



Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know about the Emerging Science of Sex Differences

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Are boys and girls really that different? Twenty years ago, doctors and researchers didn't think so. Back then, most experts believed that differences in how girls and boys behave are mainly due to differences in how they were treated by their parents, teachers, and friends.

It's hard to cling to that belief today. An avalanche of research over the past twenty years has shown that sex differences are more significant and profound than anybody guessed. Sex differences are real, biologically programmed, and important to how children are raised, disciplined, and educated.

In *Why Gender Matters*, psychologist and family physician Dr. Leonard Sax leads parents through the mystifying world of gender differences by explaining the biologically different ways in which children think, feel, and act. He addresses a host of issues, including discipline, learning, risk taking, aggression, sex, and drugs, and shows how boys and girls react in predictable ways to different situations.

For example, girls are born with more sensitive hearing than boys, and those differences increase as kids grow up. So when a grown man speaks to a girl in what he thinks is a normal voice, she may hear it as yelling. Conversely, boys who appear to be inattentive in class may just be sitting too far away to hear the teacher—especially if the teacher is female.

Likewise, negative emotions are seated in an ancient structure of the brain called the amygdala. Girls develop an early connection between this area and the cerebral cortex, enabling them to talk about their feelings. In boys these links develop later. So if you ask a troubled adolescent boy to tell you what his feelings are, he often literally cannot say.

Dr. Sax offers fresh approaches to disciplining children, as well as gender-specific ways to help girls and boys avoid drugs and early sexual activity. He wants parents to understand and work with hardwired differences in children, but he also encourages them to push beyond gender-based stereotypes.

A leading proponent of single-sex education, Dr. Sax points out specific instances where keeping boys and girls separate in the classroom has yielded striking educational, social, and interpersonal benefits. Despite the view of many educators and experts on child-rearing that sex differences should be ignored or overcome, parents and teachers would do better to recognize, understand, and make use of the biological differences that make a girl a girl, and a boy a boy.

Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know about the Emerging Science of Sex Differences Details

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Jared says

This book is phenomenal. The author talks about the emerging research into the fundamental differences between boys and girls. He also debunks a lot of commonly believed false differences. It's really amazing that psychologists and teachers had to go through forty years of unisex philosophy, thinking that boys and girls are different only because we raise them that way, when any parent of more than one gender can tell you that there are very distinct mental and emotional differences between them.

Even better than his explanations of the research, though, are his comments about how to apply the research to raising kids. The studies that point out that boys and girls are more confident and happier when they have a firm sense of gender identity are fascinating.

And I never expected to develop sympathy for the idea of gender-segregated schools, but his comments on the topic and why it's valuable make me wish that we had schools like that nearby.

Douglas Wilson says

Great information here on the current state of brain science with regard to the differences between boys and girls. Some fascinating stuff here. At the same time, Dr. Sax sometimes wanders off into telling some off-the-track pediatrician anecdotes. He also sometimes flinches when giving us the bottom line. He will say something like this: "I don't want to go back to the bad old days of woodworking for boys and home economics for girls. But we need to recognize that our society lost something . . ." Yeah, we lost woodworking for boys and home ec for girls. I don't know why he is so diffident in his conclusions when he is so courageous in stating the actual state of the research. Dr. Sax does not have a biblical worldview and so the end result is a mish-mash. But the mish in here is dazzlingly illuminating.

Aaron says

Worth reading, but Sax goes way too far with the gender essentialism arguments. Often he does not provide enough evidence for a reasonable person to agree with him. He also gets too finger-wagging about teenage sexual culture and makes implausible claims about the damage it does. I found myself becoming increasingly skeptical of his claims towards the end of the book. He ends by making an absurd and unconvincing case for gender segregation in K-12 education. The science of gender difference certainly shows us that teachers must construct their lessons carefully, so that both boys and girls' needs are met, but gender segregation would do more harm than good.

