

How Girls Learn



Girls like to collaborate and often create strong relationships.

by Patti Ghezzi

Diane Lore learned to appreciate how different boys and girls can be after her third child—her first daughter—came along.

“Emmie could color at 2 [years old], literally for an hour. At 4, she’s Miss Perfect Student,” the Atlanta mom says. “She sits in her seat, loves to color, and writes her name. It is so vastly different from the boys, it’s stunning. And, of course, the teachers adore her.”

Parents with both boys and girls are often struck by how girls seem to be a more natural fit for the classroom. On average, they make pleasing their teachers a higher priority than boys do. They like to collaborate with other students on projects. They are proud of their neat penmanship. And while they might long for recess, they are able to sit still and march their way through a math worksheet.

Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to rebel against the structured classroom environment. They generally need to jump around and release energy in a way that girls do not.

The trends are compelling, but parents shouldn't be too surprised if their daughters don't fit the pattern, says Nancy Knapp, an associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Georgia who has observed gender differences in the classroom. "You can't predict any one kid based on gender," she says, noting that up to one-third of kids break the pattern.

Still, understanding how boys and girls often differ can help parents and teachers make sure their daughters don't fall victim to gender stereotypes. "We need to make sure we have room and space for both genders in schools," Knapp says.

Girls usually start talking earlier and use more complex sentences than boys do. As they get older, girls continue to outpace boys in speech fluency, reading, and writing. Their SAT scores on the verbal portion tend to be higher.

But such impressive vocabularies can have a cost. Compared to their verbal skills, girls' perceived weakness in spatial visualization—where boys tend to be strong—can put them at a disadvantage for math and science.

As girls hit middle school, their self-esteem often declines. Feeling that they aren't as good at math and science as boys, they may stop trying, focusing instead on more girl-oriented skills like reading, writing, foreign languages, and the arts. "Even girls who once thought of themselves as good at math and science may start doubting themselves," Knapp says.

Parents can help their daughters find the academic path that's right for them by exposing them to math and science as much as possible and encouraging them if their daughters show signs of self-doubt.

Girls get used to being praised for their compliance, but they also need praise for being independent thinkers. "Boys are more often praised for originality of thought," Knapp says. "Girls need to be allowed to have original thoughts and opinions."

Relationships become even more important for girls in middle schools. They tend to need their teachers to like them, and friendships are paramount. They often become interested in the opposite sex earlier than boys. Instead of cringing at a girl's tendency toward melodrama and worrying about its interference with schoolwork, parents and teachers should recognize that it's a normal part of development.

Even though girls are usually able to sit still longer than boys, they also

benefit from exercise during the school day, says Lise Eliot, an associate professor of neuroscience at the Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science in Chicago. “Moving around is good for all kids,” she says.

Some girls will need more of a nudge toward physical activity. Parents can make it easier by exposing their daughters to a range of opportunities beyond competitive sports, which will not interest all kids.

Like Knapp, Eliot worries that parents and teachers will inadvertently go overboard when addressing gender differences, pushing kids into the areas where they are comfortable instead of challenging them to take on subjects and skills associated with the other gender.

Girls do just as well as boys on arithmetic and computation in elementary school, Eliot says, but when their coursework shifts into advanced math, they often falter. She recommends exposing girls early on to spatial skills that will help with geometry and calculus. Puzzles and building blocks make good toys for preschool-age girls as well as boys.

Young kids don’t need a lot of toys, Eliot notes. Instead, parents should focus on having the right mix of toys to give their daughters the early-learning skills they’ll need to sidestep gender stereotypes. As they get older, girls can learn about fractions, ratios, and percentages through everyday life, such as slicing a pizza into eighths or calculating how much gas will be required for a family vacation.

Overall, the news is good for girls, who are excelling in the classroom at a pace that often has educators wondering where they went wrong with boys. The key is to make sure that in the effort to help boys achieve, girls continue to get the attention and encouragement they need.

For more on the differences in how children learn best, read [“How Boys 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