

STAY TUNED

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By Susan Kovalik, © 2008 Susan Kovalik

## **Gender Differences Mark Classroom Division**

Girls and boys play differently.

They learn differently, they fight differently, they see the world differently and they hear differently. They express their emotions differently.

### **Girls and boys behave differently because their brains are wired differently.**

This information is becoming vital as schools see more boys disengaged from the classroom/school. In Dr. Leonard Sax's latest book, "Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men," he contends that a combination of social and biological factors is creating an environment that is literally toxic to boys.

The following examples are broad generalizations, as all behaviors are on a continuum, and each of us is a unique individual flexible enough to modify our behavior based on the situation when needed or if motivated to do so.

Information on gender is not new. Over the years we have heard about it, but rarely have we applied it with intention in our classrooms. Actually, what we have done over the past 20 years is tried to create gender neutral classroom/school environments, which in many cases have been a detriment of boys.

In his practice as a family physician and psychologist, Dr. Sax has seen a growing epidemic of underachieving boys. Starting in kindergarten, they are very often labeled as inattentive and distracted, and with limited focus. Often they are put on medication to control their behavior. Dr. Sax's dedication to uncovering what is behind this trend taps into the question of student disengagement and uncovering the factors that are influencing this trend.

There is no right or wrong in this discussion — just the science behind the hardwiring of gender. The past 10 years have proven beyond doubt that classrooms that organize around gender neutral strategies leave out what we have known about our differences. It is once again in the forefront of our thinking as more students (primarily boys) seem adrift from our classrooms. In some locations, it is now seen as an epidemic.

### **Risk taking: Hard wired?**

Many boys enjoy taking risks and are impressed by other boys who do as well.

They enjoy the immediate thrill of the risk itself, and usually the consequences are not a consideration. Boys are more likely to be seriously injured in a variety of accidents, whether on a bike or skateboard, misusing a gun or being lost in the wilderness. A ranger at Yosemite National

Park reported that 9 out of 10 boys who get lost end up seriously hurt — and 9 out of 10 girls will be found, usually very near where they were lost.

Girls are willing to take risks, but are less likely to seek out risk-taking behavior. Boys overestimate their abilities, and girls underestimate their abilities and will be less likely to engage in an activity where they have no experience. It may be that for boys, in choosing risk-taking behavior, the danger it is exhilarating.

If a boy takes his skateboard over a dangerous jump, other boys think it is awesome, but girls are more likely to ask, “Why would he want to do that?” If a girl did the same behavior, the girls who heard about it would react, “That is crazy, why would she do that?”

A boy is more likely to take a dangerous risk if there are other boys present. Dangerous behavior gives boys an irresistible charge. Climb the mountain because it is there, ride the bull at the rodeo, become a motocross racer, snowboard down the steepest hill, use alcohol while underage, experiment with drugs — all elements that have a risky edge and provide an emotional high.

Girls participate in these activities, but it is not the norm; some boys do not participate at all.

### **Emotions**

Emotions, both positive and negative, are processed differently in boys’ and girls’ brains.

Prior to adolescence, there are limited connections between feelings and language in both boys and girls. Acknowledging that you feel mad, sad or disconnected is your feeling, but you may not be able to describe or explain it to yourself or others. During adolescence, the connections between the amygdala (the emotional center) and the cerebral cortex (the language center) begin, and this connection empowers reasoning, reflection and language.

This change occurs only in girls. Boys’ negative emotions stay routed in the amygdala. And how do these negative emotions get expressed? Watch the way boys just standing next to each other will punch or push their brothers or friends; interestingly, when boys have a fight they get over it as quickly as it started, and in most cases remain friends. Not so for girls: If they disagree, or are a target for bullying, or verbally rejected from their “group,” the making up is not usually easy and the feelings last over time.

### **Classroom Behavior**

In the classroom, girls are more likely to do their homework, even if the assignment doesn’t interest them, because they want the teacher to like them.

Boys need to find the homework assignment meaningful to them, and having the teacher like them is not a necessity. A boy who works well with his teacher may have his status lowered with other boys, or may be considered a geek.

When girls ask for help, she is responsive to a smile and will make eye contact. With a boy, sit down next to him and spread out the materials in front of you so that you are both looking at the materials, shoulder-to-shoulder. Avoid eye contact.

Small group learning works for girls because they are more comfortable asking the teacher for help if they need it. If boys get stuck, chances are they won't ask for help and may even get rowdy to get attention. Their status in the eyes of the other boys in the classroom is raised if they disrupt the teacher.

Competition and time-constrained tasks draw boys' attention, and when they have to work as a team to answer a question, they collaborate and work hard not to let the rest of the team down.

Girls regard shouting out answers as silly and complain that the "right answer" focuses on small details instead of the big picture. Moderate stress improves boys' performance on tests and degrades girls' performance.

What does all this mean? According to Dr. Sax, "ignoring gender differences does not break down gender stereotypes; ironically, neglecting hardwired gender differences more often results in a reinforcement of gender stereotypes."

The solution is not necessarily to have gender-specific classes, although in some situations, that has shown to work very well. In some states, this is a growing trend. For the classroom teacher/parent, knowing these hardwired differences can inform and direct what we do in the classroom, ensuring that students are engaged and eager to participate in the learning — and that home offers a safe and predictable environment.

Stay tuned.

For more information, visit [www.whygendermatters.com](http://www.whygendermatters.com)

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