Laura says

This guy is nothing short of a neo-Nazi. His approach to gender and anthropology belongs in the nineteenth century--and has the same reasoning. For instance, he claims that the sizes of women's and men's brains are what contribute to each respective sex's intellectual inhibitions and/or talents. (i.e., men excell at math because they have larger brains; boys misbehave because they do not hear as well as girls; etc.) The claim that one sex performs better in one academic arena whereas the other sex excels at another is a problematic argument in itself to say the least. I know women who excel at chemistry and men whose ability to write and express themselves borders on the poetic. Dividing the entire population into such categories AND placating this argument on supposed "scientific" evidence is not only violent, but dangerous. This filth that is somehow regarded as "unbiased" gender analysis is disgusting in that Sax's arguments only reiterate his own biases--which he apparently has never explored nor even considered. His claim that EVERY "fact" he states in this book is based on "science" is but another indicator of Sax's subconscious and repressed prejudices. In other words, he feels that by hiding behind science he can state whatever he wishes without any threat of accusation. The irony is his very use of science and proclamation that science is unquestionable, indisputable is not only false, but just another indicator of how, frankly, stupid this man is.

His arguments are essentialist and ignore the fluidity of gender; in fact, he sees no fluidity in gender! What makes no sense (among other things) is that he claims gender is not a social construction at all; he thinks everything (yes, everything) associated with gender is "natural" and "biological."

His assessment and "cure" for homosexuality is equally offensive, claiming gay men can be "cured" by having sex with a woman but imagining her as a man. Yes, this makes perfect sense!

I encourage anyone who found this book useful to read Sandra Harding. She claims that our concept of "science" is more respected because we associate it with being emotionless, analytical, unbiased, unarguable--all qualities we associate with masculinity. She says science is just as malleable and gray as any "feminine" discipline, such as English Literature. I state this because Sax claims his argument is the best because it is scientific, as though using "science" makes his claims indisputable. What nonsense.

I am disturbed by how many people like this book or claimed they learned a lot from it. Sax is someone who would have seriously benefited from a Women's Studies class--or at least reading Foucault. This book could be very dangerous when in the wrong hands, and I denounce everything he claims. Let's not forget how the "science" of the nineteenth century which claimed slavery was justified because of the sizes of people's skulls affected our culture....

Mel says

Blech. I wish I hadn't assigned this, I knew it had an essentialist position (boys and girls are different, so they should be treated as though they're different) but I had no idea this guy was so lacking in logic or critical thinking. His conclusions are farfetched based on the evidence he provides, and he offers trite 'examples' which sound absolutely as stereotypical as possible, highlighting how absolutely different girls and boys (and men and women) can be...

I had no idea boys had to kill a living thing in order to feel self-esteem, did you?

Will never use this in class again- wanted my students to use it for critical thinking and the bits of good

research it provides, but I overlooked his ridiculous writing style and agenda. Boo.

Lesli says

My friend recommended this book to me and it was beyond interesting to me. Four years later, it finally clicked why my oldest child who loves school, hated kindergarten. He loved preschool and loved first grade but not kindie. Why because he had a soft spoken teacher who wanted him to describe colors and read fiction and sit still. He does so good with loud teachers who allow him to stand at his desk instead of sit in a chair. But yet my daughter who always struggled in preschool thrived in kindergarten with a calm soft spoken teacher. (Those poor boys in her class.) On page 24, it said, "Girls draw nouns, boys draw verbs..." Oh golly, duh, never realized it but makes complete sense. I love hearing children describe their pictures before kindergarten, especially boys.

Since I just read a different book on neurology, I was surprised when he said males feel emotions in their amygdala while women experience it cerebral cortex. Which explains why my husband never wants to discuss his bad moods. Its hard to verbally express what is happening in the amygdala. Also I thought it was useful to hear the difference in how boys prefer to discuss books. Makes so many conversations with my husband or oldest son make so much more sense.

I also thought it was interesting when the book said, "Ironically, the result of her lack of awareness of gender differences is a reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes." Accepting that males and females are different allow them to thrive beyond gender stereotypes.

Since I only have small children I loved the beginning of the book. The chapter on teenage sexuality was beyond depressing. I hate the sexual revolution because it seemed that instead of empowering females it has turned them into objects by males instead of liberating them.

