Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How small differences grow into troublesome gaps - and what we can do about it  
Lise Eliot

Lise Eliot is an associate professor of neuroscience and specialises in brain neuroplasticity. In *Pink Brain, Blue Brain* she describes the specific biological differences between males and females but concludes that there is “surprisingly little solid evidence of sex differences in children’s brains” (Eliot, 2009, p. 5). Her work is in contrast to many texts published in the last decade, which argue that there are expansive differences between girls and boys, men and women.

The target audience for *Pink Brain, Blue Brain* is parents and educators. Eliot systematically reviews the research on sex differences from infancy through to puberty. It is easy to get lost in the myriad of studies, but the breadth and depth of Eliot’s analysis gives weight to her conclusions: “We need to be aware of gender but also of the imprecision of stereotypes. Above all, we need to assiduously avoid prejudging any boy or girl. Presuming that girls will be less interested in science or boys will not enjoy writing virtually defeats the purpose of education” (Eliot, 2009, p. 313).

Chapters one and two focus on prenatal and newborn development. At the end of each section is a practical list of tips which can be used by adults to help reduce gender stereotyping and to foster stage-appropriate development in girls and boys. Eliot’s suggestions come directly from her analysis of the research and are genuinely good ideas.

The third and fourth chapters examine sex differences in preschool and primary school aged children. For educators who work in these areas, there are solid reminders of how to educate girls and boys as individuals. A later chapter on “Sex, Math[s] and Science” is not particularly innovative. There is a great body of recent literature on the topic of girls and science. Eliot’s work contributes little that is fresh however, her suggestion that spatial skills should be formally taught does have some merit.

Risk-taking, competition, relational aggression and empathy are all examined from a gender perspective. Cumulatively, “sex differences in emotions and interpersonal behaviour fall mostly in the small-to-moderate range” (Eliot, 2009, p. 293), however, “the good news is that there is plenty of plasticity in every child’s brain to nudge them in either the empathetic or assertive direction” (Eliot, 2009, p. 294).

Eliot tackles the topic of single-sex schooling directly at the end of her book. “There are many sound reasons to advocate single-sex schooling, but sex differences in children’s brains or hormones are not among them” (Eliot, 2009, p. 305). This sits in direct opposition to psychologists’ Leonard Sax and Michael Gurian’s opinions. Lise Eliot is certainly not a supporter of single-sex schools but she does concede that “they can counteract the gender stereotyping that boys and girls impose on each other” (Eliot, 2009, p. 307). Single-sex schools “automatically expand the leadership opportunities available to both boys and girls, and they may increase the odds that each sex will enter non-traditional disciplines” (Eliot, 2009, p. 311). She also suggests that in coeducational schools “there should be some provision for single-sex classrooms in subjects such as computer science” (Eliot, 2009, p. 311).
Pink brain, blue brain is published at a time when gender differences are of increasing interest to readers. Eliot’s work is credible and thorough; her book is well worth reading as a balance to many others which can oversimplify and generalise gender differences. “By appreciating how sex differences emerge – rather than assuming them to be fixed biological facts – we can help all children reach their fullest potential, close the troubling gaps between boys and girls, and ultimately end the gender wars that currently divide us” (Eliot, 2009, back flap).