



# This One's for the Girls

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## This may seem hard to believe,

but there was a time in America when it wasn't considered important to educate girls.

During the early colonial days, it was commonly believed that a girl with the ability to read the Bible and the skills needed to run a household was well educated. Even the wealthiest girls in the land got little more than this with, perhaps, a smattering of embroidery, dancing, or language, such as French, added to their limited curriculum at the time. These skills were considered important in the role these women would most frequently play—hostess. It was also believed that girls were best instructed by their own sex. And, so, girls were most often taught by women who also had limited educational experience. It is hard to comprehend just how limiting this might make a girl's world back in the late 1700s. In fact, in the 17th and 18th centuries in the United States, studies estimate that fewer than 45 percent of women could actually sign their own name.

The argument against educating girls in the same way boys were being educated at the time was obvious and simple: Why in the world would a woman, whose primary function was to get married, have babies, and run a household, need such lofty ideas filling her brain? Indeed, the argument continued, it might be damaging to the social order.



Therefore, it was a rather extraordinary notion in 1818 for a woman to believe not only in such an education for girls, but to write publicly arguing for the government to fund education for girls at a time when public funding of education was reserved for boys. The written case, *A Plan for Improving Female Education*, was considered revolutionary, provocative, and . . . outrageous. Yet, the author, Madame Emma Hart Willard, was undeterred; she was committed to politically “stirring the pot,” not only convinced that girls should receive the same education that was offered to boys, but that she could be the one to do it. Her famous quote is timeless: “An education should seek to bring its subjects to the perfection of their moral, intellectual, and physical nature in order that they may be of the greatest possible use to themselves and others.” One of her best arguments? Our growing country needed more teachers and who would be better suited to educating children than well-educated women?

## **But, what could this unique woman’s vision possibly have to do with the education of girls in the 21st century?**

As it turns out, there are many ways in which women still have to argue for access to the education they need and want in order to “be of greatest possible use to themselves and others.” Even here in the United States.

Let us fast forward through the decades. Once the case had been successfully made for girls to be educated, good schools to do just that sprung up across the nation. Of course, many of these schools were schools that only educated girls. It was not until the end of the 19th century that public schools were predominantly coeducational, including both boys and girls.

Do you know why schools became coeducational? I bet the answer will surprise you. Most schools became coeducational for two very simple reasons:

- 1. It was less expensive to run one school that had both boys and girls.**
- 2. It was considered to be more equitable—fairer—if all children were educated precisely the same way.**

Therefore, and this is important, schools that are coeducational are not better than girls' schools or boys' schools. In fact, since the late 1990s there has been renewed scholarly interest in understanding what difference it makes to be educated in a single-sex versus a coeducational school. "Renewed interest" is a gentle way of saying that the argument for "girls-only" or "boys-only" education is a heated, politically charged, controversial debate.

First, a few statistics that might be of interest to you, especially if you are a girl or the parent of a girl:

- 1. Did you know that only 10 percent to 20 percent of op-eds, newspaper editorials, or other journalists' opinion pieces are written by women?<sup>1</sup>**
- 2. In the world of academic scholarship, publishing research is a key to success. Did you know that from 1991 to 2010 only 13.9 percent of the research published in economics was by women authors? Even in history, considered to be more "female-friendly," only 30 percent of the papers are written by women. And, in the sciences, the odds aren't good either: In the biological sciences, only 30 percent of the published papers are by women.<sup>2</sup>**

3. Want to know about women engineers? In 2010, women headed to college in record numbers, but they earned just 18 percent of the undergraduate degrees in engineering. Recently, a study by Rice University in 2012 found both male and female scientists believe that gender discrimination—bias against women students—is one of the reasons why.<sup>3</sup>
4. The US Department of Education reported the following statistics about degrees earned by women in 2009–2010<sup>4</sup>:
  - Computer science: 18 percent
  - Construction trades: 4 percent
  - Mechanic and repair technologies: 4 percent
5. Women make up 51 percent of the population in the United States, but hold just 16 percent of the seats in Congress. Hmm...

