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Parents set the tone

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Mother, author and neuroscientist Lise Eliot says mom and dad can help their kids achieve gender balance

November 21, 2009 | By Julie Deardorff, TRIBUNE REPORTER



Neuroscientist Lise Eliot writes about what's nearest and dearest to her heart: her children and their malleable brains.

The result is a compelling perspective on parenting, one that challenges conventional notions of sex differences. Yes, little boys reach for trucks. And little girls carry dolls. But in her latest [book](#), "Pink Brain, Blue Brain," Eliot deftly refutes the zeitgeist that sex differences are hard-wired at birth. Instead, she shows that parents unwittingly socialize their children during their earliest days.

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Eliot, mom to Julia, 15, Sam, 13, and Toby, 10, believes the sooner parents can step in and tweak their kids growing neurons and synapses, the better their chances of raising both boys and girls with a well-balanced set of skills. She explained how from her office at Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science in North Chicago.

Q. Are little boys and girls really from different planets?

A. Most gender differences are relatively small; there's enormous overlap in boys' and

girls' interests and learning styles. We're focused on this idea that boys and girls learn differently. But it's just not true and it's almost dangerous (to think that) boys are visual learners and girls are auditory. Teachers are hearing this in their so-called brain-based [professional development](#) seminars, and I'm afraid it's triggering a new era of stereotyping.

Q. How can parents help girls grow better brains?

A. There's clear evidence that building toys and spatial activities or targeting type skills are beneficial for mathematics. Boys gravitate toward these things: [video games](#), Legos and baseball. Parents can step in while their girls are young to help develop those skills.

Q. Give us one tip to help a boy's brain.

A. If there's one thing we're worried about, it's the reading/writing gap. There's no question that girls talk a little earlier than boys -- one month on average -- but the vast majority of verbal ability is a reflection on how much time is spent with books and texts. Parents need to make a greater effort to talk, read and sing to their sons and to find books they really like. Even when boys are old enough to start reading on their own, they can still cuddle up at night and [trade](#) off reading pages.

Q. What is one thing you did right with your children?

A. Immersing them in books. The boys are very good readers and not living up to that side of the stereotype. You hear that boys are more interested in nonfiction and those books aren't often a parent's first impulse. But (in my family) if we bring home a whole stack about solar system, or if we're traveling and bring home books about another place or country, the boys really like to browse through them. They don't necessarily have to read them from cover to cover.

Q. What's one of your main messages to parents?

A. Let's stop labeling boys as these sociopathic warriors and let's stop assuming all girls are dying for tiaras and makeovers. We have seen the value of masculinizing our daughters to prepare them for the work world and [careers](#) that are now open to them. But boys haven't had anything like that shift in expectation. If anything, their available opportunities are shrinking.

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Q. How does studying the brain's plasticity affect your own parenting?

A. I have the same issues as anyone with a demanding job. But it has probably made me more of a neurotic mother just thinking about their brains, what's happening, the wiring and the connections.

Q. Do you worry parents will see your book as just one more thing to feel guilty about?

A. I'm hoping it affects not just parents but teachers and the culture. And that it helps anyone interested in gender topics appreciate that nothing is hard-wired. We are all good at the things we spend our time on and we can learn skills we never dreamed we could if we put time into it. The trick is convincing people they can do it.

jdeardorff@tribune.com

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