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Will Boys Be Boys?
Why the gender lens may not shed light on the latest educational crisis.
By Ann Hulbert
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"It's OK, guys, being a haptic learner doesn't necessarily mean you have ADD," a teacher reassured a group of ninth-grade boys who were duly filling out a survey designed to assess their "learning styles." Telling me this story as she flipped through a recent issue of Newsweek announcing the arrival of a "Boy Crisis" in education, my ninth-grade daughter laughed. I gather the boys had found it at least somewhat amusing, too. Though the term made me think of spastic, "haptic," I discovered, actually means "hands-on." Here was a diagnosis with a double entendre that the testosterone-afflicted gender could almost enjoy.

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But look more closely at some of the longest-running data about school trends, and the picture that emerges isn't so neatly polarized—or so readily PET-scanned, either. The truth is that by 1980, women had already reached parity with men on college campuses. Over the next two decades, as women continued to get college degrees in ever greater numbers, there's evidence to suggest that girls' gains at the pre-college level weren't as striking and don't appear to have been at the expense of boys. A paper titled "Assessing Gilligan vs. Sommers" surveyed "gender-specific trends" in the well-being of American children and youths between 1985 and 2001 by, among other things, assembling National Assessment of Educational Progress test scores for reading and math skills over the decade and a half—for ages 9, 13, and 17. The graphs that emerged aren't very exciting: The trend is relative stability for all, rather than marked mobility for either gender. Boys' reading scores have declined somewhat over the past decade, but they were lower than girls' from the start; girls' scores have barely budged. Meanwhile, math scores have risen slightly for both girls and boys. Gender gaps are negligible for 9- and 13-year-olds, while high-school boys hold a slight edge over their female peers. The percentage of females between 18 and 24 with high-school diplomas, too, held steady—at about 85 percent; in 2001, the percentage of males with diplomas dropped slightly below what had been a pretty stable 80 percent.

Compared to rather blurry educational trends, PET scans and MRIs not surprisingly beckon as irrefutable support for keeping gender differences in the spotlight—except here data don't quite match up with dogma either. Male and female brains, the new imaging technology shows, are indeed surprisingly dissimilar in form, function, and maturation. Yet experts caution—as even *Time* did in a cover story about girls and math a year ago—that it's far too soon to extrapolate from neural architecture to specific intellectual potential. *Newsweek* leaves firm science behind when generalizing, for example, about the comparative inefficiency of the boy brain and about "the kinetic, disorganized, maddening and sometimes brilliant behaviors" it gives rise to. Assessments like these may be less male chauvinist than the old belief that men's slightly bigger brains signaled greater intellectual powers, but before long, such claims will look similarly crude. (In *Time* you certainly didn't hear about the static, neatnik, sometimes dull behaviors wired into the female brain.)

The cultural diagnoses of what's behind male school dilemmas are wobbly as well. In the *New Republic*, Whitmire points to a college-bound "verbally drenched curriculum" as the culprit, arguing that boys, whose verbal skills lag behind girls', are handicapped by the ever more literacy-focused course of study that he maintains has become crucial preparation for the world of "information-based work." But surely in a high-tech era, when math and science skills matter more than ever, boys get some benefit from their greater computer savvy and confidence in quantitative skills. (I'd be curious to know what evidence Whitmire has of a new emphasis during the 1990s on a verbal curriculum.) Other complaints about boy-averse pedagogy also don't quite add up—in part because they contradict one another. Sommers blamed a touchy-feely, progressive ethos for alienating boys in the classroom; males, she argued, thrive on no-nonsense authority, accountability, clarity, and peer rivalry. But now *Newsweek* blames roughly the opposite atmosphere for boy trouble: the competitive, cut-and-dried, standardized-test-obsessed (and recessless) pedagogical emphasis of the last decade. So much speculative certainty doesn't really shed much light on the puzzle of what's deterring young men from college.
Viewing school issues primarily through a gender lens has a way of encouraging a search for one-size-fits-all prescriptions for each sex. But what the array of motley evidence about males suggests is the wisdom of being wary about just that. It's worth noting that boys' test scores tend to be more variable than girls', with more of them at the tippy top, and many more down at the bottom. There may be biological forces at work, but at the moment the most marked contrasts in educational performance and college attendance show up between races and social classes; minority and poor males lag furthest behind, especially in college attendance. (Black women now receive twice as many college degrees as black men.) Gender equity may be the sexier goal to push for, but right now socioeconomic inequality is the greater obstacle to overcome.

In the meantime, both sexes—as international comparisons show—could stand to make more progress in math and verbal skills in our competitive global world. What's truly at stake for American children may not be the intricacies of neural wiring, but the rudimentary habits of working. Citing a recent study by two psychologists (one of them Martin E. P. Seligman, author of Learned Optimism), Washington Post education reporter Jay Mathews called attention to evidence that self-discipline—in particular, a capacity for deferred gratification—may be the best predictor of academic success, better than IQ: Do your homework, and plenty of practicing, before you watch television or sit down to play Xbox. That sounds, I know, like irresistible grist for an argument about whether and why girls might have an innate gift for just that kind of goody-goody, grindlike behavior, but let's not start it. It's a disservice to girls to portray them as destined for diligence, as though conscientious effort were a second-rate recourse for slower or steadier minds, rather than what is really is: a crucial choice that helps ensure long-term success. And it's an even bigger disservice to boys and their college prospects to reinforce the idea that discipline and self-denial are sissy stuff.

Ann Hulbert is the author of Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children.
Illustration by Mark Alan Stamaty.

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