



FLM-FS-16-01-R10

# Gender Issues: Preparing Children for a Lifetime of Success

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For many years, people believed that girls and boys were born vastly different from one another—so different, in fact, that women had no business attempting to do “men’s jobs” and men had no need to participate in “women’s work.” During the 1960s, however, this notion about women and men changed dramatically. In fact, during that era, many people began to argue that women and men are far more similar than they are different, and that no jobs or chores should be exclusively assigned to one sex or the other.

Ask anyone you know, and you’ll probably get a strongly held opinion about these two positions. But what does social science research say? Are women and men different or are they more alike than was commonly believed? The answer is: BOTH! Moreover, understanding and sharing with children and teens the ways in which women and men are alike and different is very important to their future occupational successes.

## Beyond Averages

How can women and men be both alike and different at the same time? Generally, women and men are, *on average*, different, but as individuals, very similar. Think about it this way: Who is taller? Women or

men? No doubt you said, “Men are taller than women.” And that’s true; height is an area in which gender differences are well documented. But now, think about a group of people you commonly see, for example, your classmates or co-workers or even the stream of individuals you see entering the movies. Are *all* the men taller than *all* the women? No, they are not. In fact, many of the women are taller than many of the men. What does this tell us? It tells us that if we added up the heights of all the men and all the women, the men’s average height would be greater than the women’s average height. But if you needed something on the top shelf, a man might not be the best person to ask to get it down. Sometimes the tallest person in any given group will be a woman.

What this idea, that women and men are *on average* different but are as individuals very similar, illustrates is that while there are differences between men and women, knowing whether an individual is a male or a female does not tell us much about how tall he or she is. And this is true in many areas—knowing whether a person is a male or female does not tell us very much about whether he or she is a good basketball player or an outstanding parent. When it comes to talents and abilities, gender is not a good predictor of an individual’s characteristics.

## Beyond Stereotypes

To further illustrate this idea, think about some research that was conducted in the mid-1970s but remains highly influential today. A Stanford University professor, Sandra Bem, demonstrated that “femininity” is not the opposite of “masculinity” and in fact, her work showed that many people possess the best qualities of both. In several research studies, Bem found that some individuals report themselves to have characteristics that are mainly consistent with our culture’s stereotypic view of femininity (such as being nurturing, soft-hearted, etc.), some report characteristics that are mainly consistent with masculinity (such as being independent, aggressive, etc.), and some report having both types of characteristics. Bem found that individuals who reported themselves to have both feminine and masculine traits and skills were more creative, intelligent, flexible, were better able to meet changing situational demands, and experienced less anxiety than were individuals who reported themselves to have only sex-appropriate traits and skills.

What all of this tells us is that girls and boys are individuals with unique traits, talents, skills, and interests. Yet, despite the fact that gender does not necessarily predict an individual’s interests or destiny, girls and boys are often funneled into activities, hobbies, and even classes that reflect stereotypic expectations for women and men. This practice can prohibit girls and boys from selecting careers that allow them to use their unique talents and abilities and that would be personally satisfying for them as individuals. Moreover, this process may have life-long consequences for their financial well-being.

Think about the professions that provide the greatest prestige and highest salaries. Did you think

about architecture, medicine, engineering, computer science, business, and occupations such as those? One of the most important skills required to become successful in each of these fields is the ability to do math. Yet girls continued to be passively—and sometimes actively—guided away from taking math courses. In fact, studies indicate that boys and girls do not differ in the abilities that would enable them to hold high-paying professional careers. Rather, they differ in the motivation to use the abilities they have, and this difference in motivation often results from the encouragement (or lack of encouragement) they receive from the important adults in their lives. This, more than any other factor, is related to the lower occupational prestige and success of women in our culture.

## What Can Parents Do?

Encourage children to try out various skills, talents, and abilities. Help them to discover what their unique likes and dislikes are, so that they may select a profession that will provide them with a lifetime of satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. And of course, encourage children to enjoy math!

## References

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