

How Boys Learn



Many boys need opportunities to move around and like competitive situations.

by Patti Ghezzi

On the playground, it seems so obvious. Girls huddle and chat, often using vocabulary that makes their parents shake their heads and ask “Where did my 4th grader pick up the word ‘ebullient’?”

And boys...well, they’re less likely to use words like “ebullient” and to have in-depth conversations with their pals on the playground. They’re too busy proving they can climb the fastest, jump the farthest, and holler the loudest.

“Girls and boys,” says one parent who has a couple of each, “they’re just so different.”

Researchers have long been fascinated by gender differences and how they play out in social situations, in the classroom, and in adulthood. Teachers and parents often struggle with the challenge of having such different kids assigned the same term paper or math test.

But do boys really learn differently than girls? Some experts say they don’t. “There is no difference in the nature and quality of how they learn,” says Judith Preissle, an education professor at the University of Georgia who has

studied gender and education. “We’re not different species.”

But that doesn’t mean boys and girls are the same.

There is evidence that boys differ from girls in some key ways: They mature at a slightly slower pace, and they are better at spatial visualization. That’s not to say many girls aren’t good at reading maps or constructing elaborate three-dimensional projects. But on average, boys have the edge in these areas.

Another key difference is that boys need to move around more. Girls are often able to sit still longer and to stay more focused during a traditional lesson, a possible explanation for why girls are enjoying more academic success than boys. Boys are more likely to fidget in class and need frequent stretch breaks. Boys don’t just enjoy recess, they crave it. “If you want to help your boys, give them lots of opportunity to run around,” Preissle says.

Penmanship is also an area of contrast. “Boys just struggle with pencils,” Preissle says. Their fine motor skills will eventually catch up, but until that happens it can be difficult for boys to write neatly. Messy handwriting is often mistaken for laziness or carelessness.

Generally speaking, boys crave competition and the possibility of winning whereas girls are better at cooperation. Preissle recommends exposing both girls and boys to opportunities to compete and cooperate. That way, kids get to do what they enjoy and also have a chance to improve in areas that don’t come naturally.

Many experts, including Preissle, warn against putting too much stock in gender differences for fear parents and teachers will inadvertently reinforce stereotypes.

“Kids rise to our expectations,” says Lise Eliot, an associate professor of neuroscience at the Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science in Chicago. Eliot is working on a book about gender differences, and she urges parents and teachers to be sensitive to individual differences without letting the expectation that boys will struggle in a traditional classroom become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Experts disagree over whether differences between boys and girls are biological or taught. Eliot notes that while little boys gravitate to balls and little girls reach for dolls, as girls get older they grow comfortable with trucks

and action figures. Boys, however, don't usually outgrow their aversion to girl-themed toys, leading Eliot to suspect nurture over nature.

In her years of research, the only biological difference she has seen between boys' and girls' brains is their average size. Boys tend to have bigger brains, but they also tend to have bigger kidneys and other organs, she notes. They're just bigger kids. "I don't get too excited about bigger brains," Eliot says, adding that girls' brains grow faster.

For parents, the possible reasons for gender differences aren't as important as how they respond to those differences. Eliot recommends exposing all children, regardless of gender, to toys and activities that encourage literacy and math. "Expect boys to read," she says.

Many parents and educators are concerned about boys sliding down the educational achievement ladder while girls leapfrog over them. As girls make gains in society, does it have to be at the cost of boys' academic achievement? Eliot suggests paying attention to boys' need to release energy on a playground, at the ball field, or in the backyard. She also advises exposing boys to musical instruments, fine arts, foreign languages, and other interests more often associated with girls.

Perhaps easiest of all, parents can help boys by exposing them to girls. "Boys who hang around with girls are better able to read emotions," explains Eliot, adding that girls can learn from boys how to stand up for themselves and embrace competition. "The two genders have much to learn from each other." That gives both boys and girls reason to be ebullient.

For more on the differences in how children learn best, read ["How Girls Learn"](#)

Journalist Patti Ghezzi covered education and schools for 10 years for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, winning several awards, including a public service citation from the Associated Press for her exposure of grade inflation. Her freelance work has appeared in the Chicago Tribune, the Miami Herald, and Adoptive Families magazine. Ghezzi lives in Avondale Estates, Ga., with her family, which includes husband, Jason; 4-year-old daughter, Celia; and geriatric mutt, Albany.