

# Adam's Rib

## *Why have girls become so much better at reading than boys?*

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The poor performance of English boys in relation to girls, particularly in reading skills, is a relatively new phenomenon. Various surveys show that, formerly, where sex differences did occur at the age of 7 or 8, they usually disappeared by the age of 11. Today, significant differences between girls and boys are still dramatically apparent in English tests at the ages of 14, 16 and 18.

These differences do not occur in other countries, such as Germany and Austria, even at the ages of 7 or 8. One might imagine this is due to the greater regularity of their language or to differences within their culture. However, there is one English-speaking country that is very similar to England but where no sex differences in reading exist. That country is Scotland.

As late as 1992, when sex differences in England had become the norm, no sex differences in reading scores existed among Scottish eight-year-olds. Furthermore, a comparison of the results of Scottish and English children on the Edinburgh Reading Test showed that, compared to all English children, Scottish boys were reading at a level four months in advance. Compared to English boys, their level was 10 months in advance.

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain boys' poor achievement. With these reasons in mind, one might wonder whether 1) boys mature more slowly in England than in Scotland, or 2) Scottish boys' brains are different from English boys' brains, or 3) boys are better behaved in Scotland.

Before dealing with these questions, it is important to note there is one major

difference in educational policy between the two countries. While 1960's child-centred methods of instruction have radically reshaped the teaching of reading in England, in Scotland methods have remained more traditional and phonics-based. It may be that code-based methods of reading instruction are more advantageous for boys than other methods.

There are just two crucial skills all children must possess if they are eventually to become readers. They must be able to detect the separate sounds in spoken words, and they must have some knowledge of letter-sound correspondences. Traditional, direct instructional approaches teach these components systematically, sequentially and comprehensively, and these skills are emphasized right from the start of instruction.

First, boys do mature at slower rates than girls. Australian research shows that young boys are eight months behind girls in their ability to remember some letters in a word. At the age of five, boys can remember on average only one letter in a word. Yet in England, boys of this age are expected to remember words such as "crocodile" or "slippers."

In Scotland, where teaching focuses more on phonic-processing skills, boys are given the opportunity to process letters one at a time and to transfer visual information to auditory memory (an area where they are not at such a disadvantage). Thus their low visual memory skills become relatively unimportant.

Second, boys and girls do appear to use different areas of the brain when reading. Areas predominantly in the left hemisphere are activated in boys, whereas areas in both hemispheres are activated in girls. Evidence suggests that methods that encourage the use of pictures, word shape and word length

as reading strategies (largely activating right-brain processes) put boys — who have all their eggs in one basket, so to speak — more at risk of failing to use the appropriate left-hemisphere skills.

Third, it would not be surprising if English boys behaved badly compared to Scottish boys. If a boy is fed a teaching diet heavy on guessing and the use of minimal phonic cues, when faced with a word such as "bark," the two letters that he may be capable of holding in visual memory are just the end letters b\*\*k. Possible guesses will include book, beak, back, bake, buck and so on. If the boy is only 5, he will remember the initial 'b' at most, and the possible guesses become almost endless. Boys' ensuing frustration and boredom could easily lead to lack of motivation and bad behaviour.

Boys and girls have the same teaching requirements when it comes to learning how to read. The reading achievement of all children can be enhanced with the appropriate instruction; without it, the reading progress of all children will be curbed. However, since the factors described above may make boys more susceptible to developing reading problems than girls, it seems likely that the lack of appropriate instruction will take more of a toll on boys.

In England, there may be the fear that phonological and code-emphasis methods of instruction represent a return to all that is old-fashioned, to didacticism, competition, élitism and selection. This need not be the case. Instead, the simple policy one must adhere to is that no practice should be embraced without evidence to support its effectiveness. Rather than increase differences among children, differences will diminish if all children receive good instruction.

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