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opening extract from

The Cleverness of Boys

written by

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Introduction

The Cleverness of Boys was first conceived some time after the publication of our book *Boys and Girls Come out to Play* (Featherstone), and was inspired by the discussions we had with the many parents, practitioners and teachers who attended conferences on the issues of gender in the early years. It soon became evident that in order to inform the debate about young boys, we needed to write a book that just focused on boys.

Many boys, particularly those from age three to seven who are attending full-time out-of-home care in the UK, are seen to be failing to thrive. They are sometimes falling into the spiral of low self-esteem, low levels of achievement and unacceptable behaviour that blights their time in school and could affect their whole lives. Boys feel frustrated, angry and unappreciated. Adults swing between feelings of irritation, fury and pity, as they try to understand the minds and behaviours of the boys in their care. We felt that there was a need to draw together the latest information about brain development and behaviour, and to suggest ways in which we might all begin to understand the issues faced by boys in our twenty-first century homes, settings and schools.

This book is unashamedly about boys. It encourages the reader to recognise how talented and capable boys really are, and attempts to show a way forward for us all in recognising their cleverness and talents.

In reading and discussing with colleagues the content of this book, we realise that there are many different views on the difference between boys and girls and how we, as adults, can help boys in particular to succeed when their early years in education are dominated by women. Of these many views, three seem to predominate.

Are boys and girls the same?

One view says, ‘There is no difference between boys and girls, so we should treat them exactly the same and have the same expectations of everyone’. This view supports the position of equality, of treating everyone the same (which of course we would all support), where both girls and boys are encouraged to play with dolls, build with construction kits, play football, dress up, climb trees and so on, If we do this, the theory is that children will grow up with the same characteristics and behaviour, emerging as strong, caring, energetic, talkative people. Our opinion is that the ‘equality at all costs’ view, while a worthy aim, has not worked. Being politically correct has disadvantaged everyone because equal does not mean that everyone is the same. The principle which replaced ‘to each according to their need’ with ‘everyone should have the same’, has let everyone down.

The vast majority of parents and education professionals will say this view can no longer be supported. They spend their days working and playing with both boys and girls, and they know that boys and girls are different; that even when you take away race, colour and religion, boys and girls behave differently, are interested in different things and are switched on to learning in different ways. Watch children in a park,

garden, classroom or nursery and the differences are apparent. Early years practitioners asked if there is any difference will say *yes* and so will parents who particularly comment on the differences between siblings when the first and subsequent children are of different sexes.

So we think it is time to recognise that each individual boy and girl has different needs, behaviours and strengths. Recognising these and working to meet them will help us to ensure that every child is treated as the unique being they are, and that with real equality of *opportunity* to access individualised support, they can achieve their potential.

Are sex and gender the same thing?

A second view is that *sex* and *gender* are the same thing, making all boys the same and all girls the same. This view says that boys are masculine, girls are feminine and we should keep it that way by having specific and different expectations of boys and girls. They may say, 'Boys will be boys, all action, violence and fidget. All girls are quiet, sensitive and willing to sit still'. In this camp may sit the people who talk about 'man flu' and 'multitasking'. They may have read the book *Men are from Mars Women are from Venus* (Thorsons), and spend their personal and professional lives making simplistic judgements, justified by their extreme point of view, even if this may not fit the individual they are looking at.

But what about the boy who is caring and sensitive, the girl who loves football, the boy who learns to talk and read at an early age, or the girl who has difficulty sitting still? How can we explain this if we think that

sex and gender are the same thing? There are feminine boys and masculine girls, as demonstrated by artistic and creative TV presenters such as Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen and extreme risk takers like Ellen MacArthur who has twice sailed around the world alone.

One could describe the difference by saying: ‘Sex is in your underwear and gender’s in your brain’, clearly differentiating between the physical differences connected with our sexuality and the behavioural ones which are located in our brains.

There is now certainly enough evidence from brain research to convince us as writers that there really are differences between male and female brains, and that the differences are even greater than the differences between the sexes. Of course, the gender spectrum combined with the range within each of the sexes means that there are probably more differences *across* the feminine spectrum and the masculine spectrum than there are between males and females.

