

The case for single-sex: It lets girls be girls and boys be boys



It's not about playing a role for the opposite sex. 'Being unique and having deep interests is what's considered cool.'

Josh Dehaas

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When Katherine Snell moved to Toronto in sixth grade, she was shy about almost everything — except for insisting she would "absolutely not" attend a girls' school. But, after noticing the poise and confidence of her teenage hostesses on a tour of Branksome Hall school in the city, she reconsidered. Five years later, she's glad she did. She's directed a one-woman show, flown to Lithuania for a global debating championship and enters Grade 12 this fall as Head Girl of The Bishop Strachan School.



Katherine Snell is a Grade 12 student at all-girls' The Bishop Strachan School in Toronto. Photo: Kevin Van Paassen/The Globe and Mail

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Believers in single-sex schools consistently argue that not having the opposite sex around allows students to take risks that build confidence. Add in classrooms adapted for the different ways boys and girls learn, and pupils thrive, say educators. "Boys and girls have different energy and interests," says Deryn Lavell, head of Bishop Strachan in Toronto. "Why wouldn't we take advantage of that?"

Educational psychologist Abigail James taught math and science at both boys' and girls' schools for 25 years before returning to school herself for her PhD at The University of Virginia. She wanted to better understand why boys and girls responded so differently to her lessons, so she focused on neuroscience and linked what she had noticed in the classroom to brain scans that show how young brains develop differently by gender.

Her investigations affirmed what, she says, most teachers already know: Most girls are verbal-auditory learners who are primed to listen and read, while boys are usually kinaesthetic learners, whose advanced motor skills and spatial skills make them suited to hands-on learning. As a result, the same lesson may need a different approach, depending on the sex of the student. This idea can be controversial says Dr. James, who readily admits that not all boys are "boy-learners." But "teachers teach groups," she says.

Dr. James gives the example of teaching a class to fold origami cranes: Girls will sit and listen for step-by-step instructions; boys will just start folding. Girls need to be prodded to try and visualize what the next step might be. Boys need to slow down before impulsively making incorrect folds and ruining their square of paper.

It's not just the lessons that can be better tailored by sex, says Dr. James. Studies show that boys need more physical activity breaks in order to focus.

You don't have to tell that to Neil Menzies, a father of three from Vancouver whose son Philip attends St. George's School for boys. When Philip started Grade 5 at his new school, he was thrilled to have four times as many physical education classes. Mr. Menzies was thrilled that Philip was more focused on his lessons. And, he says that, while politeness is expected at St. George's, sitting still is not.

Dr. James says there's a reason co-ed schools can't accommodate restless boys as easily. If a boy starts to wander mid-lesson, the girls (who are auditory-verbal learners) find it difficult to concentrate.

Patti MacDonald, who is now assistant head, junior school at Bishop Strachan, doesn't think those rowdy boys would necessarily be missed.

The first thing she noticed in her boy-free kindergarten class was that the blocks table was filled with girls. (In her previous co-ed classroom, exuberant boys had always dominated the station.) The second thing she noticed was that the girls weren't building skyscrapers to knock down like the boys would. "They were building houses to play house or rocket ships to play astronaut ... role playing the way girls do," says Ms. MacDonald. The third thing she noticed? "They were getting exposed to the mathematics that comes from manipulating blocks." Girls in her co-ed class had missed out.

Dr. James wasn't surprised to hear that story. In fact, she credits a lack of boys at school with fuelling her own interest in science and math while growing up. If there had been boys in her science lab, they would have shot their hands up first, studies have shown. Dr. James would have doubted her ability, instead of gradually gaining confidence, she says.

But there are also some non-academic reasons why so many parents notice improved confidence when their children start at a single-sex school. Not having the opposite sex around means less pressure to "be cool," says Mr. Menzies. "At St. George's, [not having girls around] creates an environment that encourages children to take risks and go for it and not worry about whether it's cool."

Dr. James agrees. "In a single-sex class ... a girl who's good at science doesn't feel pressure to dumb down and a boy

who's good at music doesn't feel like there's something weird about him," she explains. This idea clicked for her when one of the toughest football players at the boys' school where she worked told her he'd be mortified if his friends back in West Virginia knew he liked to paint. "He would not have had the courage to try art had he been in a co-ed school," says Dr. James.

Bishop Strachan student Ms. Snell has observed a similar dynamic at her school. "There's very little pressure to conform at a girls' school," she says. "Being unique and having deep interests is what's considered cool."

She also dismisses the one criticism of single-sex education that Dr. James says she hears most often: "People say students should learn to live co-ed because the world is co-ed," says Dr. James. But Ms. Snell points to plenty of opportunities to socialize and collaborate with young men. She attends co-ed dances, works with boys from Upper Canada College on co-productions of Shakespeare and teams up with boys for debating competitions.

And she says her parents need not worry that she'll meet a boy and go weak in the knees because she went to a girls' school. "Because we're not in class with [boys], we don't grow up worrying about how to act a certain way around them," says Ms. Snell. "So when we do meet them, we just act how we normally act. You know ... confident."

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