I'm always pleased to be reminded as a parent "Your job is not to maximize your child's pleasure, but to broaden her horizons." 172

Lastly the book mentioned in 1999 the Colorado state school board approved a resolution advising teachers not to recommend or suggest psychotropic medications for any student because they are utilized for discipline. I thought now I know why I love Colorado. I don't have a problem with medication as long as it is needed, but I think its used too early when diet and exercise can change lots. Not to mention active children are normal not sick.

Norma Jesus says

The author, a family physician and psychologist, cites numerous studies and his own experience to support his assertions. There is so much food for thought in this book, all very interesting, some terrifying. I'm really glad I read this book, even if I didn't believe everything in it, and I plan to read his next one as well. It's worth reading even for those without children. Covers how we as a society raise and educate our children based on what we believe about gender and what common beliefs may or may not be accurate.

Audrey says

I loved Dr. Sax's other book (written after this one), Boys Adrift, but I really didn't care for this one.

The first few chapters WERE really interesting and contained information that the title led me to believe would be found within. Perhaps it is worth reading the book just for these very interesting chapters. But the rest of the book degenerated into a typical parenting book with lots of lectures and opinion, the focus on "difficult" children with "serious" problems.

Dr. Sax makes himself sound like one of those doctors who knows best--his examples were rife with hapless parents who were either set straight by the good doctor OR who disregarded the doctor's advice and rueled the day.

Then there was the entire chapter teen sex and another on homosexuality in children, both troubling. This book walks in alarmist territory and states unequivocally that bad behavior is widespread. It talks too much about managing bad children and not enough about raising good ones.

And I have trouble getting past the impression that this book (after the first few chapters) is a collection of his opinions backed up by various research studies (and we all know that research studies are out there to back up just about ANY opinion). One of the reasons I liked Boys Adrift so much more is that I felt Dr. Sax was offering a point of view (supported by research, naturally) that the reader was free to believe or disbelieve. This book was much more opinionated. Didn't like that.

Read Boys Adrift, though--it was great!

Heather McCubbin says

Take what you will from this book. Much of the advice in here is fascinating and some of it true, based upon my own observations of my 2 boys and 1 daughter. However, some of the issues, like anomolous males, irked me. Sax suggests we, as parents, try to stop this behavior if it appears around the age of 3 (anomolous means: likes to play sports that aren't team oriented, associates with more females than males up until puberty--then it's the girls that pull away he says--and these males, supposedly, have a certain facial shape). To 'get rid' of this behaviour we are to force that child into competitive sports, which will in turn foster a better male/male friendship. This is one section that made me want to write him and ask: why does he want us to change our children from who they are? Yes, they will have a harder time when puberty hits and their female friends may move onto their girlfriend groups. Puberty is hard, our job is to be there for our child and provide them with the tools and morals to make it through middle and high school. Alive.

Also, the "Are you Feminine/Masculine" quiz was a joke! It's not masculine to read a lot and you aren't feminine unless you know what the parts of a sewing machine are? Is Sax from the 1920s? Come on, grow up and be grateful for all the wonderful individuality that is out there!

I do agree learning styles are different for males and females and, as a preschool teacher, may even try to apply some of his thoughts. His chapter on sex and teens has spurred me to talk more with my kids, so these issues he talked about were beneficial.

This would be a great bookclub book and will definitely spur on some interesting, albeit heated, discussions!

Bridget says

I am going to write this review by taking this book on its word that the scientific research is accurate (that is another debate) - even with that assumption the arguments and conclusions made are very troubling and problematic:

- Contrary opinions are presented as straw men, despite having their own scientific research to back them up.
- The first few chapters use peer reviewed scientific studies, but the book quickly turns to anecdotal evidence ("a principal told me that children's books are dominated by female protagonists" or claiming that bisexuality in men doesn't really exist, it's just gay men still figuring things out, with no citation, evidence, or example of this statement).
- He also quickly devolves into a conflation of gender and sex - claiming that gendered behavior that has been clearly documented to be socialization is biologically rooted - without providing scientific evidence.
- The author has an agenda. Sax is the founder and executive director of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education.
- His solution to the problem (same-sex education) does not have support from scientific studies or educational professionals: <http://www.nea.org/tools/17061.htm>

One can argue that our educational system needs improvement, that we need to pay attention to sex and gender in education, and that single sex education may have its place for some students - but you don't have to do so in a way that mischaracterizes the science, has an agenda, and that perpetuates harmful ideas about the immutability of gender.