The influence of nature, nurture and culture

And then there’s the third debate, which is the ongoing discussion about the influence of ‘nature’, ‘nurture’ and ‘culture’ on human behaviour and development. Opinion has swung between such extremes as, ‘It’s all in the genes’ (the nature view) or ‘It’s all in the parenting’ (the nurture view) or ‘It’s society’s fault’ (the culture view).

Over recent decades people have developed theories where nature (the genes), nurture (the parenting) or culture (the society we are brought up

in and our life chances) were considered to have the greatest influence on what children are and become. Boys are late readers solely because their fathers were late readers, girls are caring because they have watched their mothers with their younger siblings, aggression in young boys is something we can put down to a violent culture or too much TV.

Such theories, backed up by the knowledge and opinion of the age have left a trail across the centuries of competing views of the proportional influence of nature, nurture and culture. These range from the concept that babies are ‘blank slates for us to write on’ to the idea that we are entirely influenced by the family or society we happen to experience.

How can a single influence produce such different results? If it is all in the nurture, how can identical twins, reared in different families far apart from each other, and not even aware of their twin’s existence, grow up to like the same food, have the same mannerisms, even choose the same clothes? If it is all in the nature, how can two bothers be so different when they have the same parents and genetic code, live in the same house and go to the same school? If it is all due to culture, why is it that most boys, regardless of the culture of their youth, grow up to be reasonable members of society?

New evidence

New evidence continues to shape our views, influenced by science, anthropology and psychological studies. Steven Pinker now proposes the following balance in humans of:

- nature (around 50%)

- nurture (not more than 10%)
- chance, including culture (around 50%).

This extreme and unusual view of the nature/nurture/culture balance (which also adds up to more than 100%!) confounds all previous views, It gives massive weight to genetic make-up, which is constantly shaped and reformed by the chances of individual lives, such as health, pre-natal influences, exposure to hormones, viruses, accidents and events over which we have little or no control. The reduction in the influence of family and nurture comes as a bit of a shock, particularly to those of use who spend our lives working to support parents in the upbringing of their children, However, when given thoughtful consideration, it begins to help us understand why we end up like we do – creatures of chance, each fashioned on a genetic framework, but constantly buffeted by events that change the direction of our development.

What we, as authors and lifetime 'boy watchers' believe, is that the *third way*, a way that recognises every boy (and every girl) as a unique mixture of nature, nurture and chance is the nearest we have found to what we see and what parents, practitioners and children themselves tell us. Boys are creatures of nature, nurture and chance, with different strengths and needs, influenced in different ways, their personalities shaped by chance, so they are different, not just from girls, but even from brothers in the same family, born of the same parents.

The purpose of this book

We also know, as parents, practitioners and teachers tell us time and time again about these differences, that boys *do* have different needs,

and that mothers and female practitioners often find boys a mixture of mystery, puzzle, frustration and wonder. These people ask us for help, guidance, and particularly for information about the unique differences of boys, and that is the purpose of this book. We have tried to find out all we can about the unique natures of boys, and we present this for your consideration.

We have constructed chapters about the current culture and why children, and boys in particular, are under pressure. We have attempted to unscramble the latest research on male and female brains, how they are similar and how they seem to be different, and how gender balance can complicate boys' lives and their life chances. And finally, we look at stories of individual boys, each one unique, each of them clever in different ways.

We have chosen to call the unique abilities, skills, interests and behaviours of boys 'clevernesses', a reference to a very clever and self-assured boy – Peter Pan. We explore the clevernesses through the stories of eight boys, each one giving us a unique challenge, both professionally and personally. The stories have been collected over time, and describe real boys in real schools and settings, with real adults and real families.

At the end of each story we have tried to describe the characteristics of each boy, why they behave as they do, think as they do and relate to others as they do. We show how their parents, practitioners and friends supported them to become the best boys they could be, not by pressing

them into some pre-ordained mould, but by responding to their uniqueness in ways that suit their complex personalities. Each chapter has some guidance on ways to support boys who are like them, ways that suit boys' brains and bodies, that take into account their gender, genes and their specialisms, not just their sex.

