

## 'Stop feminising our schools - our boys are suffering'

by JILL PARKIN

The swimming bag hit the car floor with a thump and my son hit the car seat with an even bigger thump, grumbling: "What's the point?"

His primary school had just lost a swimming competition, largely because their head teacher had picked a team on the basis of enthusiasm rather than ability.

To paraphrase that old cliché, it wasn't the winning that mattered, it was the taking part.

Well, I'm sorry, but in the real world life is full of winners and losers. And right now, the losers are a generation of boys who have been betrayed by an education system that no longer recognises crucial differences between the sexes.

For the story of my son's swimming competition is also the story behind recent figures showing that boys going to university are now outnumbered by girls in every subject, with 23,000 more places awarded to women than to men.

I'd like to say the figures came as a surprise. But both as a parent (of a boy and two girls) and as a writer on educational matters, I'm sorry to say the figures are only too predictable.

The simple truth is that by the time our boys have done 12 or even 14 years in the feminised environment of today's schools, they all ask: "What's the point?"

If boys are not getting into university, or not applying in the first place, it's because they've been turned off learning. They've been given a message that it's not for them.

And that's a tragedy for all of us. For I don't want my daughters growing up in a society full of alienated young men and I don't want to live in a society which suffocates all the good aspects of masculinity. Yet that's exactly what is happening in our schools.

Forget all that stuff about slugs, snails and puppy dogs' tails.

What boys are made of is this: tremendous data banks that can recall years of FA Cup ties in minute detail; lashings of testosterone that needs constant burning off on a sports field; and a hideous competitive streak almost as vital to them as lifeblood itself.

Harnessed in the right way, these raw ingredients can help boys make the most of their education. But far too many of today's schools try to stifle these instincts in favour of a feminised curriculum that benefits girls in almost every single regard.

The problems start in the classroom. Instead of the make-or-break sprint to the exam deadline, boys have to endure stultifying coursework.

This system of continuous assessment means that anyone who can call up Google on a computer can cut and paste answers from the internet at home. Girls, with their more patient approach to learning, thrive under such a system.

But where's the excitement and challenge for boys? Exams used to be a chance for them to show off and think on their feet. Not any more. No wonder all too many of them fall by the wayside, and are opting out of the chance to go to university.

To put it bluntly, boys now find education boring. It used to be said that the majority of firsts and thirds at Oxford

and Cambridge went to boys, while the girls were more likely to get seconds. Why? Because the boys like taking risks - ending either in glorious triumph or disaster. The girls tend to play it safer.

And today's curriculum is pretty risk-proof. This is at its most obvious in science, where actual experiments with real flames and real blood have been replaced by facts on paper or video demonstrations.

The Royal Society of Chemistry has what it calls serious concerns about the decline in the teaching of practical chemistry. But, in fact, schools have become anodyne in many other ways, too.

Essays are now so safe they can practically be marked by computer. One of my daughters comes home with starter paragraphs and keywords for her English essays already provided.

What if you have a brilliant idea, a passionate argument or a ruthless analysis? Those are not encouraged because they don't fit model essay plans.

Presentation, consistency and diligence may well be virtues, but if we are to have physicists who will think the unthinkable, politicians with radical ideas, inspired playwrights and musicians, we need to have fireworks in the curriculum, too.

It's a teacher truism that little girls want to please and little boys want to win. The trouble is that our whole system is geared to a strange idea of egalitarianism which has somehow been confused with fairness.

It is egalitarian to put anyone who can float in a swimming gala, but it is not fair to those who can swim and want to compete. And it won't get you anywhere.

The same thing goes for school certificates. I've sat through many certificate assemblies in school and they're a farce.

Those who do best, who genuinely achieve great things, get hardly any recognition because someone has decided that in the interests of egalitarianism, most certificates should go to the less able. So there are certificates for kindness and certificates for not using bad language.

And so there should be, but it's equally important to reward sheer excellence, too. Boys like prizes - but only real ones. Once they are convinced the system is rigged, they don't want to play.

Their testosterone and its companion competitive streak need to be acknowledged. If they're ignored, boys get listless and they start retreating into their hoodies and terrorising the rest of us.

Eventually, they spend their time brawling, picking up ASBOs instead of A-levels.

Education experts will point out there's a class issue here as well. As university admission has extended to families whose children have normally gone straight to work from school, it has picked up far more working-class girls than working-class boys and that accounts for some of the statistics.

These are the very boys most likely to be alienated by today's style of curriculum, and, with their macho culture, they are the ones most likely to slide into trouble if they leave school with no skills and little chance of a job.

For example, a disruptive boy in my son's primary class was impossible to deal with until the day his exasperated male teacher challenged him to an arm-wrestling match (yes, it's probably a sackable offence).

The boy lost, took it with good grace and became considerably better behaved. There was a male code at work that he recognised.

The same teacher also knew when playground fights were serious and when they should just be allowed to run their course. The women teachers, wanting a tidy playground, always stopped them.

Such macho attention-grabbing needs to be harnessed, not ignored. Boys need sports, they need exams, competition and recognition.

You only have to look at how boys spend their spare time. They shout themselves hoarse at football matches, they knock hell out of each other in the virtual world of the computer. In short, they compete. Mine does, anyway, even

though he devours books, too.

It ought to go without saying that boys and girls are different. But today's schools are denying this basic biology.

In fact, any society needs both sexes to succeed and to be inspired by their education. Right now, though, the lads are chucking their kit on the floor and asking: "What's the point?"

And, frankly, I don't blame them.

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