

Girls Catch

in **Positive** and **Negative** Ways

A generation after a great national rethinking of gender roles and the forces that classify children by their sex, the results are: American girls are behaving more like boys—and it isn't always a pretty picture.

Girls have virtually caught up with boys in math performance and have closed the gap considerably in science. But they are now smoking, drinking and using drugs as often as boys their age. And though they are not nearly as violent as boys, girls are increasingly more likely to find their way into trouble with the law.

A status report released by a consortium of universities and research centres describes the American young females as a population stepping out of many traditional stereotypes that have defined girls for generations. And that, it is becoming clear, can be both good and bad.

"Adolescent girls are getting more of a sense of entitlement in healthy ways and feeling bolder, but some may be acting this out in ways that are not so healthy," said Lynn Philips, author of *The Girls Report*, which compiled the most recent research on girls from hundreds of academic and government sources. "There are ways we want girls to catch up with boys, but there are also ways we want boys to catch up with girls."

Some of the progress girls have made results from public policies and private efforts—to enhance math, science and sports programs for girls, for example. But more subtle social

pressures have also had an effect, pushing girls to follow the less desirable patterns set by boys in other ways.

While 13 percent of eight-grade girls reported smoking in 1991, the report shows that figure increased to 21 percent in 1996, a faster increase than that for the boys. And nearly 17 percent of eight-grade girls used marijuana in 1996, compared to just over 5 percent in 1991.

In its report, the National Council for Research on Women also found:

While girls are still less likely than boys to be arrested for violent crimes, the rate at which they are being arrested for these crimes increased faster than that for boys between 1986 and 1995.

Girls participate in a wider range of sports and exercise more than ever before, but they still lag far behind boys. And a federal study found that the percentage of high school sophomore girls participating in sports declined from 46 percent in 1980 to 41 percent a decade later, while male participation remained even at 63 percent.

After the years of concern about girls trailing boys in math performance, a 1996 test administered by the U.S. Department of Education found no significant differences between average scores for eighth and 12th grade girls and boys.

In science, girls perform about as well as boys until the 12th grade, when boys' average scores pull ahead and more boys excel in science.

Although much of what the new report documents are the

problems that face the girls, it also challenges many popular stereotypes. It questions, for example, the notion that adolescent girls are doomed to go through a period of low self-esteem or that the teen years are invariably filled with anger and stress.

It also makes clear that, despite their convergence with boys on some measures, in many important ways, girls remain very different.

They are twice as likely to be depressed as boys, for example. And a federal survey of high school students found that 34 percent of girls see themselves as overweight, compared to 22 percent of boys. Nearly two out of three of the girls were attempting to lose weight.

Racial differences among girls are important in many instances. African American girls, for example, have more positive perceptions of their own bodies than do white and Hispanic girls.

And black girls are significantly less likely to smoke than girls of other races or African American boys.

They also found that girls are frequently the victims of violent crimes. It cited the studies estimating that between one third and one fourth of girls are sexually victimised by the time they finish high school. That includes a range of experiences from rape to sexual harassment.

And nearly two-thirds of rape victims are under 17 years old, the report said.

Source: *The Washington Post*, no date

up With Boys

by Barbara Vobejda and Linda Perlstein

The current anxiety about boys' underachievement is only a negative reaction to the success of girls.

As we have all seen on TV, read or heard on the news, boys are underachieving at every level of education compared to girls and the gap between the academic achievements of boys and girls is widening, according to research in England and a recent report compiled by Dr. Anthony Gallagher of Queens University. But for some critics the current anxiety about boys' underachievement is only a negative reaction to girls' success.

Although a child's early experiences usually take place within the family, one of the most important agents of socialisation is, and has been, the extremely different educational experiences to which boys and girls are exposed. Does anybody remember the pretend-kitchens we had to sit in during home economics or domestic science class? Educational experiences of women have not only reflected the dominant ideologies of the time, but their social class, the situation in the labour market and society's fixed attitudes to them. If a society expects men and women to fulfil different roles then it is hardly surprising that education will play an important part in reinforcing these roles.

The previous curriculum did not tax girls' intellectual powers fully or put them in a position where they could compete with men for social, economic or political power. In coeducational primary schools, research has shown that girls received praise

Is the Future Female?

by Michele Jordan

for neatness, cleanliness, and social ability, and boys for toughness, strength, and adaptability.

These behavioral characteristics were largely reinforced by reading, materials, toys and teacher expectations. You only have to look at *Ladybird* books to see that girls and mothers rarely go outside their domestic sphere, girls passively looking on as their adventurous brothers pursue interesting and active pursuits, usually with their father. Girls were still being schooled with marriage in mind.

Historically we see that women had to struggle for education throughout the centuries when learning was a privilege for men, and not for mothers, wives and daughters. When the Compulsory Education Act was introduced in 1870 [in the United Kingdom], it was still seen as more important for boys and when work was available girls did not attend. "A woman's place is in the home," the pillars of society dictated, so therefore education for women was seen as less important.

In Victorian times, it was argued that biological differences made men more intellectual than

women. It was claimed that women's brains were smaller than men's and as a result women were incapable of mental stimulation. It was also recommended that for the health of the girl/woman, all activity (especially any form of intellectual study) should cease during pregnancy, puberty and menstruation. Women who wanted to be educated were often accused of wanting to be like men. A life of scholarship did not always combine easily with a life devoted to the needs of a family. Even the most fortunate of women who were supported by their families became ostracised by society for challenging the male-dominated world of education.

The previous tendency for girls to specialise in Arts subjects acted as a handicap for those who wished to enter further or higher education. In the 1960s, two-thirds of women concentrated on Arts while two-thirds of boys passed two or more scientific subjects as A-Level. This was significant as fewer educational and occupational opportunities are open to those who did not have maths or physics qualifications.

Now in the 1990s girls are not being told what sort of education/knowledge is suited to them and they are being less inhibited by gender stereotypes within British society. And without the preconception that they will be less successful than boys, girls are now performing better than boys.

Source: *Women's News*, 19 March 1998