We have spent much time on reading and research, observation and discussion of the needs and natures of boys. We have tried to read both wisely and widely, in books, research reports, magazines and learned articles. We have been influenced by:

- findings from the Human Genome Project (the latest on the nature of our genetic make-up);
- findings and reports of brain scientists and researchers (to understand the latest information about the structure of the brain);
- the work of developmental and behavioural psychologists from a range of viewpoints (to explore behaviour and child development);
- books on the development of children's bodies and brains (to be sure that we balance the work of great thinkers of the past with current literature on learning, thinking and growing).

We have also read and re-read the extensive writings of those who have studied boys and their needs over many years, adapting their guidance and views in the light of the latest research.

We hope that what we have produced is thoughtfully presented and thought- provoking for the reader. We have decided not to complicate the text with footnotes and reference numbers. Instead, we have given

readers an extensive book and resources list at the end of the book, leaving the boys and their stories to stand for themselves.

Sally Featherstone and Ros Bayley

Paul the risk taker

Paul's story

There wasn't much that could reduce little Paul Clamp to tears, but what happened that day nearly had me wailing as well, not so much in sympathy but in sheer, abject frustration! Had I not been crystal clear about *which* trees could be climbed and which were most definitely off limits? Had I not been extra vigilant in my supervision of this lively bunch of children? Either way, as I entreated the distraught, howling Paul to keep still I decided that now was not at all the time to consider such profound questions!

'I'm gunna fall,' he screamed as I did my best to keep him calm. I was tempted to tell him that fall was the very last thing he could do, but giving vent to my own emotions would probably only inflame an already difficult situation. There was no doubt about it his knee was not going to budge. It was wedged in the fork of a sturdy branch as sure as if it had been concreted there! I was just grateful that my colleagues were so supportive. My teaching assistant Pam had gone for help while some very nice teachers from another school minded my class as well as their own.

A trip to the Botanical Gardens and City Farm with my reception class had seemed such a good idea at the time but now I began to wonder whether it had been folly to assume that Paul could have survived it without some sort of minor catastrophe blighting the day.

He continued to sob inconsolably as the other children looked on with disbelief.

‘Will he have to stay there all night?’ asked Kev.

‘Will the fire brigade come?’ asked Daniel enthusiastically.

‘Will they have to cut off ‘is leg?’ enquired another, not at all helpfully as this only caused the usually heroic Paul to wail all the louder. It didn’t usually matter how hard he fell or what he bumped into, tears were not something Paul usually concerned himself with. However, today was decidedly different and as he saw Pam approaching followed by two large men with a ladder, the sobbing turned into terrified screaming.

One of the men was young and agile and when Paul saw him climb effortlessly into the tree the sobbing gave way to interested admiration. Paul was fond of telling us that he was the ‘besttest climber out of everybody,’ but this was climbing as he’d never quite seen it before. He gazed in astonishment as the young man leapt on to the branch that was trapping the leg and then swung ape-like to the end of the branch. As he did this, the older of the two men climbed up the ladder with a brick in his hand and as the young man’s weight forced the branch down, he wedged the brick underneath Paul’s leg.

‘That should do the trick!’ he said, hopefully, then slowly and carefully he began to pull the now smiling Paul from the tree. He tried to bring Paul down the ladder, but the now miraculously recovered child was having nothing of it. ‘I can do it myself, ’ he shouted emphatically, and the next minute had scrambled down from the tree to the cheers of the other children. Looking relatively unscathed, he was obviously enjoying the attention! As for me, although my nerves were in tatters I didn’t have the heart to remonstrate with him. That could wait until tomorrow!

The next day I went to work resolved to have a firm word with Paul about the wisdom of thinking things through before launching into action, but it was just ‘one of those mornings’ and by the time lunch time arrived there hadn’t been a moment to spare. It would just have to wait until the afternoon. Over the lunchtime, various staff began to share their experiences of time spent with the adventurous Paul. Apparently, on a recent trip to the park with his mum and dad he had hurled himself into the paddling pool to retrieve his football. His parents, who had been busy collecting pine cones with his little sister, had been horrified when they looked up and saw a pile of clothes on the grass and Paul in the middle of the pool completely naked!