### **Now we are ready to talk about girls' schools and single-sex education.**

Do you know what the biggest difference is in a school that is all-girls, a school where there are no boys? The single biggest difference? Girls have to do everything. Everything. All the leadership positions, all the sports, all the clubs and activities, all the student council decisions are done by girls in girls' schools. If they don't do it, it doesn't get done. There is no standing on the sidelines, no deferring to boys to give the answer or do the heavy lifting. So, why might this be a good thing?



In girls' schools, we are quite used to documenting any claim we make with research. As we know in the real world, often the best arguments are those that can be made with real data and statistics. So, here is what research tells us:

In 2009, Alison Booth, an economist and research fellow at Australian National University, conducted research that found that girls in girls' schools were more likely to take healthy risks than girls in coeducational settings.<sup>5</sup> In fact, even placing girls in an all-girls' group was likely to increase the chances of risk taking. What do we mean by risk taking? Calling out an answer in class, trying out for a play or a sport, experimenting in a school club or activity; in short, getting involved in situations that require more self-confidence, bravery, or willingness to fail or appear foolish. Why do you suppose girls don't mind appearing foolish in the presence of other girls? Because they aren't worried about what boys may think. It sounds simple, and it is.

### **There is more. In girls' schools, girls are more likely to be focused on academics first.**

Don't worry, this does not mean there is no social life. It means that while in school, girls are free to think about their academic interests without distraction and this shows up in test results, which is a very good thing. As recently as 2005, a review of single-sex studies concluded that all-girls' schools were more frequently associated with higher career aspirations, improved test scores, and better learning climates.<sup>6</sup> In other words, girls in girls' schools are encouraged to believe they are smart and are rewarded for acting on that belief. The air is just different; the conversations are just different; the talk of what is possible is just *different*.



What happens in schools filled with girls who are willing to take the right kinds of risks and have interesting ideas? It might interest you to know that, according to the Girl Scout Research Institute, for girls ages 11 to 13, 73 percent reported improving the world around them as their favorite activity (i.e., activities related to the environment or helping others).<sup>7</sup> Imagine what it is like to be surrounded by girls who want to improve the world and who believe they can do so. It is heady stuff. We also know that more young women than men aged 15 to 25 participate in raising money for charity, volunteering for nonpolitical groups, active group membership, and participating in a run/walk/ride for charity.<sup>8</sup> Put that kind of energy together with girls who want to change the world and “big dreams” start to seem pretty doable.

**What is rarely mentioned when girls’ schools are compared to coeducational schools is that the teachers in single-sex schools have a bit of an advantage:**

they only have to worry about how to bring out the best in one gender. Teachers in girls’ schools are focused solely on girls—how they learn, how they play, how they create friendships, what they need to be successful. The facilities are designed with girls in mind—no waiting for the pool or the tennis courts; meals served are created with the nutritional needs of girls as the primary consideration. From guest speakers to social activities, from rules to relationships, there is only one thing that is important: what girls need and want. Don’t get me wrong, everybody in girls’ schools cares about boys; it is just that in these “girls rule” zones, boys are not the main agenda item. Girls are. It is pretty amazing to be the center of all this attention during such a critical time in your life.

In the end, being who you want to be, living the life you dream of having, comes down to having the self-confidence to go after it. But where does this self-confidence come from? Why do some girls have it and others don’t?



These are tough questions. While there are no guarantees, we do know that how we are treated as young people shapes our feelings about self-esteem. We know that the messages we get along the way from parents, friends, teachers, and other adults all contribute to our sense of who we are. Those messages are played and replayed in our heads and become the messages we use to talk to ourselves, reinforcing what we believe about ourselves. Our school successes and struggles also shape our dreams and our attitudes. Our self-confidence is directly linked to all of these experiences. We know that, in general, if a girl feels capable, appreciated, and supported by friends and teachers, she will have the right seeds to grow healthy self-esteem. That is why high school needs to be a place where girls are both challenged and supported, cheered and held accountable, celebrated and told to dream even bigger.