Hannah says

Complete and utter drivel. Sax jumped from an interesting hypothesis: biological differences between the sexes matter to how we teach and parent kids to a gender essentialist platform filled with his own prejudices and speculation. Choice gems include an endorsement of spanking (for boys only!), advice to avoid rape by never letting your daughter date someone more than three years older, and getting your sensitive son involved in team sports before age three or he may be condemned to being a "mission specialist on the space shuttle but never the pilot."

Elizabeth Kennedy says

Sax's writing is very clear, interesting and informative. The overall thesis of his book can be summed up in one of the last lines of the book: "Our job now is to create a society that has the courage and the wisdom to cherish and celebrate the innate differences between the sexes while at the same time enabling equal opportunities for every child."

He is a proponent of single-sex education, and his arguments are very convincing. For most of us educating our children within the framework of the American public education system, single-sex education isn't really an option, however. He also advocates cross-generational single sex activities as a way to help children and

teenagers grow into healthy, happy, well-adjusted and productive individuals. I couldn't agree more.

The chapters on education and discipline are really enlightening, and have already helped me understand my kids, especially my sons, better. The chapters on Sex and Drugs were a bit alarming, but a good wake-up call.

Lyn says

This book was so good. It went into quite a lot of scientific detail of how boys and girls develop DIFFERENTLY. It isn't that boys are "slower" at developing - it is that their brains / eyes / ears develop differently than girls do. The author provides a lot of advice on how to parent and teach boys vs girls (and especially on some difficult topics such as drugs and sex).

My mom would definitely approve on the section on discipline (she teaches middle schoolers and we talk about this topic a lot - especially as it relates to her students!!) - the author maintains that a lot of discipline problems today have to do with the shift of parental - child power. In previous generations, parents didn't "consult" or "ask" or "suggest" that their children do things - they expected it. Now, the trend is towards parents asking/consulting/suggesting, and never never putting their foot down and truly disciplining (i.e. TV's in bedrooms, computer privileges, expectations of behavior) because their child would get angry with them (what?! you, the parent, are afraid your child will be angry with you?!) I obviously agree with the author - sometimes my implementation may be flawed, but I definitely agree!!

One thing to note - I've seen over and over again where studies show that dinner time has a significant impact on how well children do. This author talks about that as well.

Kaethe says

Bogus. This is very simple: the difference in *average* between male and female is always less than the difference between the *range of normal* for either. [This is the same sort of crap science used to support the ideas behind racism.] If you try and base your parenting or your educating on the average for one gender, you're going to be wrong for the individual most of the time. and if you're going to be wrong most of the time, frankly, it's just easier to have one standard, rather than two.

Carissa says

This was a fascinating book. So much of what this author wrote seemed to click in my mind and made sense. I now think differently about how boys and girls learn and the advantages of all-girls (or boys) schools. I know that this will effect how I raise my son. I loved the authors sample lesson for boys and girls. The girls' one definitely had me more interested! It makes me wonder if I would have liked science and math better if I would have been taught with a more girl-friendly approach. There was a lot of interesting parenting advice.

My few complaints are minor. I thought it would have been helpful to hear more of the debate against this theory. For example, I wish that he would have stated some of the benefits of co-ed schools. I think it would have given his argument more credibility. Also, he specifically states that ballet places too much focus on

how a girl looks and in the next chapter he encourages girls to take ballet. That confused me a little bit.

Overall, I really enjoyed this book and I am SO glad that I read it. I think this is an excellent read for teachers and parents, if only to challenge existing beliefs on gender. I hope that I remember what I learned from this book.