He just seemed one of those little boys who saw no fear in anything. When he and his friends had built the tower as high as they could reach he was always the one who would find some way of accessing sundry pieces of furniture that could be precariously balanced on while further pieces were added. He was the first to volunteer to hold the snake when the animal man came, and no-one could accuse him of not making the most of our recently developed outdoor area.

He loved nothing more than to ride in, or push others in wheeled toys at high speed, and he showed a considerable talent for risk assessment. It was rare for him or any of his playmates to be hurt. His favourite pursuit was climbing. He was the fastest to the top of the climbing frame and enjoyed nothing more, when we got the use of the school hall, than shinning to the top of the ropes. So why, I ask myself, should I have been surprised when a somewhat flustered lunchtime supervisor arrived to announce that Paul was on the roof?

This simply couldn't be true! Not after yesterday, surely not! But as I arrived in the outside area I could see that it definitely was true! There, on top of the flat roof stood a triumphant Paul holding the muddy ball he had just fished out of the guttering.

'Don't move,' I shouted with authority. 'Stay exactly where you are and we'll get the site manager to come and get you down.'

'But I can get down by myself,' protested Paul, who, after throwing the ball to one of his mates proceeded to slide down the drainpipe. It was too late to stop him, and fortunately, the roof was not high so I was able to grab him by the backside and at least offer some protection against him falling, which actually would have been very unlikely as he rarely exceeded what he knew to be his own limitations. Nevertheless, I now felt an even greater urgency to talk with him about the incident the previous day! So, the said conversation took place that very afternoon and concluded with Paul promising to 'fink carefully' before climbing again.

The next few weeks passed relatively uneventfully and anyway, with an impending Ofsted inspection I was somewhat preoccupied! It wasn't until the middle of the inspection that Paul distinguished himself again. His first faux pas involved a somewhat elderly lay inspector. While she was interrogating the displays by the creative area he asked her whether she was going to die soon! When she told him that she very much hoped not, he affirmed that he was sure that she would. She kindly asked him to explain. 'Well,' he announced, 'my Nan's hair went white like yours and then she died!' Before the bemused inspector could respond he was off to the 'finding out' area to see if he could find something to

disassemble. After climbing, disassembling things was probably his favourite activity.

Paul shrieked with delight when he saw the riches of the finding out area. One of the cleaners had donated an old-fashioned cylinder vacuum cleaner that no longer worked. ‘Wow,’ shrieked Paul, grabbing a screwdriver, ‘look at this!’ For the next half an hour he was deeply engrossed in taking the thing to pieces. He stopped periodically to ask someone a question, or show off a component he had removed from the cleaner, and his concentration would probably have remained unbroken had it not been for the lead inspector who approached the table and stood over him watching what he was doing. Now, I don’t think this man was much accustomed to talking to very young children, because if he had been, he probably wouldn’t have said what he did! He spoke very kindly, if a little patronisingly, as he pointed to the vacuum cleaner and enquired of Paul, ‘Is that a space rocket?’

Paul looked amazed that anyone could think this. ‘No mate,’ he announced, obviously unaware of the importance of our visitor, ‘this here is a vacuum cleaner!’ He then proceeded to laugh uncontrollably as the inspector retreated from the room.

It has to be said that life with Paul around was never dull. Paul was always going to be one of those boys you would never forget, and some years later I was to bump into Paul once again, in what at first seemed the most surprising way, although, if I think about it, it actually made perfect sense.

At the time, I had recently moved to live in an old Victorian house in need of a considerable amount of work. In fact, there was such a lot to do that I'm afraid the slipped tiles on the roof had been somewhat ignored. It was not until there was a series of bad storms that getting them fixed became an imperative. As I didn't know any roofers it seemed sensible just to pick up the Yellow Pages and follow my intuition. An appointment was made and a middle aged gentleman turned up to assess the work and give me an estimate.

