

# TRUE / SLANT

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## Pink is for Boys, Blue is for Girls

For me, one of the most frustrating things about being a teacher was seeing how often the young men and women in my classes attributed their behavior, attitudes, and likes and dislikes to allegedly innate differences in gender. Many of my adult family members and friends carry the same belief when it comes to their children or grandchildren. While scientific evidence disproving many of these “innate” gender differences has existed for decades, it has not always been available or accessible to the average person. I therefore was thrilled to learn about a new book that reviews and explains the science around brain-based sex differences: [\*Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow Into Troublesome Gaps—And What We Can Do About It\*](#), by Dr. Lisa Eliot. In her [review in the Washington Post](#), Emily Bazelon writes:

*In one of the eye-opening studies cited in Lise Eliot’s masterful new book on gender and the brain, mothers brought their 11-month-olds to a lab so the babies could crawl down a carpeted slope. The moms pushed a button to change the slope’s angle based on what they thought their children could handle. And then the babies were tested to see how steep a slope they could navigate.*

*The results?*

*Girls and boys proved equally adept at crawling and risk-taking: On their own, they tried and conquered the same slopes. But the mothers of the girls — unlike the mothers of the boys — underestimated their daughters’ aptitude by a significant margin.*

In her [review in Newsweek](#), Sharon Begley recaps another of Eliot’s points:

*Those differences also arise from gender conformity. You often see the claim that toy preferences—trucks or dolls—appear so early, they must be innate. But as Eliot points out, 6- and 12-month-olds of both sexes prefer dolls to trucks, according to a host of studies. Children settle into sex-based play preferences only around age 1, which is when they grasp which sex they are, identify strongly with it, and conform to how they see other, usually older, boys or girls behaving. ‘Preschoolers are already aware of what’s acceptable to their peers and what’s not,’ writes Eliot.*

This idea of gender conformity reminded me of the work of [Jo Paoletti](#), a University of Maryland professor who conducts research on children’s clothing and gender differences. In a short piece that’s [available online](#), Paoletti explains the history of the connection of pink and blue to each gender. Here’s the portion I find most interesting:

*The Infant’s Department, a trade journal, tried to settle the question in 1918: ‘There has been a great diversity of opinion on the subject, but the generally accepted rule is pink for the boy and blue for the girl. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for a boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.’*

*Clothing manufacturers complained that greeting-card companies were confusing the issue by using pink for girls and blue for boys in birth announcements. The greeting-card people pointed to Gainsborough’s ‘Blue Boy’ and ‘Pinky’ as proof they were right. The debate continued for*

*decades. In 1939, Parents magazine polled customers in a New York department store and found that, while most preferred pink for girls, about one-fifth favored blue for girls and pink for boys. The first children to be consistently color-coded by gender were the post-war baby boomers. Pink has been an exclusively feminine color for only about 40 years.*

Hopefully Eliot's book, as well as Paoletti's forthcoming book (*Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America*), will spread the fact that much of what/who we are as people comes from the parenting we receive and our interaction with the larger society. Because once a critical mass of people internalizes this information, I think we will see that many of the problems we face in education (e.g., girls' performance in math and science, boys' performance in reading and writing) are quite simple and very fixable.