

Boys And Girls Todays Lesson Is

I'll bet you never realized you learned it in school. That men are assertive, independent and capable, that women are passive, weak and dependent was, in all likelihood, transmitted to you in the classroom.

Sure your parents — and other adults — probably helped. And television, books and magazines did nothing to contradict these edicts about the nature of the sexes.

But by and large, no social institution has worked as hard as the educational system — from pre-school to post-grad — to teach males and females their "proper" places in society.

It starts in nursery school. A spate of recent studies have revealed how both male and female teachers from pre-school on unwittingly foster an environment where children learn that boys are aggressive and able to solve problems, while girls are obedient and docile.

By treating boys differently than girls teachers unconsciously maintain, if not actually create, the belief that boys are better equipped for the world of action, where they can and do influence their environment, while girls are the passive recipients of male initiative.

When girls attempt to join in the energetic play of the boys more often than not they are admonished for being "tomboys." Even when they are not specifically forbidden to engage in the rough-and-tumble play, they are often effectively prevented from doing so by the restrictive dresses that are still the required uniform in some Vancouver schools.

Girls soon discover that being a girl is not as much fun as being a boy.

Boys receive more attention in the classroom than girls do, reinforcing notions that boys are more important. Numerous studies have documented the fact that although boys are yelled at more by their teachers than girls, they are also listened to more, and receive more praise and instruction.

In a comprehensive study by Lisa Serbin it was revealed that boys received eight times more individualized instruction than girls, except when the classes were involved in traditionally feminine activities, like cooking or sewing.

That women are ranked lower than men is demonstrated by virtually every social institution, and the educational system is no exception. The social relationship between men and women that children most often observe in school is that of the usually male principal to the usually female and subordinate teacher. According to the status of women committee of the B.C. Teachers Federation in B.C., despite the fact that 95.5 per cent of elementary school teachers are female, only 10 per cent of the elementary school principals are women.

Is it surprising then that as children advance through school girls experience a growing sense of inferiority while boys do not? Although children do not differ measurably in self-esteem when they enter the school system, as reported in the Journal of Genetic Psychology, as boys and girls progress they come to think more highly of boys, with a corresponding drop in their regard for girls.

Children learn early and pervasively what girls do is different from what boys do. Play materials are clearly sex-typed, with a wider range of toys designated for use by boys. "Free play" is a misnomer because during time set aside for free play girls tend to be guided either by implicit expectations or by direct suggestions from their teachers toward playthings that prepare them for their future roles as mothers and homemakers.

Conversely, boys have more options and are allowed more free-ranging play. They soon learn, however, to avoid dolls and other play materials considered feminine.

These distinctions between appropriate activities for boys and girls create rather than reflect the heterogeneous aspirations of each sex.

The school system seems bent on perpetuating these sex-role stereotypes. In junior high the girls are shunted off to home economic classes where they learn to cook, sew

and knit in preparation for home and hearth (or at best a career that approximates this ideal).

Meanwhile boys learn a variety of career-oriented skills like woodworking, drafting, metalworking and power mechanics.

But discrimination against women is at its height — or depth — in textbooks ranging from children's readers to college required reading.

Girls and boys pick up many clues about the relative importance of each sex by their exposure to how language is used. The common use of the allegedly gender-generic terms (using "he" instead of "he or she") conveys the impression of female exclusion to children, as it does to most people.

Children tend to interpret things literally, and the masculine pronouns are more likely to be interpreted as referring exclusively to males. Moreover, their confusion is compounded by the fact that there are no rules about when "he" means "he," and when it means "he or she."

When presented with words like "policeman" and "fisherman" children have problems believing that such terms include the possibility of a female fishing, policing, fighting fires or delivering mail.

Exclusion at the most basic level of language cannot help but contribute to the erosion of a girl's self-esteem.

Another quirk of our language that further delineates the inferior status of women is the use of "girl" to refer to adult women. Boys grow up to be men, but girls are always girls. The implication of this anomaly is similar to the implication of calling a black man "boy."