Not long after this as the weather took a turn for the better, my anxiety about the slipped tiles subsided and I almost forgot about the work on the roof. It was not until I heard a prolonged ring of the doorbell that I twigged it was the day for the roof repairs to begin. I hastened to the door and as I opened it, was completely unprepared for the sight that met my eyes. There on the front doorstep, with a wide smile on his face, stood a grown-up Paul Clamp!

Obviously he still enjoyed climbing and had turned his first love into a full-time career. At first he didn't recognise me, but even though a good few years had elapsed, I'd have known that face anywhere. Mind you, this time it was my intention to simply let him get on with the job. I certainly wasn't going to stand underneath waiting to catch him this time! All I can say is, the extensive climbing practice in his early years had obviously paid off. He never slipped once and did an excellent job of mending my roof!

How Paul's brain affects his behaviour

What is going on in Paul's brain as he takes risks in behaviour, language and relationships? How do we learn to see these characteristics and behaviours as 'clevernesses', rather than feeling irritation and seeing the possible dangers to Paul and others? How does Paul's behaviour in the reception class demonstrate the tension between nature, nurture, culture and chance? Recognising his real strengths and helping him to manage his risk-taking nature needs understanding and flexibility from his parents, the practitioners and teachers who work with him, and Paul himself.

As we discuss Paul and the other boys in this book, looking at the reasons for their behaviour and learning styles, we need to acknowledge new research into the differences between the brains and bodies of boys and girls. Less than 50 years ago, most people believed that gender differences were entirely the result of nurture (the upbringing of individuals and their families) and culture (the expectations of society at the time). These two influences were thought to be the major influences, with little acceptance that nature (what we are born with, our genetic code) or chance had much influence at all.

We now know without doubt, particularly from evidence provided by CAT and MRI scans, that nature not only makes a significant contribution to our gender balance, but that it may well be the most influential of all – more than the way we are brought up or what society expects of us. From the instant of conception, the genetic blueprint of each unique child predisposes some behaviours and will reduce or eliminate others. As we have discussed in the introductory chapters of this book, gender is a point on a spectrum, which is first established at conception, reinforced

in the womb by repeated floods of human chemicals, then, and only then, affected by the outside world of family and society, with its life chances.

In previous decades boys like Paul, and the other characters in this book, spent most of their young childhood out-of-doors. They would have been out of the sight of adults, learning in an active, hands-on way with their friends. They used their wits and competed against their own bodies and those of their group or gang. I was the middle child of five siblings, and climbing trees, jumping ditches, lighting fires and making camps with my three brothers were daily occupations for us all, with the two girls trailing behind and trying to keep up. Winter and summer, we went outside after breakfast (and sometimes before) and were still outside as it got dark and our mother called us in saying, ‘I thought I said come in when it was dark!’. We lived an outdoor life, with the risks and excitements that entailed.

Paul’s brain is an outdoor brain, the brain of a hunter, quick-witted, highly focused and competitive, naturally tuned to taking risks and trying things out. It’s not just the opportunities he has, or the models from television and local culture. His genetic make-up and the physical growth and architecture of his brain cannot be denied. However, his life is very different from generations before him, perhaps more different than we might think, and his behaviour is constrained in so many ways. He is not able to spend as much of his time out-of-doors, despite the understanding of the adults who work with him. He is much more supervised, our safety-conscious society allows less risk, and there are fewer opportunities to test his strength and skills. The trees, rocks and

streams where his parents and grandparents played have been replaced by carefully designed climbing apparatus in purpose built playgrounds where risk has been so reduced that Paul's instincts are often denied.

Key elements of the brain

Let's look more closely at some of the key elements of Paul's brain and how they are developing into a unique structure, formed by nature (the biology and genetics), by nurture (how the child is brought up by his family and other carers) and chance (the assumptions and responses of society from the moment of his birth, and the accidents and opportunities he will encounter on the way). Each of these elements has an effect on the child, but in the last decade, we have established without doubt that nature plays such an important part that the nature/nurture debate is now clearly favouring nature.

