**Infancy is the time to start tackling inequality between girls and boys by** [**Gaëlle Dupont**](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/ga-lle-dupont)**, 09/10/2012**

[**http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/09/gender-discrimination-research-france**](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/09/gender-discrimination-research-france)

When does gender inequality take root? In the cot, according to the Bourdarias nursery in Saint Ouen, in the suburbs of Paris, the first infant care centre in [France](http://www.theguardian.com/world/france) to introduce a policy to combat discrimination in 2009.

Last month France's minister for women's rights, [Najat Vallaud-Belkacem](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/22/najat-vallaud-belkacem-france), visited the nursery to promote this pioneering work. Only one other nursery in Seine-Saint-Denis has launched a similar policy. "We will not achieve equality if we do not combat the construction of stereotypes as early as possible," Vallaud-Belkacem said.

"We aim to give [children] the foundations to develop properly," says the head of the nursery, Haude Constantin-Bienaimé. "But what we observe is that even very young boys and girls don't have the same degree of self-confidence.

"Children develop by imitation, with adults exerting considerable influence," Constantin-Bienaimé suggests. "We bring up our children in line with our own representations and with the expectations society places on each sex. Little girls should smile and be sensible, little boys should be brave." Parents are not the only ones to blame. Teachers, the media, literature, the childcare and toy industries bombard toddlers with stereotypes.

The nursery looks much the same as any other, with the usual toys. Without denying differences, its "proactive egalitarian pedagogy" seeks to avoid locking children up in boxes, with pink and tea sets for girls, blue and lorries for boys. "We try to keep toys as neutral as possible, without banning dolls or garages," says David Helbecque, one of the educators. "Simply, we show the young girls that they can play with the toy cars, make a noise, shout and climb. Boys wanting to play with dolls are encouraged too."

"The merit of this pedagogy is that it enables everyone to broaden the scope of what is possible," says Geneviève Cresson, a sociologist at Lille-1 University and a specialist in children and gender relations. "Gender discrimination reduces the opportunities for young women, but is also damaging for their male counterparts, imposing aggressive behaviour and requiring them to hold back emotion."

The craft and cooking workshops are open to all comers. The former is led by a woman, the latter by a man. Everything is vetted: the activities available to children, but also relations between adults of both sexes at the nursery, even everyday language. "Adults need to work hard on their own behaviour to gain an awareness of the biased way they treat girls and boys," Cresson explains. "They're always convinced they are perfectly even-handed."

Seine-Saint-Denis council, which manages a network of 55 nurseries, is backing this initiative. "It is part of a broader approach," says council leader Stéphane Troussel. "We have a scheme to combat gender discrimination in secondary schools and an observatory of violence against women. This is not to say that things are any worse here than elsewhere, but we do not want to deny its existence."

The work at the Bourdarias nursery demands parental support, but the response in this socially mixed area – where executives from the capital rub shoulders with the residents of low-income housing estates – has been positive. The nursery is now heavily oversubscribed.

Childcare specialists are convinced that such policies enhance mutual respect between the sexes and can reduce violence against women. But the approach needs to be applied on a larger scale and extended to schools. "We have nevertheless made a small contribution to laying the foundations," says Constantin-Bienaimé.

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# How do we close the education gender gap? by [Jonathan Wells](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/jonathan-wells/), 01/12/2015

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/how-do-we-close-the-education-gender-gap/>

Despite closing slightly this year, the education gap between male and female students is still of concern to both academics and the government alike.

Last weekend, a panel of experts at the [Being a Man](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/festivals-series/being-a-man?gclid=CJLXntamuMkCFRLhGwodHLwNDw) festival at London’s Southbank Centre debated the possible reasons for the gap, and ways the issue might be resolved.

Chaired by gender research specialist Sandy Ruxton, the experts acknowledged that, since 1996, there has been a growing disparity between the grades attained by male and female students.

A [government report](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/280689/SFR05_2014_Text_FINAL.pdf) published last year found that 7.3 per cent more girls were achieving five or more A\* - C grades than boys at GCSE. And, several months ago, Mary Curnock Cook of UCAS revealed that British girls were, on average, a [third more likely](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11792260/University-gender-gap-growing-warns-admissions-chief.html) to progress to higher education than their male peers. But what is the root cause of this problem? Is the curriculum unfairly gendered in favour of female students, or do boys just not possess the desire to learn?

Sean Simms is a transition manager at the UK based charity [Working with Men](http://workingwithmen.org/). He proposes that the education gender gap may have been caused by a shortage of male teachers.

 “There is a distinct lack of male presence within education,” says Simms. “I think it is too simplistic to say that an increase in this male presence would change young boys’ attitude to learning and attainment, but I think it would definitely help.

