

Math study finds girls are just as good as boys



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By LIBBY QUAID - July 25, 2008

Sixteen years after Barbie dolls declared, "Math class is tough!" girls are proving that when it comes to math they are just as tough as boys. In the largest study of its kind, girls measured up to boys in every grade, from second through eleventh.

Parents and teachers persist in thinking boys are simply better at math, said Janet Hyde, the University of Wisconsin-Madison researcher who led the study. And girls who grow up believing it wind up avoiding harder math classes. "It keeps girls and women out of a lot of careers, particularly high-prestige, lucrative careers in science and technology," Hyde said.

That's changing, though slowly. Women are now earning 48 percent of undergraduate college degrees in math; they still lag far behind in physics and engineering. But in primary and secondary school, girls have caught up, with researchers attributing that advance to increasing numbers of girls taking advanced math classes such as calculus. Hyde and her colleagues looked at annual math tests. Ten states provided enough statistical information to review test scores by gender, allowing researchers to compare the performances of more than 7 million children. The researchers found no difference in the scores of boys versus girls — not even in high school. Studies 20 years ago showed girls and boys did equally well on math in elementary school, but girls fell behind in high school. "Girls have now achieved gender parity in performance on standardized math tests," Hyde said.

The stereotype that boys are better at math has been fueled, at least in part, by suggestions of biological differences in the way little boys and little girls learn. This idea is hotly disputed; Lawrence Summers, then the president of Harvard, was castigated in 2005 when he questioned the "intrinsic aptitude" of women for top-level math and science. Joy Lee, a rising senior at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Alexandria, Va., says she always felt confident about math, but remembers how it felt to walk into a science class full of boys. "Maybe I was a little bit apprehensive about being the only girl, but that didn't last for very long," said Lee, president of a school club that tries to get young girls interested in science and technology, along with engineering and math.

Still, while there are fewer women in science and technology, there are more women in college overall. To Hyde and her colleagues, that helps explain why girls consistently score lower on average on the SAT: More of them take the test, which is needed to get into college. The highest-performing students of both genders take the test, but more girls lower on the achievement scale take it, skewing the average. For the class of 2007, the latest figures available, boys scored an average of 533 on the math section of the SAT, compared with 499 for girls. On the ACT, another test on which girls lag slightly, the gender gap disappeared in Colorado and Illinois once state officials required all students to take the test.

Back in 1992, Barbie stopped saying math was hard after Mattel received complaints from, among others, the American Association of University Women. So far, while her current career choices include baby doctor and veterinarian — and Dallas Cowboys cheerleader, too — Barbie has not branched out into technology or engineering.