalities of poverty, for example. Wider economic reform such as that recommended by the [Gonski review of school funding](#) is crucial in supporting our teachers and schools to engage all students but especially underprivileged students who tend to be the most disengaged.

If we're going to address these issues we need to challenge the limited gender messages that contribute to the higher levels of [disengagement](#) we see in our boys and we must better support teachers and schools to create engaging learning environments.

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