What has already happened before birth is so important that we can no longer say that gender is a 'plastic' element, easily moulded by nurture to create adult gender disposition. We know for sure that from the first day of life, every baby has a clearly established gender disposition that will play a strong part in what they will become. Foetal testosterone, flooding the womb in pregnancy triggers the development of each boy and places them on their unique place on the gender spectrum, which stretches from the most masculine position to the most feminine. This is the first building block of gender for each child and the starting point for their life as a boy or a girl.

The structure of human bodies and brains has not changed much since we were living in caves. Males are still built to hunt and females to nurture, and risk-taking is part of the nature of a hunter. Recent research has identified more than 100 differences between the brains of males and those of females, and among these is that boys' naturally have more dopamine in their blood streams, and dopamine is a chemical that increases risk-taking. Add to this the natural tendency of boys to be 'doing' which results from a more muscular body and a higher number of red blood cells, and the urge to climb high, run fast, keep up with the chase is understandable. No amount of debate or discussion will change Paul's instincts.

Paul's position on the gender spectrum is towards the extreme male end, with strong features of human maleness – strength, tenacity, single-mindedness, and a tendency to take risks and enjoy a sense of danger. If we could use a PET or MRI scan to see how his brain affects his body and behaviour, we would probably see the following features, which may well result in tensions between Paul's strengths (his 'clevernesses') and the demands that early education are making on him:

- Because Paul's body produces more dopamine than girls and many other boys, Paul is an impulsive risk-taker, rarely thinking about what he does before he does it, and usually getting away without damaging himself or others. This makes him take the opportunities that life offers, and can be seen as a real advantage or a real problem, depending on who you are!

- If we ask his mother, she will say Paul was a big, heavy baby, his genetic make-up, his bone structure and his muscle bulk made him so. Different boys, at different places on the gender spectrum, will have had different birth weights, differently affected by foetal testosterone. Paul's position in the continuum is towards the heavier, more muscular end, and he will be among the tallest and strongest boys in his group, striving always to be the most competitive runner and racer, the best 'mover and shaper' in large construction, and the model of risk-taking for his peers. His natural energy and physical strength make it difficult for him to conform to many of the expectations of the current education system, which often brings him into conflict with adults.

- Because he is at the extreme of the 'hunter' continuum of boys, Paul is also more active and restless than many other boys. Testosterone will probably have resulted in more red blood cells, which, with his muscular body give him both strength and stamina, perfect for a hunter. They also make him more fidgety when he is asked to sit still. His parents and practitioners observe that he is constantly on the move, and even when he is concentrating on quiet activities, his body is still on the move. Muscle bulk and strength of this sort will also make Paul more competitive. Testosterone binds a pack of boys, it also makes them compete for leadership. Without the hunt, Paul and boys like him will often engage in physical rough and tumble which is intended

to exercise essential muscles and establish a ‘pecking order’ in the pack.

- The amygdala is an almond-shaped organ deep in the brain that controls our impulses. In all boys, the amygdala is bigger, but in many boys it develops its controlling role later than in girls. This means that Paul is less able than most girls and some other boys to control his impulse to act or to speak, particularly when he is under pressure. In Paul’s story, climbing forbidden trees and speaking his mind are examples of his impulsivity. Impulsivity may also get him into trouble for ‘smart remarks’ and thoughtless comments.

- Sitting still and listening are not Paul’s strengths, and in the nursery he often has to stop doing activities he enjoys in order to follow the nursery programme. The teachers we experience are chance factors in our lives, and this teacher is patient, giving Paul as much time as she can when these transitions are necessary. Pressure to do too many things at once, or to stop quickly when he is involved in an activity will lead to the production of cortisol and adrenalin (stress hormones) resulting in frustration and anger – and behaviour management issues for everyone.

- Like most boys, Paul’s listening and memory are slow to develop. His hippocampus (which helps his memory) will develop more slowly than the same brain area in a girl, or even in some boys. His temporal lobes, with their role in memory and listening, are finding it difficult to both hear and

remember the instructions and warnings of his parents and the practitioners in the nursery. He finds it hard to interpret voices when people are speaking to him. He absorbs less information from the unspoken messages given by facial expression, body language and voice tone, and he picks up less of what is going on, particularly if the information is in words.