 “And why stop at male teachers?" Simms continues. "Why not look to the wider community and ask male family members, entrepreneurs and business professionals to have some kind of contact with young men in education to influence them? That would enable the students to consider possible career paths, and highlight how their education is connected to – and will eventually lead to – what they want to pursue in the future. We need to use these personal insights to create a spark and inspire these young boys.”

Simms also suggested that the lack of male teachers could be most detrimental earlier in boys’ academic careers, despite any major exams being over a decade away.

 “There is currently a minimal male presence in Key Stage 1," observes the transition manager, "and this is a crucial stage of education. At this early stage, young boys’ education tends to be dominated on both sides of the school gate by women. I believe this lack of a male presence is having a lasting impact on a boy’s perception of where men belong in the world of education.

“I’ve spoken to year 9 boys,” Simms continues, “and they’ve told me that they’d prefer to speak to male teachers. One in particular said, 'they understand us, they’ve been through what we’re going through. They know what it’s like to be a boy in this position'. So I suggest, to close this gender gap, we need to get more men present in schools – not just in teaching – but in all areas of the school structure.”

[Errol Lawson](http://errollawson.com/), a motivational schools speaker, believes that it is increasingly difficult for modern schoolboys to establish an identity during their early years. Citing the rise of gender fluidity as a cause for this problem, Lawson thinks that this confusion may be leading to distraction in the classroom.

 “To solve this,” says Lawson, “I think we need to get back to a place in society where it’s okay to be solely a man, and it’s okay to be a woman. And we need to teach boys that it is okay to want to grow up and become a typical man, because there are some specifically male traits and qualities that may be useful.

 “We need to help them develop that,” Lawson continues. “I’m not talking about hypermasculinity here, just character stuff that it might be useful for men to build upon in order for them to function with clearer goals in society.”

Ann Cayenne, a conflict resolution worker who works alongside Sean Simms, disagrees with Lawson. She argues that “with working class families, where the father may have a job such as a car mechanic or bricklayer, his son may aspire to that stereotypically masculine role. And then he may not apply himself at school. But the father’s daughter, who would likely not aspire to these typically male jobs, would need to study in order to create opportunities for herself  – and this would widen the gender gap.”

Cayenne also cited the transition between primary and secondary schools to be more socially awkward for boys than girls, and suggested that this emotional turmoil may result in a social environment unconducive to learning.

 “Year six is one of these transition points for young boys. They have their SATS and they’re getting ready to transition into secondary school. You see boys in primary school and they’re hugging their friends and getting on. Suddenly, when they move to secondary school, they’re terrified of any physicality.”

Sean Simms agrees.

 “Absolutely,” says the transition manager. “They’re terrified of being branded ‘gay’. So there’s absolutely no touching, and no crying anymore. They have to suppress their emotions as they move into secondary school and, unlike girls, are therefore constantly uncomfortable and distracted in the learning environment."

The experts concluded that the stigma surrounding male emotion was the probable cause of the gender education gap. Cayenne spoke of [Troops to Teachers](https://getintoteaching.education.gov.uk/explore-my-options/specialist-training-options/troops-to-teachers), a program in which ex-army personnel are brought into secondary schools to teach. This scheme was introduced by education officials who believed that a lack of discipline had led to the disparity between genders. However, the panel unanimously agreed that this was not the case, and that encouraging emotion in schoolboys may instead be the most effective solution.

Andy Wimbush is an English literature tutor at the University of Cambridge. The majority of students who enrol on Wimbush's course are women, a fact the tutor finds troubling.

 “Men don’t seem to be drawn to creative subjects,” Wimbush says, “and I don’t know why this is. Is there a taboo in boys being conscientious, being devoted to their work in some way? And, if so, why?

 “Possibly, through society’s expectations, boys are being dissuaded from these humanities courses because they are subjects in which a little emotion may be useful? Especially in literature, paying attention to your emotions is a way of understanding the work that you are studying. Boys tend to have, what we call in literature, ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ – which means that if they feel a writer is trying to affect them emotionally in some way, they try to undermine that, and pick it apart.

 “I wonder whether there’s a danger that young men feel as though they can’t respond to a work of literature, or drama, or art with sincerity, with openness, with love. I suspect that this is the ‘other half’, if you like, of the problem we have in getting young girls to enrol on STEM courses.”

The panel were angered somewhat by the fact that despite there being a plethora of STEM schemes that encourage young women to enrol onto the male-dominated science subjects, there is no equivalent for young men to point them in the direction of the humanities.

Ann Cayenne concluded the debate by suggesting that there may be double standards in schooling, favouring female students over the male. Indeed, she revealed that many boys she has spoken to believe that teachers treat female students less severely.

 “In terms of a solution for attainment,” says Cayenne, proposing her answer to the education gender gap problem, “it’s all about highlighting potential in young males, offering more opportunities and starting conversations around their individual goals and aspirations. Helping them get where they want to be rather than telling them what they need to achieve.”