



Pink VS. **BLUE**

Frogs and snails and puppy dogs' tails? Sugar and spice and everything nice? Rethink those gender stereotypes, says Lise Eliot, Ph.D.

by Julie Halpert
Photographs by Ana Schechter



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PINK VS. BLUE

WATCH ANY group of little boys and girls on the playground and you'll likely conclude that they're very different animals. In general, the boys are rough and tumble; the girls, more refined. It almost seems as if their brains are hard-wired to act differently. Neuroscientist Lise Eliot, Ph.D., wants you to reconsider that notion. In her book *Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow into Troublesome Gaps—and What We Can Do About It*, Dr. Eliot presents research that suggests that boys and girls aren't so much born to be different as they are *raised* to be different. "The bottom line is that what we think of as gender differences are mostly the result of societal influence and peer pressure," contends Eliot. We asked Eliot to share her findings with *Parent & Child* and to talk about why she believes we should all challenge our assumptions about the potential of our sons and daughters while they're still young.

Parent & Child: How did you first become interested in this topic?

LISE ELIOT: As a scientist, I found that women's abilities are questioned in a way that a man's aren't. As a parent of a girl and two boys, I wanted to understand how real the differences are. Everyone is fascinated by hormonal effects ["nature"], but it's vitally important to include the nurture side of this discussion, which is where gender gaps really start to widen.

P&C: Did you find any differences between the brains of boys and girls?

ELIOT: There are some, but they're small. These small differences become more pronounced because as children grow, they tend to exercise what they're already good at initially. For example, boys start out with a small advantage in spatial perception that magnifies as they play with vehicles, balls, and video games, toys that are considered, for the most part, boy toys. Girls start talking a bit earlier

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and provoke more conversation with parents and friends, increasing the number of words they are exposed to.

P&C: In what other ways do these small "pronounced differences" grow?

ELIOT: They accumulate to the point that girls have better [word] awareness than boys by kindergarten and learn to read earlier, which makes

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their language skills stronger. We like to pretend that we treat all kids the same, but in reality, we interact differently with boys than we do with girls based on society's expectations and our own experience.

P&C: *What do you suggest parents do for their children that will defy expectations and help them grow to full potential?*

ELIOT: It's important to expose your child to a wide range of experiences. Encourage boys to read, join a choir, or take art classes. Allow girls to build with blocks and Legos. Keep an open mind when it comes to a child's abilities. Suggest that your child play with classmates of the opposite sex, and invite more of them to birthday parties. We need to work harder on getting boys and girls to interact and respect each other instead of furthering the belief that they're from different planets.

P&C: *How can parents encourage their children to branch out, without forcing them?*

ELIOT: One option is to try to make any new activity feel more natural for your child by inviting his friends to join in. For example, if you want your son to take a class that's typically female-oriented, like dance or art, try to get a group of his male friends to participate. You might even try to organize a "boys only" ballet class, for instance. Though single-sex classes are not necessarily ideal, it's fine if that's what will make your child comfortable trying a new activity.

P&C: *What happens if kids aren't given the opportunity to participate in a wide range of activities?*

ELIOT: It limits their skill base. Girls will lack the tools they need to succeed in male-dominated fields like science, while boys won't have crucial interpersonal, verbal, and writing abilities needed for growing fields like education or health care. It's often more difficult to do this with boys than girls.

P&C: *Why is it more difficult with boys?*

ELIOT: There's no question that as a society we're more tolerant of a wide range of gender behaviors in girls, applauding their participation in sports or computers. Most dads aren't thrilled about the idea of their sons taking tap dance or



painting their fingernails. That's because masculine things are valued more highly and are associated with power.

P&C: *Do you think there's a link between your findings and the rising number of boys diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)?*

ELIOT: There might be. The problem with diagnostic criteria for ADHD with young children is that boys are generally less mature in terms of their ability to sit still and in their planning and organizational skills. Because the ADHD diagnosis is based in part on the child's physical activity level ("hyperactivity"), more boys will fall into the spectrum, since the average boy is more active than the average girl. My opinion, based on my discussion with child psychiatrists, is that ADHD is over-diagnosed in boys.

P&C: *What do you think could help these boys?*

ELIOT: More physical movement. Children's lost opportunities to exercise—walking to school, several recesses each day, daily gym classes, outdoor play after school—are taking a bigger toll on boys than girls. Some really can't concentrate as well in the classroom as they might with more physical breaks. Anything that accommodates the more active, distractible child will reduce the effort to test for, label, and medicate for ADHD.

P&C: Do you hope for your research to lead to new teaching methods in schools?

ELIOT: Yes. I'm concerned about the messages teachers get about gender differences, particularly that boys and girls learn differently. Every child should be treated as an individual; the same principles of learning apply to both genders. I'd like to see schools incorporate more visual and spatial

elements essential to geometry, calculus, physics, and math. It would also be beneficial if kids were required to rotate through electives like cooking and woodworking. **P&C**

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Best of Both Worlds

The preschool years are prime time to help children improve skills they struggle with. Here, Eliot offers activities for your son or daughter that cross over into skill areas typically "owned" by the other gender

FOR BOYS

Chat and read every day. The amount of language directly addressed to children early in life influences their vocabulary size, reading ability, and writing skills. Language-based activities are especially important for young boys, as they lag slightly behind girls in this area. Try books on tape: Kids love to wear headphones and use the play and pause buttons to follow along.

Foster fine motor skills. They don't come as easily to boys as they do to girls. Your little one can practice coordination with projects that include cutting, stamping, and building with small construction toys. Typing on a computer can also help.

Get them moving. Boys need ample opportunity to flex and run. At home, shut off the TV and get outside! Look for preschools that offer frequent physical breaks. Boys concentrate better when they've had enough exercise.

FOR GIRLS

Toss a ball. Girls begin falling behind boys in certain spatial skills by the end of the preschool period. One theory holds that boys' greater experience with projectiles begins training their brains by this age to better perceive 3-D moving objects. Girls may benefit from practice at ball games and other hand-eye challenges.

Play with puzzles. Males typically outperform females on puzzles and mazes that require spatial and reasoning skills. The Gearation Fridge Magnet Set by Tomy, which allows kids to experiment with gear movement, is a good example of a toy that can provide practice in this area.

Make music. There's evidence that it trains the brain to recognize patterns in space and time—especially learning to play the piano. This kind of brain training is thought to be especially helpful for mastering math concepts such as fractions and geometry.



Adapted with permission from Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow into Troublesome Gaps—and What We Can Do About It by Lise Eliot, Ph.D. (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009)