

## The wonder of teaching boys

### Get beyond the myths and enjoy it.

By Joe Cox

Recently, there has been a great deal of debate about new research into the differences in learning styles among girls and boys. Despite noble motives to avoid gender stereotyping and prejudice, most teachers will agree that boys and girls interact differently to their educational environments.

Sadly, the current dialogue about single-sex education is fraught with sociological caveats and, more often than not, gets hijacked by the left-right political noise machine. However, the wonder of boys transcends sociology and politics.

**Boys are funny.** Yes, girls have a sense of humor, too, but they are not as literal or as quick to give themselves over to the humor of a given situation. Boys respond to teachers who are funny. They like to laugh and are always telling jokes - often very bad jokes - or imitating others or their teachers. In an all-boy setting, humor is everywhere. The more we encourage their innate and uniquely literal sense of humor, the more they will respond favorably.

**Boys respond to role models.** Boys need male role models as they grow, and they need to see a wide range of masculinity to pattern their lives after. At boys' schools they are exposed to a wide variety of men who model their masculinity in different ways. Boys also need women teachers and coaches who appreciate the unique learning needs of boys and develop in them important empathic skills.

**Boys are social.** They want to be part of something larger than themselves. Joe Ehrmann, the former All-American and All-Pro football player, points out that in today's world boys are taught that being a man is about being successful in athletics, with women, and earning money when, in reality, life is about relationships, being part of something bigger than yourself, and loving those around you. Boys are joiners and boys make great friends. It is exceptional to see the bonds of friendships that form in the all-male class, where boys are not competing with one another for a girl's attention. They are bonds of friendship that last a lifetime.

**Boys are ethical.** Most boys and girls approach issues of right and wrong somewhat differently. Girls are very sensitive to the feelings of others where boys see things more black and white, right and wrong. Boys like to take charge, and those of us who work with boys are generally impressed with the virtues of letting boys take responsibility for their moral decisions.

**Boys are competitive.** When confronted with intellectual or artistic challenges boys rise to the trial. They like to compete with one another, and they like to test themselves against their limits. Girls are more sympathetic to those who did not win, where boys exalt in their victories. If handled correctly, competition in an all-male environment is a strong motivator and can be a positive force in the learning dynamic.

**Boys are active.** Anybody who has been around boys knows that they can't sit still. They like to push when in a line. They pick up sticks and sword fight when they are supposed to be on a nature walk. They respond to big-muscle, active-learning challenges and thrive on physical challenges. Their boundless physical energy can sometimes be at the root of behavior and discipline problems if not appreciated and directed in more positive directions. Boys love hands-on projects, making things, building things up or tearing things down.

**Boys are great leaders.** They can handle responsibility from a very young age and respond in direct proportion to the trust shown them. Compared with levels of self confidence in girls, boys are overly confident, even when the evidence for such confidence is not there. In the hands of a good teacher, this built-in can-do attitude can be a wonderful incentive to academic achievement, leadership success, and self esteem.

Girls and boys move through their developmental stages in markedly different ways, and often quite out of harmony with one another. Girls acquire language facility sooner, comprehend concepts earlier, and develop small-motor control at a younger age. There is fastidiousness to the work of girls that most boys never acquire.

Sociological and political opinions aside, all of our students need our individual attention. No one argues that certain segments of our male population are failing disproportionately and that our success as a society depends on all of our children getting the best education we can provide. The best thing we can do is to get beyond the myths and the politics of single-sex education, encourage all of our students to blossom, and, most important, never stop celebrating the joy that is the wonder of boys.