

Education Gender Issues: Do Boys and Girls Really Learn Differently?

Scientific instruments, brain scans, prenatal studies, MRIs and just about every other tool in the science labs around the world have come to a fairly inescapable conclusion: Boys and girls learn differently because their brains develop differently and are wired differently. It is far beyond the scope of this article to document the above assertion. Let it be enough to say that this male, liberal, feminist-supporting teacher of 25-plus years was at first dismayed to see the evidence. It gets harder to change my thinking as I get older, but this is one area I can't argue with. I was dismayed only because the evidence flew in the face of all my attempts to view children as equals, regardless of gender.

Gender Behavior Is Evident

As a result of the research, teachers will find answers to many of their questions about why Johnny or Jane "get it" or don't "get it" in the classroom. A brief disclaimer is in order: This article will say that boys and girls use different learning intelligences to gather information. *At no time is any normally functioning brain unable to become stronger in any of the other intelligences it is not currently using to best effect.* It will take effort and stimulation for the brain that has a strong spatial bias to develop its more logical-mathematical abilities, but it can be done. Who is the better musical learner? Well, happily for the world, both boys and girls show strong evidence that they can learn through music-based activities!

Learning Intelligences Vary

Boys are generally more capable in the logical-mathematical category, BUT-and this is a significant BUT-girls have been gaining ground in these areas over the last twenty or so years. This could be a clear example of how society's desire to encourage girls in math has forced schools to demand more of girls in math class, thus stimulating that intelligence in them. As girls have no doubt begun to wonder, they have been questioning this male dominance and have begun to enter math and science fields in greater numbers in recent years. **Boys are predominantly spatial learners.** They need more space to spread out their books and pencils. Unfortunately for them, the teacher also knows from experience that they are often more kinesthetic learners, which means they are moving around in that space more than the girls are. Boys get in trouble for wiggling in their seats! **Girls shine as linguistic learners because they are much more likely to be better listeners to speech.** Teacher lectures convey a great deal of information and girls get more out of that approach. **Boys deduce conclusions from general statements.** (If such and such is true, then I should be able to...) **Girls tend to gather evidence or facts before they draw a conclusion.** (I saw her do this and that so she will probably do...) **Girls more often can give a concrete example of why they have come to the conclusion they did.** (My two towers of blocks have ten blocks altogether because I counted them.) **Boys, similarly, can more easily handle mathematical symbols and general ideas in math** than can girls. Watching an argument being developed on a blackboard won't convince a girl as well as more concrete activities such as counting and putting groups of things together will. Any teacher who has assigned a group writing assignment knows that girls talk about the subject more and use many more words than boys in the writing-talking process. That same teacher also has probably noticed that boys may be less focused on the task, talk less to the topic or talk less altogether as a group, actually individually preferring to write alone if given the chance. Cooperative learning experiences that involve more active tasks than just writing, show **girls attending to the task more readily and socializing more productively.** **Boys want to get to the project and get moving and doing,** even if it causes disputes over who is going to be the boss. **Girls handle the boring parts of a school day better than boys.** They can entertain themselves inwardly while boys tend to act out and distract the class. Sad, but true. Some teachers (this one especially) have figured out that it is helpful to give a boy a soft and silent toy to fiddle with when he gets restless and then get on with the class. An interesting finding of all the research points to a phenomenon called "hiding out." Any child can begin to sense his strengths, consciously or unconsciously. Conversely, he senses his weaknesses. No one flaunts his bad points, so a child who is a kinesthetic learner (movement) will want to be sure that is the strength he shows to others. For example, he may challenge other children to foot races every day at recess. That same child may have a wonderful capacity to be a musical learner, but perhaps through non-exposure to music or an embarrassing moment during a music activity, he has developed a reluctance to show that part of himself. The snowball effect kicks in and the musical talent "hides out" from peers. This is tragic because that intelligence may be ready to flourish if nurtured but the child is dedicated to keeping everyone in the dark about it. Those dedicated to teaching at home and in school must see every child as a potentially multi-intelligent child and provide as much stimulation in all the areas

as possible.