

UK Independent, Tuesday, 29 December 2009

Boys aged three 'must work more'

Government demands action to close the nursery school gender gap

By Sarah Cassidy, Social Affairs Correspondent

Boys aged three and four must be made to write more to stop them falling behind girls before they even reach school, the Government will order nurseries and childminders.

New boy-friendly guidance is to be sent to all nurseries and childminders advising them to get the youngest boys to take more interest in writing, scribbling and drawing – basically just putting pencil to paper.

After a year of school, more than one in six boys cannot write his own name or simple words such as "mum", "dad" or "cat" – double the number of girls – official figures show.

Early-years experts condemned the move, arguing that having more targets to get children writing by the age of five would be "developmentally inappropriate" and potentially damaging, particularly for boys. But Dawn Primarolo, the Children's minister, said in an interview with *The Independent* that after 12 years of Labour government, the gender gap remained a "stubborn" and "worrying" problem.

"It is about readiness to learn. It is part of the development process. There is a gap, and it is a worrying gap," Ms Primarolo said. "What we can see is that boys, particularly on emotional development, lag behind girls. That emotional development is very important in language development through play before they start school and reading and writing.

"Although that gap between boys and girls is closing, in writing it is still quite wide."

The guidance, which will be sent to nurseries from January, will include advice to set up role-play activities tailored to boys' interests, such as builders taking phone messages and writing up orders, post office employees writing on forms, and waiters taking orders from customers.

Boys will also be encouraged to write using unusual materials such as chocolate powder and coloured sand to make marks on the floor and walls outside.

Ms Primarolo said the new guidance aims to get all nurseries and childminders to learn from those who have successfully narrowed the gender gap.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families said: "Some boys don't enjoy writing or see it as relevant – but teachers and practitioners can make it fun and relevant. The guidance will offer practical examples about how to do this.

"Because boys don't seem to be as interested as girls in drawing and mark-making, it is important that practitioners ensure that this doesn't then result in limited access to resources such as paper, crayons, paint etc, and insufficient opportunities or encouragement for boys to write."

Official figures released earlier this year showed that boys were lagging further behind girls by the age of five since the introduction of Labour's "nappy curriculum".

Boys are also less likely to know the alphabet, or how to count to 10, sing simple nursery rhymes

from memory, dress themselves and work well with classmates at the end of the reception year, before they start Year One.

The figures were the first results from the Early Years Foundation Stage – a compulsory programme introduced in September last year for all schools, nurseries and childminders.

Overall, just over half of children reached government targets for all areas of early development, including personal and social skills, literacy, problem-solving and numeracy, physical development, and creativity.

Some 52 per cent of five-year-olds were competent in all areas – a three-percentage-point rise from last year. However, boys were significantly less likely than girls to start the first full year of school properly prepared. The gender gap widened in three key areas: writing, problem-solving and elements of personal development.

The Government said that at least 23,000 more children had reached a good level of development this summer compared with 2008.

Child-development specialists have opposed the writing targets for five-year-olds since they were first proposed, arguing that many children, particularly boys, do not develop the fine motor skills needed for writing until they are six or seven.

Sue Palmer, a former headteacher and author of the book *21st Century Boys*, described the decision as "state-sponsored child abuse", arguing that boys were developmentally behind at birth and needed time to "run, jump and play, in order to acquire the physical control and capacity to focus that they will need later on".

She said: "The Government's belief that they can accelerate human development is just nonsense. This is massive control freakery which will be disastrous for the children. These very young children have become hostages to political fortunes because ministers believe that their political futures depend on getting a certain number of children to reach these targets by the age of five. That is just wrong."

Dr Richard House, a senior lecturer at Roehampton University and a founder of the Open Eye campaign against the early-years curriculum, warned that many of the targets for five-year-olds were inappropriate for the age group. He added: "Many of the much-criticised 'teaching to test', assessment-driven characteristics of the primary school are now invading our nursery settings."