

Voices from the Field: Constance Walker



Q1: What do we know about how early childhood programs are failing boys of color?

We're finding more and more evidence that many of our early childhood programs are failing boys, particularly boys of color. Research shows us more than 80 percent of the children expelled from our programs nationwide are boys. Among African-American children, 90 percent are boys. What's even more disturbing, the number of boys identified with discipline and learning problems is increasing. Something is seriously wrong, and it's way past time all of us in the field addressed this issue.

We need to understand why so many boys are struggling, why there are such differences between boys and girls and why the problems are so much more acute among African American and Latino boys. Even more important, we need to know what we can do to make a difference.

Luckily, we're finding answers. We all know boys are extraordinarily active, always moving, running, jumping. That's just who they are. It's easy for us to get frustrated when they race around, don't follow directions or take unsafe risks. Girls aren't like that. They'll sit quietly and listen and not poke the child next to them.

We need to understand how boys learn and behave at their best and adapt our curricula, classrooms and teaching strategies. For one thing, we can't expect boys to sit for long periods at a time and listen. New research shows us their brains don't fully engage unless they're moving. When they're twisting and turning, they're learning. There are many more differences in the ways boys' brains work, and we can use that information to come up with strategies that do make a difference.

Q2: What strategies can teachers use to fully support boys in their learning?

In my work with early childhood programs/classrooms, we've cut boys' discipline problems in half through simple solutions like finding ways for boys to move during sedentary activities, increasing time for indoor and outdoor small and large muscle activities, keeping verbal instructions to less than a minute and using more visual aids and manipulatives. Additional strategies that support boys include having materials for boys in the dramatic play area, recruiting positive male role models to come into the classroom to read to the boys, and developing a superhero corner (fantasy/real) to help boys to understand that "there is a superhero in them and that superheroes help people (not hurt).

We're also taking a good look at ourselves. Because so many of us are women, are we expecting boys to act more like girls? Do our boys need more male role models in our classrooms? Can we interest more men in early childhood careers?

We want all of our young children to thrive. And that means finding new ways to support boys in our early childhood environments. When we do, our experience shows us the girls do better, too.

The work I do with early childhood programs/classrooms are based on the book, *Wired to Move: Facts and Strategies for Nurturing Boys in an Early Childhood Setting* (2013) written by Ruth Hanford Morhard for Starting Point for Child Care and Early Education.