

# Teaching Girls

Andrew Fuller

## Girl Smarts

The variability between girls can challenge teachers. This variability is often concealed, as girls often like to highlight their similarities with one another. Nevertheless, if you have a class that is predominantly girls there are some key things you can do to maximize their learning.

### **We are all in this together**

Girls generally like teachers who like them. They want to fit in and be part of the group. They want to do well.

Many girls like to be prepared. Give directions the day before. Give them advance notice of new topics as material to investigate.

### **Override the cliques**

Many girls waste a lot of time worrying about relationship issues that never actually occur.

Relationship divisions are toxic to girls' learning. Override the cliques. Successful classes for girls don't allow girls to splinter into set groups. From day one, move girls and get them interacting with a variety of other students. Not just their special best friends.

### **Assign roles and membership in group work**

Girls thrive with group work when the teacher selects who is in each group and assigns roles to each girl. Give each member of the group the responsibility of completing a task and set a time limit. Rotate who reports back to the class. Generally use groups with even numbers. Don't let girls become "invisible" in your class.

If allowed to control the social interaction, girls can be merciless and organize merciless vendettas against other girls. If this does occur you need to call out the behaviour and give clear consequences.

Have a clear policy of girls being able to speak to staff members. Interview the girls doing the bullying. Use empathy 'how do you think she feels?' and a clear hands off warning regarding bullying. For example, 'you don't have to like her but there is to be no looks, rumours, telephone, electronic contact etc. If it continues we will have to take further consequences'.

### **Praise more than you think you need to**

Just as boys love it if you tell them are legends, geniuses and are brilliant, girls initially want to know if you like them. They are more responsive than boys to facial cues so make eye contact, smile and nod positively more.

Once they know you like them, the world is your oyster. Girls who have a sense that you like them and are interested in them they will want to collaborate with you.

### **Value them and they become heroines**

Have a clear set of values. Live them and insist on them. Talk about women who have had powerful impacts on the world and establish community projects (not just fund raisers) that show them they can make a difference.

### **Teach self-reliance**

Once girls have a sense that you like them it is useful to move them from pleasing the teacher to self-reliance. Create a non-judgemental environment in which they can take risks.

The desire that many girls have to "get it right" can quickly topple into anxiety and perfectionism. Perfectionist girls may constantly seek reassurance from you that they are doing the right thing, teach them to trust their instincts and do what they think is right

Most girls will do what is asked of them, but they may be less likely to realize that they have acquired a skill. They may be more likely to focus on having pleased the teacher and

attribute successes to having pleased the teacher rather than improvements in their own skills and capabilities.

Help them to develop a resume of acquired skills. Teach them that everyone can get smarter. Don't allow them to avoid trying things. Encourage having a go and living by your wits.

### **Girls need quiet time**

As many girls are social they can discount their own abilities and creativity. Structure solo quiet thinking and creativity times in schools.

### **The answer is the answer**

Girls often think that if hard work pays off, working longer and harder will always result in success. Teach them to work smarter not harder. They need to know it doesn't matter how much you put into completing a project, if the answer is incorrect. Glitter pens and beautiful covers are lovely but not if they hide inadequate work.

Giving girls time trials e.g. "I want to see how much you can get done in twenty minutes" helps them to overcome procrastination.

### **Don't dampen high-energy girls**

Make sure you don't subtly indicate to high-energy girls that they should be quiet and more docile. Girls often are given implicit messages such as don't get too excited, run too fast, don't over do it, get too tired, don't be too you. Girls often try to gain acceptance through being similar to others and that can squash the spirit of some girls and engender over-compliance. Talk about women who have been rebels.

Know that it is easy to dis-empower girls by showing them how to do things rather than getting them to solve them. Don't be too helpful.

### **Give girls special access to technology**

Encourage computer use. Boys often get plenty of screen time. Girls use computers for social networking but may need to be encouraged to complete tasks, conduct research and seek data on computers.

### **Make mathematics hands on**

Making mathematics and sciences hands on and as people oriented as possible keeps girls engaged. Use models, manipulatives and visuals such as graphs to teach mathematics. Match mathematics with journal writing. Make mathematics concrete (dice rolls and blocks). If girls are having difficulties in mathematics ask them to write out the issues they don't understand.

Read out the full names of chemistry symbols and algebra. Abstractions can bewilder some girls and imperil their success.

Illustrate the relevance of science. For example, in the film *Legally Blonde*, the character Elle Woods wins her court case by pointing out the witness could not have taken a shower or she would have lost all her permanent curls. She cites the complex chemistry involved in creating permanent waves as evidence (James, 2009)

### **Improve spatial skills**

Girls are generally not as adept as boys as non-verbal problem solving and spatial visualization. For this reason, make time to help them develop spatial problem solving.

This can be achieved by:  
Playing puzzles- jigsaws, scrabble, chess  
Making pottery and weaving  
Making and reading maps  
Using physical objects such as blocks to stand for variables in equations.  
Using physical representations of atoms, electrons, planets  
Using examples of diamond and crystal structures in jewellery  
Using spatial problem solving exercises that involve animals or horses.

### **Girls generally learn by talking- thinking- doing**

Often girls need to discuss an issue in small groups and then need to some time to think about an issue before applying the knowledge. Try to structure most activities for girls in the sequence of talk-think-do.

Extracted from the *Brain Based Learning Manual*, available at [www.andrewfuller.com.au](http://www.andrewfuller.com.au)