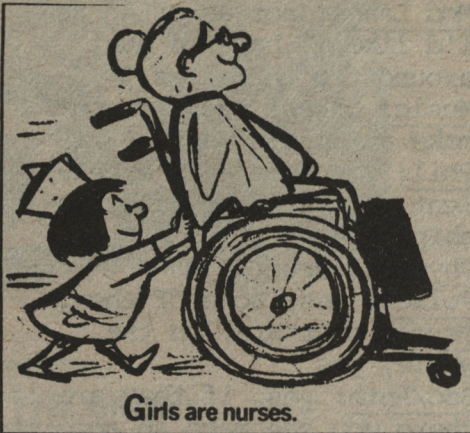
The second major problem with the reading material available in the schools is that women are noticeably absent. Most books involve male protagonists and male adventures. When women are present they are usually insignificant, one-dimensional characters in limited but highly stereotyped roles.

While boys are presented in a variety of roles — they can play basketball, rescue a neighbor's cat or learn to sail a boat — girls are depicted most often in domestic situations. They bake cakes for bake sales, help mom do the shopping or watch brother mend a broken bicycle.

Adult males are seen in many exciting occupations: they can be astronauts, architects or animal trainers. Women in children's texts are usually full-time mothers always ready with a snack for junior or a kind word for dad. When women do work it is invariably a sex-typed career such as secretary, nurse or teacher.

Children learn the limited occupational choices available to women when the only examples they are exposed to are biased and not true reflections of women's capabilities.

A survey of children's literature by the education committee of an American feminist group, the National Organization of Women, uncovered some blatant differences in the way the sexes are characterized. They found women are usually portrayed as being passive, unachieving, unadventurous, subservient, emotionally weak and somewhat lacking in ethics.



Girls are nurses.

At the university level social science texts tend to reflect a masculine bias. Social scientists have the odd habit of conducting their experimentation on white males and making generalizations about the entire population. It is not uncommon to see the results of parallel studies on women added as a postscript, an exception to some universal law of behavior.

The problems of boys and girls who see themselves portrayed in texts in highly rigid sex roles are compounded by unconsciously sexist teachers and counsellors. When junior high school teachers were asked to describe good female students in a recent study, they used the adjectives "appreciative," "calm," and "conscientious." "Active," "adventurous" and "aggressive" were words used to describe ideal male students.

Furthermore there is evidence high school counsellors tend to encourage "appropriate" career choices for male and female students rather than encouraging individuals to discover their own potential.

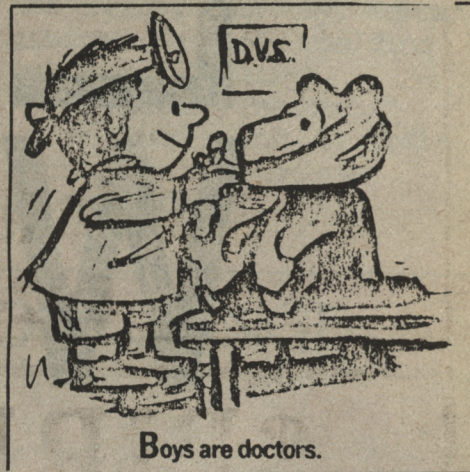
By the time they reach university the sexes have been successfully pigeon-holed into opposite spheres.

Female students tend to gravitate toward the humanities while there is still a preponderance of men in the math and science departments.

The effect of teacher expectations is graphically illustrated in a study in which teachers were told to expect a marked increase in the academic achievement of certain students who were actually chosen at random. The students the teachers believed would excel, did, in fact, perform much better than the other students.

However, the school system, for all its biases and inequities, cannot be held entirely responsible for this dismal state of affairs. The institution of education is no more than the socializing tool of society and as such merely reflects sexism (not to mention racism and elitism) built into society. Schools function to maintain hierarchies, to keep dominant groups dominant.

Universities, the seats of higher knowledge, should be exempt from the prejudices of the general populace, but they're not. The people who have made it to university, either as students or faculty, have made it by going through the system, and it shows.



Boys are doctors.

Farmer George.

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