

Let's Hear it for the Boys

There is a recent study in which two people wearing backpacks stood at the bottom of a hill and were asked to estimate the hill's incline. People standing next to their best friend during the experiment tended to offer the least steep estimation. They perceived the climb up the hill as less difficult than those who stood alone or next to someone who was just described as an acquaintance. Does this mean that all students should be allowed to sit next to their best friends in class? The study actually has broader implications than that.

Frequently, boys are not just kept apart from their best friends in the classroom, but our society may actually discourage them from connecting with a best friend at all. At the recent *Celebration of Teaching and Learning Conference*, psychologist Niobe Way spoke about why boys are struggling in school. (The conference and the talk were written about by Liana Heitin in the current edition of *Education Week*.)

The frequent stereotype about boys is that they are not expressive and do not have or need close friendships. Dr. Way, a professor of applied psychology at New York University, says the boys need and want deep connections with other boys. As boys get older, they need the connections even more, but are often pressured to separate and become more independent. She says the result of having closer relationships is better physical and mental health, lower rates of drug abuse, and higher academic achievement. Dr. Way says that schools need to foster close relationships among boys through counseling, advisory groups, and by rewarding daily acts of kindness.

Teaching boys to show empathy for others is an important part of any program like this. In our middle school, beside our weekly advisory meetings, we also have our boys (and girls) visit the Daughters of Sarah nursing home to spend time and engage in activities with residents, meet weekly with their kindergarten buddies, and visit and read with public school students. They also spend time with their friends, so that hill in front of them does not look so steep after all.