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Biology, Not Destiny

By Malia Blom, JD

In our ongoing examination of why boys tend to score lower on literacy assessments than girls, we have talked a lot about boys' lack of interest in reading, but we haven't yet discussed gender differences in language development. There's a reason for this, which I'll get to shortly. In the meantime, a few interesting facts about boys' development, from the Boys and Schools website's Facts and Research section:

- Areas of the brain related to language, speech, processing grammatical structures & word production (including the frontal lobe, left hemisphere, and Broca's area) tend to be more developed or more highly active in females, resulting in their improved verbal communications skills.
- Male toddlers tend to speak later (and reach comprehensible speech later), are more physically impulsive, and more likely to ignore voices (even their parents).
- In preschool and kindergarten, boys tend to have more speech problems than girls.
- In early elementary school, boys are slower to master reading, but better at general math and 3-dimensional reasoning.
- In late elementary school, girls are generally better at fine-motor skills and learning foreign language. Boys at this stage are more likely to need remedial reading.

In sum, girls tend to mature more quickly when it comes to mastering language skills, including reading, speech, and writing. And it is for that reason that Boys and Schools stresses the importance of early intervention, a positive early learning experience, and getting boys started young with developing reading and language skills.

At the same time, I would also take exception to the idea that such developmental trends explain or excuse boys' lower performance on literacy tests and lower interest in reading, writing, literature, etc. For one thing, it is absurd to claim that these developmental differences make boys incapable of excelling in language-related studies—history is full of examples of male masters of language, from Shakespeare to Cicero.

Another major objection comes from the flip-side of the developmental research—girls tend to demonstrate similar difficulties with spatial relationships and mathematics. However, no one considers this adequate reason for girls to under-perform in math and science. On the contrary, a great deal of effort has gone into encouraging girls to enter into and excel in those fields.

Developmental research like the information I cited above is interesting and helpful in understanding where a boy (or girl) might run into greater difficulties, and how one might go about helping them learn certain skills. This is not a case of "girls=smart, boys=slow" when it comes to language and reading. Though such research may provide a helpful insight into why some boys have a more difficult time developing speech and language skills, it is what we do with that insight that is really important. Such findings can be a springboard into exploring different techniques and methods for helping struggling boys acquire language skills. And they certainly provide a strong argument for early intervention in helping young readers succeed. But anyone who uses a developmentally-based argument to try to explain away the literacy gap, or as the basis of a claim that boys simply aren't equipped to be as good at literacy skills as girls falls into the same erroneous trap as the person who claims that girls can't be scientists. Early development is interesting, but it is not a reflection on intelligence or potential. And it certainly is not destiny.

(From a blog dated January 23, 2007 found at www.boysandschools.com)