

## Tips for Parents: The Gender Gap in Schools – Fact or Fiction?

*For decades we've been hearing about the "Gender Gap" in our schools. This gap referred to research done in the 1970s, 1980s and particularly the early 1990s that indicated that girls were performing significantly lower than boys in math and science, received less attention from teachers, and that more men than women were going to college. Today, a growing tide of researchers and educators are loudly claiming that not only was this research flawed, but the exact opposite is true. Boys are the ones falling behind.*

### Are Boys Falling Behind?

Many experts today say yes, they are. To support their claims, they offer this evidence, and much more:

- In *The Myth That Schools Shortchange Girls: Social Science in the Service of Deception*, J. Kleinfeld reports that girls receive higher grades and higher class rank than boys from elementary school all the way through college.
- According to C. H. Sommers of *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*, there are more girls than boys in honor societies, student government, school newspapers, and debate clubs. Girls read more, study more abroad, and outperform boys on tests of artistic and musical ability. Only in sports do males outnumber females.
- By the 1990s, more girls than boys were taking high school biology and chemistry.
- 40% of boys are now being raised without their biological dads. When boys aren't around their dads, they are more likely to take school less seriously, achieve less, and dropout of high school.
- 30 years ago, men made up 58% of undergrads. Today, that number has sunk to 44%.
- Sommers also notes that, "more boys than girls are suspended from school. More are held back and more drop out. Boys are three times as likely as girls to be enrolled in special education programs and four times as likely to be diagnosed with ADHD."
- Numerous researchers point out that girls significantly outperform males in reading, writing and other language arts.

### What is the Other Side of the Issue?

Previously, the big concern over the educational gender gap came in 1992 when the American Association of University Women issued their report titled "How Schools Shortchange Girls." The report cited research that showed that girls were receiving less attention from teachers, racism put African American girls at a further disadvantage, sexual harassment of girls by boys was increasing, girls were losing self-confidence, textbooks marginalized or ignored the accomplishments of women, girls were less likely to take advanced math courses and the gender gap in science was likely increasing, among numerous other findings.

In May of 2008, the AAUW published another report called "Where the Girls Are: Gender Equity in Education." This report notes three main points:

1. "Girls' successes don't come at boys' expense." The AAUW argues against those that state not only have girls made huge progress, the boys are now the ones in crises. They acknowledge that girls have moved towards equity in education, and state areas where girls score higher on tests are the places that boys are also scoring well. Their position is that today, it is socioeconomic status more than any other factor that affects educational achievement.

2. "On average, girls' and boys' educational performance has improved. From standardized tests in elementary and secondary school to college entrance examinations, average test scores have risen or remained stable for both girls and boys in recent decades. Similarly, both women and men are more likely to graduate from high school and college today than ever before."
3. "Understanding disparities by race/ethnicity and family income level is critical to understanding girls' and boys' achievement... Gender differences in educational achievement vary by race/ethnicity and family income level. For example, girls often have outperformed boys within each racial/ethnic group on the NAEP reading test. When broken down by race/ethnicity, however, this gender gap is found to be most consistent among white students, less so among African American students, and least among Hispanic students. Similarly, boys overall have outperformed girls on both the math and verbal portions of the SAT. Disaggregated by family income level, however, the male advantage on the verbal portion of the SAT is consistently seen only among students from low-income families. Gender differences seen in one group are not always replicated within another group... **The results put to rest fears of a "boys' crisis" in education, demonstrating that girls' gains have not come at boys' expense. Overall, educational outcomes for both girls and boys have generally improved or stayed the same.**"

## He Says, She Says

The loudest voices crying that boys are in crisis are men educators and psychologists. The most prominent defenders denying that crisis are women experts. Certainly, there are women experts supporting the Boys in Crisis position and men supporting the opposite, but still, the overwhelming feeling by both parties is that sexism is still alive and well in our school—whether it favors boys or girls.

## Science on the Difference between Boys' and Girls' Brains

Could the performance of boys and girls in school, particularly in relation to reading, writing, math and science have less to do with sexism and more to do with biology? Numerous recent studies have found biological evidence for the differences in the ways boys and girls process and perform in these areas:

1. Males' brains are up to 10% bigger than girls' brains.
2. Female brains have more connections (synapses) than male brains.
3. Girls tend to use both sides of their brains more to perform a task than boys.
4. Differences begin in the womb because of hormones.
5. Boy and girl brains develop at a different pace
6. Girls have more language processing neurons and develop fine motor skills earlier than boys.
7. Boys have greater spatial awareness than girls.
8. Many girls have an easier time talking about their emotions and feelings than boys.
9. Epinephrine, cortisol and oxytocin levels are different in boys' and girls' brains and this likely makes risk taking more difficult for girls.

Does that mean that all girls and boys learn and behave fundamentally differently? Experts say that while there are differences between the male and female brain, there are MANY more similarities. Brain biology is one factor but most researchers say that a child's upbringing, society and experiences have a larger effect; so brain differences shouldn't be used to stereotype boys' and girls' ability to learn or how they will behave.

## Tips for Parents to Help Kids Overcome Sexual Differences in Education

Many experts, such as Dr. William McBride and Leonard Sax, believe that, "There are no differences in what boys and girls can learn. But there are big differences in the best ways to teach them. McBride notes a two-part goal for parents and teachers:

1. "Promote the expression and development of a child's natural ability."
2. "Help students compensate for areas of inherent disadvantage or fragility."

How does one do this in practical application? In ["Boys Will Be Boys, Girls Will Be Girls"](#) offers detailed differences between the sexes and lists practical ways boys and girls can be taught to strengthen weaker areas.

***For more information:***

["Sex differences in neural processing of language among children"](#)

["Boys' And Girls' Brains Are Different: Gender Differences In Language Appear Biological"](#)

["How Schools Shortchange Girls"](#)

["Where Girls Are. The Facts About Gender Equity in Education."](#)

["Are Boys Falling Behind in Academics?"](#)

["Why Boys Are Falling Behind"](#)

["The Trouble With Boys"](#)

**You may also find these related Tips for Parents helpful:**

[Tips for Parents: Sexism and Stereotypes in School](#)

[Tips for Parents: Girls in Math and Science](#)