

Boys are behind girls: at primary school, secondary school and at university. In the UK, white working-class boys have long been at the bottom of the heap in terms of attainment, but these days boys of all backgrounds are underperforming relative to girls. Last year, girls got two-thirds of the new top grade 9 scores at GCSE, while just 32 per cent of boys applied for university, compared with 44 per cent of girls.

It's not just in Britain either. Across the OECD countries, a study has found that 15-year-old boys are 50 per cent more likely than girls to fail to meet the baseline standards in reading, maths and science.

So the question is why? How do boys and girls differ in their approach to learning? And what are schools doing to help boys learn effectively?

First, though — a caveat. There are, of course, many extremely diligent, hard-working boys, and many girls who aren't. Everyone is different. Nor is it fashionable to talk about gender differences. Well, I'm going to. Sorry. I've got three sons and I'm a governor at two Ofsted-rated 'outstanding' schools, so I can safely say I know something about boys and schools. Starting school at four, sitting still is hard, and especially so for little boys. Girls' fine motor skills tend to be more advanced, so colouring and drawing come more easily to them, while boys usually prefer charging around outside, expending their enormous energy.

Homework can be a battle, right from primary school. I remember my eldest son's written work was supposed to take 20 minutes. That time could vanish getting paper and a pencil, breaking it, sharpening it, going to the toilet and getting comfy on his chair. After 20 minutes there were maybe three words on the page, a frustrated mother and a fed-up child.

At secondary school, studies show that boys spend less time on homework than girls, and more time gaming online. Girls read more, whereas boys

tend to prefer non-fiction or even stop reading for pleasure. Then there is peer pressure: boys simply deciding they are ‘too cool for school’.

Since there is no innate difference in ability between the sexes, motivation plays a key role. Dame Alice Hudson, executive head of the Twyford C of E Academies Trust in west London, says that, ‘girls have a broader range of motives for working hard, including pleasing the teacher, or doing it for the sake of it’. Boys, however, require ‘a clear sense of purpose and a reason why it’s worth bothering’. She talks of boys being ‘economical with their efforts’. Some have said to her ‘don’t let me get away with it’, admitting they will coast unless pushed. Boys want to know what the ‘value’ is. ‘Don’t deflate the thinking that goes behind this,’ she says, because actually they are smart. They may not, for example, be too fussed about their GCSE French if they’ve no intention of doing it at A-level.

Indeed, the gender gap closes at A-level, largely because boys are studying only the subjects they want to. Boys, in fact, narrowly beat girls at A-level last year, for the first time since 2000.

Motivating boys is, therefore, critical. At Twyford, teachers are told to include five ‘C’s in every lesson: context, criteria, clock, correct and check. Boys need to be actively engaged and challenged to think and apply knowledge. Every lesson should be set in context — where it fits within their learning — and the criteria for success needs to be clear. Pace is important, and a sense of time, just as it is on the sports pitch. Dame Alice recommends regular low-stakes tests: boys will do the work because they know they’ll be tested, and there’s the satisfaction of getting it right. They’re also naturally competitive.

Quality teaching and learning that work well for boys also raise the results of girls, so narrowing the attainment gap is challenging. But the change back to linear exams with the new GCSEs and A-levels introduced last

year should, theoretically, help. Girls' performance has improved since modular courses became the norm in 2002, but boys tend to do better in traditional exams.

The new exams are tougher and include more content than previously, so cramming certainly won't be enough. Boys like deadlines, says Dame Alice, but they mustn't be allowed to leave too much to the last minute. There is a 'terrible risk that they won't have done enough'. Hence why small regular tests are vital.

'Boys thrive on praise and rapid response,' she says. She also talks of 'an innate insecurity in boys that they mustn't show'. This is often missed, she feels: they don't like being exposed, or embarrassed, which explains why they make excuses, or don't do the work.

As I 'encourage' my 16-year-old son to revise for his GCSEs, I know there are parents fretting all over the country. My friends with sons invariably worry they're not doing enough work; those with daughters often worry their girls are pushing themselves too hard. The next few months will be tough for many of us.

Ultimately, of course, it won't be the end of the world if they don't get the grades. There are far worse things that can happen. But just as our society concerns itself, rightly, with the gender pay gap, we should also focus on the gender results gap in education, and do all we can to help boys fulfil their potential.

If we don't, sooner or later our sons will be left behind by the girls. And not just in education. Women are now a third more likely to go to university. Just because it has long been 'a man's world' doesn't mean it always will be.