Many people believe that there are no innate differences between most boy infants and most girl infants. However, the Zero the Three organization, the country’s preeminent infant advocate and educator of new parents, tells us that boys have a “slower developmental timetable”--that boys mature more slowly during the first years and thus have a longer window of vulnerability to attachment injury. New parents will find this information helpful in relating to their infant sons, and home visitors will appreciate this in the context of assisting caregivers to understand the needs of male children.

Infant boys, on average, are more delayed in their sensory and cognitive development, and also, they are less socially-attuned than girls, less likely to smile, and less capable with regard to fine motor and language skills. Boys are also less developed in other sensory areas: less responsive in auditory and eye contact, for example.\(^1\)

In terms of the all-important relation between an infant and his caregivers, what does it mean that boys are more likely to have a slower developmental timetable? Infant boys have been described as more demanding social partners. They are less able to self-regulate and thus more in need of emotional and regulatory support from caregivers. They often require more help in the containment of their affective states, more assistance in organizing their feelings. For all of this, most or many infant boys require more of their mother’s attention.

How does it matter that boys, on average, have slower developmental timetables? If boys have consistently responsive and understanding caregiving, they will benefit greatly, as will infant girls. In such a favorable situation, a boy’s generally less developed regulatory system early in life will not become a factor in his development. However, in the situation where there is a

---

1 https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1380-are-there-any-differences-in-the-development-of-boys-and-girls-brains
disturbance in the relationship between infant and caregiver, and a child’s normal needs for
closeness and attenuation of fears of separation in threatening situations are not met, boys are at
a greater disadvantage. As a result of the more intense and longer period of demand for
connection that an infant boy may feel as a result of his maturational delay, a caregiver—perhaps
unable to respond because of post-partum depression—may create a situation where a boy is more
vulnerable for a longer period of time in early childhood to neglect and abuse.² He is less likely
to calm himself and may suffer the long-term consequences of dysregulation from stress starting
very early in life.

(By the way, this slower development of males is not unique to boys in infancy, but has been
observed with boys and young men into the twenties, although it manifests in different ways, of
course. For example, the UN tells us that “Adolescent girls tend to reach biologically defined
developmental milestones up to two years ahead of adolescent boys.”³)

This difference between boy and girl infants has been attributed to boys’ slower maturing
neurological systems, a finding which has been widely researched and substantiated.⁴ The
emotion generating centers of the brain seem to be less connected to executive control in boys,
and so boys may be up to 20 months behind girls in frontal lobe development where control
resides for decision-making, insight, judgment, and emotional inhibition. This leaves many boys
less socioemotionally developed, less able to regulate stress under unfavorable support.

What are some problems that might develop as a consequence of boys’ slower developmental
timetable? Among the issues that seem more likely to develop for boys are attachment injury,
especially a greater likelihood of disorganized attachment observed when other risk factors are
also present.⁵ Perhaps this contributes to the greater likelihood observed with boys of impulsive
and antisocial behavior, school failure, and boy-predominant psychopathologies like ADHD.⁶

² Weinberg, M. K., Olson, K. L., Beeghly, M., & Tronick, E. Z. (2006). Making up is hard to do,
especially for mothers with high levels of depressive symptoms and their infant sons. Journal of

³ World Health Organization. (2014). Health for the world’s adolescents: A second chance in the
second decade.
⁴ Schore, A. S. (2017). All our sons: The developmental neurobiology and neuroendocrinology
⁵ Beebe, B. & Lachmann, F. M. (2014). The origins of attachment: Infant research and adult
neurodevelopmental perspective. M. M. Martel (Ed.). Developmental Pathways to Disruptive,
Impulse-Control, and Conduct Disorders (pp. 53-90).
Websites/links where boys’ uniqueness in development is highlighted:

- Santa Fe Boys Educational Foundation: https://www.santafeboys.net
- The Gurian Institute: https://gurianinstitute.com

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- How might a home visitor explore with parents the developmental differences between boys and girls? What are some cultural considerations that might come into play?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about the information shared in this article regarding empirical findings about the uniqueness of boys’ development?
- What have been your observations about developmental differences between girls and boys?
- How would involving more males as staff in home visiting programs promote a better understanding of infant boy developmental differences?