### Consider this:

- 1.** In mathematics and computer skills, girls' school alumnae rate their confidence at the start of college 10 percent higher than do their coeducational counterparts.
- 2.** In writing, 64.2 percent of girls' school graduates report confidence in their writing skills, compared to 58.8 percent of women graduates of coeducational schools.
- 3.** Nearly half of all women graduates of single-sex schools (44.6%) rate their public speaking skills as "high" compared to 38.5 percent of women graduates of coeducational schools.<sup>9</sup>



So, why wouldn't you want to ensure you have some self-esteem insurance as you enter the real world? Research shows that girls' schools deliver on that score.

Those who are dubious about girls' schools say things like: *But what about boys? Having no boys around isn't anything like the real world. Without boys, my social skills won't develop. Do I really want to be around snooty girls all the time? Boys are my best friends; I need them around me!*

It is easy to criticize something that you have not experienced firsthand. It is important to note that these are nearly always comments made by those who have never attended or visited a girls' school. They are perceptions, not reality. Myths, not truth. You owe it to yourself to judge for yourself after you have visited a girls' school to see what it is really like.

This article gets its title from a famous country song, "This One's for the Girls." Whether or not you consider yourself a country music fan, you have to admire the lyrics:

This one's for all you girls about thirteen  
High school can be so rough, can be so mean  
Hold on to your innocence  
Stand your ground when everyone's giving in

This one's for the girls  
Who've ever had a broken heart  
Who've wished upon a shooting star  
You're beautiful the way you are

This one's for the girls  
Who love without holding back  
Who dream with everything they have  
All around the world<sup>10</sup>



This one's for the girls. Imagine being in a place where you are known, a place where others care about your dreams, a place where others care about you, a place where girls dream with everything they have.

Education is not one size fits all. Every girl needs something that is designed with her in mind. Her strengths. Her dreams. Her talents. Her. That is what girls' schools are and that is what girls' schools do for girls.

Other resources:

[www.mydaughter.co.uk](http://www.mydaughter.co.uk)

[www.ncgs.org](http://www.ncgs.org)

[www.singlesexschools.org](http://www.singlesexschools.org)

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<sup>1</sup> "Who Narrates the World," accessed January 8, 2013, <http://www.theopedproject.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Robin Wilson, "Scholarly Publishing's Gender Gap," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 59 (2012), <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Hard-Numbers-Behind/135236>.

<sup>3</sup> "Diversity in Academe: A Special Report," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 59 (2012), <http://chronicle.com/article/Volume-59-Issue-10-November/135474>.

<sup>4</sup> Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, Roth, National Center for Education Statistics, Manning, Wang, Zhang, American Institutes for Research, Notter, and Synergy Enterprises, Inc., "The Condition of Education 2012," US Department of Education, <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/index.asp>.

<sup>5</sup> Alison L. Booth and Patrick J. Nolen, "Gender Difference in Risk Behavior: Does Nurture Matter?" *Econstar*, <http://www.econstar.eu/bitstream/10419/35784/1/593988744.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Mael, Alonso, Gidson, Rogers, Smith, American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC, "Single-sex Versus Coeducational Schooling: A Systematic Review," US Department of Education, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> The Girl Scout Research Institute, "The Ten Emerging Truths: New Directions for Girls," 11-17, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning, Tufts University, "Special Report: The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation," 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Linda J. Sax, "Women Graduates of Single-Sex and Coeducational High Schools: Differences in Their Characteristics and the Transition to College," UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Lindsey, Hillary Lindsey, and Aimee Mayo, "This One's for the Girls," 2003.



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