- The corpus callosum (the superhighway linking the two halves of the brain) is smaller in boys, and carries fewer connections between left and right hemispheres. This feature is both a strength and a weakness. It is a weakness because Paul finds it much harder than other children to do more than one thing at a time, often referred to as ‘multitasking’. As we now know, most females are much better at this, and some women feel multitasking is a greater advantage than single focus. However, a strength for Paul is that single focus is something he is very good at. His parents and the practitioners at the nursery will comment on how difficult it is to distract him from something he is really involved in, such as dismantling the vacuum cleaner.

Left to his own devices in a free, self-chosen day, Paul would probably excel. He would take the chances each day offered to explore, invent, and test his skills of climbing, jumping, bike riding and other physical skills. He would make dens, swings and carts, and in the 1960s and 1970s there would have been a Paul on every street, in every park and garden. He would have been the envy of all the local boys, although

adults may have felt much the same about his behaviour as his teacher does now. He may have been described as ‘wild’ or ‘a bad influence’.

Other influences

At home, nurture and culture reinforce Paul’s ‘clevernesses’. His Mum and Dad both work, but they arrange bike rides, visits to adventure parks and walks in all weathers during the weekends and holidays. His uncle plays football for the local team and gave Paul a football for his second birthday, teaching him how to use it in endless games at the local park.

Of course, our culture recognises and rewards physical skill and risk-taking. Radio, TV and other media are full of the exploits of boys and men like Paul. He watches sport and other risk-taking activities regularly on TV, reinforcing the image of the risk-taker as someone to admire and emulate. Sporting stars are constantly in the news for their exploits, and the current media interest in ‘taking things to the limit’ whether in driving, sport or in reconstructing schoolboy scientific experiments, reinforces this risk-taking mentality. Paul, his dad and his uncle will often watch these programmes together, laughing, shoving each other, falling about, and making other low-level physical contact as they delight in these public exhibitions of testosterone at work.

Before he went on to a nursery class in an early years unit, Paul also benefited from pre-school provision with an understanding childminder, who has a big garden and plenty of patience. The chance of nurture in this setting reinforced Paul’s natural skills. Paul returns to her in the

school breaks and holidays and she is very good at harnessing his energy in physical activities and plenty of outdoor play.

However, for most of the time Paul is at school. Like all children in the UK he started school before his fifth birthday, and like others, he now has to spend large parts of his day doing things he hasn't chosen, often in an indoor environment. Whenever he is free to go out, he does, and most of the activities and objects that interest him are outside.

Being indoors is frustrating and difficult for him, his physical bulk means he is often seen as restless and clumsy, and the activities on offer indoors, with their emphasis on reading, writing and fine-motor skills present a combination of challenge and irrelevance to him. His teacher's addition of a 'finding out and dismantling table' is an inspiration and he spends time there voluntarily, sometimes referring to the books she has displayed nearby, sometimes taking photos of the stages of dismantling. His involvement in most other indoor or sedentary activities is reluctant and grudging. He fidgets and moves around constantly as he completes them.

How to recognise and value the strengths of boys like Paul

So what are Paul's 'clevernesses' and how can we learn from his experience how to recognise and value these 'clevernesses' in the boys like Paul in our own settings and families? If we are going to help these boys, should we try to change the boys or change the way we provide for them? Michael Gurian in *The Minds of Boys* (Jossey Bass 2005) says that the problem is not an organisational one, not an issue of

teaching style, but a moral one. Are we morally justified in ’corralling boys into an educational culture, which risks damaging their self-image and motivation for the long term’ – and if so, what should conscientious practitioners do to maintain their professional obligations while meeting the needs of every child?

Paul is clever at risk-taking, single-focus active learning and physical skills. How can we build a curriculum for him that involves, interests and motivates him, and through these, provides him with the skills he needs to manage his learning in the future? The skills of communication, reading, writing and calculating are all essential to a full life, whether that is as a roofer or a researcher, but so are the qualities of courage, problem-solving and concentration.

