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Boys and Girls Together

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As the students in Mrs. James's third grade classroom gather for Morning Meeting, she notes that once again all the boys are clustered on one side of the meeting circle and all the girls on the other. The same thing happens during choice time, when the girls flock to the writing center and the boys gather around the math games.

Earlier in the week, Shameka was in tears because the boys wouldn't let her play soccer with them at recess. Whenever Mrs. James is on lunchroom duty, she's aware that the girls cluster together at one table and the boys at another table. One day she was delighted to see Joey, who is usually fairly shy, approach Janet at the girls' table. But the situation quickly turned nasty when some of the boys taunted him, "Joey's got a girlfriend, Joey's got a girlfriend," and the girls started giggling.

Such scenes are common in elementary schools: boys or girls left out for being the wrong gender; talents, ideas, and enthusiasm rejected because someone belongs to the wrong gender; boys and girls teasing and taunting each other as they defend their positions on either side of the gender divide.

Although teachers might notice some early signs of gender division in the primary grades, the split becomes most noticeable in about third grade when boys and girls not only separate by gender in school but also stop inviting each other to come over after school and start having all-one-gender birthday parties. Because a preference for same-

gender friends and resistance to gender mixing is a predictable part of child development, it's tempting to dismiss problems between boys and girls with a simple, "Kids will be kids."

But negative inter-gender behaviors are worth paying attention to. In fact, facing them head-on can be a prerequisite to successful teaching in many classrooms, where teachers are confronted daily with taunting, cliques and exclusion, and hurtful notes and drawings by both boys and girls. All of this interferes with attempts to build community, prevents boys and girls from working successfully together, undermines the academic agenda, and creates an unsafe learning environment. As Ruth Charney, thirty-five year veteran teacher and consulting teacher for Northeast Foundation for Children remarks:

Over-sorting by gender works against what we most want in the classroom: for students to be fulfilled and to build a community. If boys are always here, girls always there, it divides the community. It's our job to help children reach their potential, which often means we have to unsort the sorted.

This doesn't mean that boys should never work with other boys on a project or that girls should never meet together in a math study group. It doesn't mean that either girls or boys should abandon their same-gender best friends: no one can deny the value of same-gender friendships.

But it is important for boys and girls to learn to work and play together in a friendly, respectful manner, outside the box of gender or cliques or favorite friend status. And students can learn how to do this in the context of daily classroom life, classroom by classroom, teacher by teacher. Determined teachers have unique opportunities every day, in all the choices they make, to build boys' and girls' knowledge of and respect for each other, creating impressions that will follow students for the rest of their lives.

Unsorting the sorted

Even something as simple as the first words that a teacher speaks on the first day of school might have an influence on how boys and girls relate to one another. "Good morning, boys and girls!" This phrase seems gentle and familiar. But it can reinforce the idea that the class is divided into two groups: boys on one side, girls on the other.

A simple change in wording can have a positive impact. "Good morning, class!" "Good

morning, everyone!” “Good morning, children!” Messages sent by these greetings might include:

- We’re all together in one group.
- No one group is more important than the other.
- Gender is not a category that matters in this classroom.

How teachers organize students also has an impact on gender relationships in the classroom. First grade teacher Maureen Russell rarely groups or lines up the boys and girls separately. “The only time I line up boys and girls separately is for the bathroom,” she notes, “and then only because the boys’ and girls’ bathrooms are so far apart!” Instead, she and many teachers focus on individual identities and interests in forming lines or groups. Saying something like, “Line up, everyone who has a furry pet . . . a scaly pet . . . no pet . . . a feathered pet,” makes gender irrelevant and heightens students’ awareness of the things they have in common.

Fourth grade teacher Tina Valentine notes: “Lining up according to birthdays, favorite foods, or interests helps kids realize you can line up next to lots of different children, not just your best friend. Over time it becomes a habit. When you make it fun, kids realize, ‘Hey, it’s kind of cool, finding other people’s interests.’ We find that instead of having boy-girl groupings, we have interest groupings.”

There are many other changes both inside and outside the classroom that will foster positive relationships between boys and girls. For example, teachers can:

- Assign seating with an eye to integrating boys and girls
- At choice time, give boys and girls opportunities to work on a variety of tasks with a range of partners
- Assign boy-girl partners for classroom jobs
- Facilitate conversations about gender issues that arise in the classroom or on the playground
- Choose books that show boys and girls in positive relationships
- At lunch, have students pair up according to common interests and experiences rather than according to gender
- Provide opportunities for boys and girls to play together safely at recess

Establishing expectation

Efforts to bring boys and girls together in comfortable, productive, respectful ways can, at times, feel difficult. Third-fourth grade teacher Terry Kayne acknowledges that if she doesn't orchestrate mixed-gender groupings, the boys and girls won't sit or work together. But because Kayne does consistently bring boys and girls together, students know they're expected to mix. And, as NEFC consulting teacher Anna Foot notes, "If you expect something from kids, they'll nearly always do it." Foot continues, "You have to let them know what it is that you expect and then give them structures and activities that allow them to meet those expectations." For example, when teaching middle school students, she begins the year with a boy-girl partner activity where students have to interview each other and then report back to the group on what they've learned.

In spite of students' initial resistance, it's worth persevering. Foot says that students actually like it when teachers structure ways for them to work with the other gender, because it gives them something concrete to do together and something specific to talk about. Also, because it's required, it's safe. No one can tease anyone about sitting with a boy or girl, because everyone is doing it. Kayne concurs, "I do sometimes feel like Sisyphus rolling that ball up a hill, but the reality is that friendships begin inside the classroom, at a table doing work."

Change occurs over time, in increments

Barrie Thorne, author of *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*, says that by junior high, students have spent over 7,000 hours with teachers! This is more than enough time to make a difference. Teachers scatter seeds in their classrooms knowing that some may not take root at all, while others may take years to reach the sunlight. Like other patient gardeners, they improve the quality of the soil and work a little every day. They celebrate small achievements. They recover from failure. They water their gardens and wait and hope.

Editor's note: This article is based on interviews done by Tamara Grogan for a book on improving gender relationships in schools.

Boys and Girls As Friends

We asked Marianne Millette-Kelley, librarian at Wellfleet Elementary School on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to recommend a few books that show girls and boys in strong

friendships. Here's her list:

Picture Books

Chicken Sunday by Patricia Polacco. Friends Winnie, Stewart, and Winston earn money for an Easter hat for Gramma and in the process befriend an old man.

Chester's Way by Kevin Henkes. Two best friends, Chester and Wilson, become three best friends when Lilly moves in.

Child of Faerie, Child of Earth by Jane Yolen. The story of a human girl and a fairy boy who are lifelong friends despite their differences.

Chapter Books

The Facts and Fictions of Minna Pratt by Patricia MacLachlan. Minna discovers important truths about herself and her family through her friendship with Lucas Ellerby.

December Secrets by Patricia Reilly Giff. Emily Arrow and Richard Best are best friends who depend on each other.

Amber Brown Is Not a Crayon by Paula Danziger. Amber's best friend Justin announces that his family is moving away. Amber's first response is to fight with Justin but they eventually make up.

Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson. A wonderful friendship grows between country boy Jess and city girl Leslie. Leslie transforms Jess's life before she tragically drowns.

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