One of the challenges to everyone who works with boys like Paul is to balance their enthusiasm and joy in activity and risk while ensuring that their sense of self-worth and pride in their growing skills is maintained. The current pressures in schools to reach targets in reading and writing can be a problem both for Paul and the adults who live and work with him.

When Paul started at nursery, the practitioners discussed his needs, and worked with his parents to support his interest in and lively approach to life. His father was (and still is) proud of Paul’s physical skills and adventurous nature, and was concerned that he should not be discouraged from the activities they both loved. He did admit that Paul’s adventures, and the scrapes he got into as a result, were becoming legendary in the neighbourhood and recognised that a successful adult life needed a balance of risk and security.

Here are some of the strategies that seemed to help Paul during his time in the early years:

- Boys like Paul need to learn how to manage their own impulsivity and risky behaviour. They need to pause, think, concentrate and remember about safe behaviour and control of their impulses. This will inevitably take time to learn, and for many boys, control of impulsive behaviour may not be achieved until they are in their twenties, or even beyond. In the meantime, these strategies did help Paul in his early years and may help boys like him, and his teachers recommend them to you:

    - Reward appropriate risk-taking and physical activity by talking about it, giving verbal and physical praise (a hug, pat on the back and so on). Risk-taking is often openly or secretly admired by other children, while attracting disapproval from adults, so catch them doing things you can approve of, by spending time outside, observing them in free choice play and offering them ‘safe risk’.

    - Give boys plenty of activities that involve shifting, building, lifting, carrying, dismantling and constructing, particularly outside. Provide tyres, big bricks, planks, ladders, wheelbarrows, trucks, and heavy things to lift, move and rearrange. Photograph their experiments and constructions, talk about them in group sessions, and display the photos where parents and other children can see and appreciate them. Praise effort and new ways of doing things, and build them into everyday experiences and

tasks – don't just say, 'I need a strong boy to help move this table!'

- Think about Paul and boys like him when you are planning small group tasks and problem-solving activities. Spend some of your group time outside where they will be more relaxed, and use the materials and equipment they enjoy. Given a bit of thought and an open mind, mathematical, scientific and language challenges as well as more formal teaching can often be adapted to incorporate large motor skills and outdoor apparatus.

- Our example child has now grown up to be a successful adult, involved in a risk- taking, physical job which suits his skills. Make sure you offer examples of active adult occupations, not just the more sedentary professions. Try to get a scaffolder, firefighter or other person who does an active job to come and talk about their work, explaining and describing both the risks and the dangers!

- Paul finds listening, concentration and remembering harder than some other children, and particularly most girls, so:

    - Speak clearly, and remember that he may have difficulty reading the tone of your voice. Repeat instructions and teach him to 'self-talk', repeating the instruction or reminder three times to himself in a whisper, or in his head to reinforce the message. Make

sentences short, and use fewer words than you think you might need!

- Encourage him to look at you while you give explanations and instructions. Boys often find eye-contact difficult and need to be reminded to look at the person who is speaking, and rewarded when they do. Boys who spend a lot of time watching TV and computer screens may find it even harder, so persevere with understanding, as these boys may find maintaining eye-contact with you very stressful.

<main bullet here> Paul is very good at focusing on one thing at a time, and gets more involved in activities than many other children:

- Give him plenty of time for activities he is interested in. Many boys like Paul can concentrate for up to an hour (or even more) on an activity that captures their interest. Try to make child-initiated activity time as long as possible, and offer this early in the day, so energetic boys have time to follow their interests before you ask them to sit and listen.

- It is now evident that engagement in large motor activity just before a spell of fine motor activity is particularly helpful for boys like Paul, so if you are going to embark on a concentrated activity that he has found difficult in the past, make sure he has had some physical activity just before you start – try vigorous

action songs, a simple brain break activity or physical activities as a group.

- Give time and early warning of the end of activity periods, so these boys have ‘transition time’ – time to bring their activities to a comfortable end. This will reduce stress and frustration.

With the help of his parents and the understanding of his teachers, Paul is now successful in maximising his continuing desire for risk in a valued and valuable job in his community. The chance meeting with a friend of his uncle opened the way to training in roofing techniques. His own boy, now three years old, may be in your group!