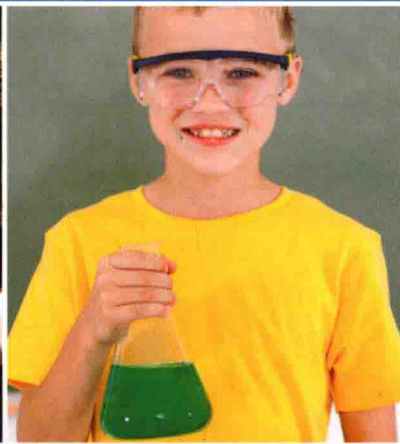


# TEACHING THE **MALE** **BRAIN**

How Boys Think, Feel, and Learn in School



**SECOND  
EDITION**



**Abigail Norfleet James**

Foreword by Bradley Adams

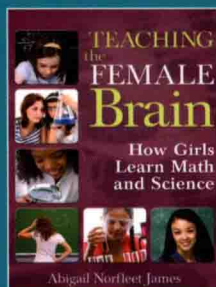
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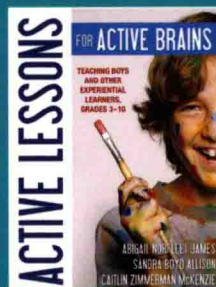
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# JAMES TEACHING THE MALE BRAIN

Second Edition

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# *Teaching the Male Brain*

*How Boys Think, Feel,  
and Learn in School*

**Second Edition**

Abigail Norton  James

*Foreword by Bradley Adams*

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*Teaching the  
Male Brain*

Second Edition

*In Memory of Two Great Teachers:*  
*Elizabeth Copeland Norfleet*  
*and*  
*R. Fillmore Norfleet*

# Foreword

**F**or many years now there has been persistent concern that, in nearly all Western countries, boys are faltering in school. On average, girls outshine boys by almost every metric of achievement and school connectedness. The relative success of girls in nearly all realms of formal education, is still a work in progress and with many barriers still to be overcome, is one of the most profound social revolutions of our era. But a concern remains that too many boys are leaving our schools ill-prepared to enter full participation in the modern economy and to do their part in creating a just and equitable world. Why this is so and what can be done about it are questions not easily answered, and the debate is often intemperate and misplaced. But surely all of us aspire to a world where all young people—boys and girls—can optimize their learning and potential, and reap the full benefit of schooling. This newly updated and expanded book by Abigail Norfleet James, a leading world expert on gendered education, helps us to reach that goal.

The first edition of *Teaching the Male Brain: How Boys Think, Feel, and Learn in School* came out in 2007, the product of many years of harvesting the research literature on gendered education and reflection on a long, varied teaching career. Since its publication, Abigail Norfleet James has had occasion to test, refine, and build upon this important and well-respected work. She has visited 13 countries, 21 states, and hundreds of schools around the world, doing workshops and consultations and speaking to thousands of educators. She has written a companion volume, *Teaching the Female Brain*, and a book on parenting boys. It's hard to think of another expert in the field of boys' education as passionately committed to the well-being of children and to boys' success in the classroom.

For this new edition of *Teaching the Male Brain*, Abigail Norfleet James considerably updates the research since 2007, revisits and tweaks her main arguments, adds new thoughts and direction for pedagogy, and includes a significant chapter on teaching boys in co-educational settings. She is again that very rare educational expert: a scholar steeped in the research literature and a committed and gifted classroom teacher. And this new version of *Teaching the Male Brain* is again a masterful work, combining

research from many disciplines, especially the most recent neuroscience, with advice for teaching honed during a lifetime of working with boys in schools. It is this ability to bring research and practice together—to make possible a dialogue between them—that marks off her approach from that of many other writers. She is careful and sure-footed in canvassing the research on the physical, sensory, socioemotional, and cognitive differences between girls and boys—or more accurately between the female brain and the male brain—and mines the significance of these differences for appropriate pedagogical response. She applies wise and considered judgment, following up on the implications of research that seems compelling and productive for the practice of teaching boys. Always critical of stereotypes or simplifications, she paints a nuanced picture of the interplay of “nature” and “nurture.” The proof, as they say, is in the pudding: The bulk of the book provides teachers with a plethora of strategies, lessons, and resources for teaching boys. Throughout the book, she engages in a high-level professional discussion with teachers, and there is a spirit of respect for how teachers think and go about the business of developing curriculum and honing their pedagogical craft.

Not surprisingly, much of this warranting of good practice is drawn from the author’s own experience in boys’ schools and from some of the remarkable teaching she has witnessed, and fostered, in boys’ schools around the world. The author is appreciative of the special expertise that can flourish in boys’ schools, and of the ways in which single-gender education, with intentional teaching and school leadership, can be transformational for boys as well as girls. Anyone who has observed brilliant teaching in boys’ schools or the powerful ways in which these schools can connect boys to learning will know what this means. At the same time, if honest with themselves, those in co-ed schools would admit that they struggle with the performance of many boys in their classrooms and that they need a more positive, sensitive, and comprehensive way to reach them and help them succeed. The truth is that co-ed schools can and should benefit from the knowledge of expert teachers of boys—and from exactly the expertise and advice on offer in *Teaching the Male Brain*.

All teachers who care about the well-being and success of boys, along with all educators interested in building bridges between research and practice in gendered education, will find *Teaching the Male Brain* a stimulating, insightful, and hugely important resource.

—Bradley Adams

*Former Executive Director of the  
International Boys’ Schools Coalition  
Toronto, Canada*

# Acknowledgments

**T**his manuscript is the product of a lifetime of being around boys. After all, my first home was a boys' dorm. Years later, as a teacher at that same school, I became concerned by the pressure to admit girls to the school. Fortunately, at that time, both the head of school and the Board of Trustees did not yield to suggestions that admitting girls would assist the school in providing a better education to its students. Even though the calls for coeducation were quelled for a while, I felt sure that they would return unless we could demonstrate that what happened in the classroom at boys' schools was fundamentally better for boys than what they experienced in a coed classroom.

As a lifelong academic, I started my search for this information in the library at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. What I found was that most of the substantive research on boys' education was being done in Australia, New Zealand, and England. There were some studies from the United States, but little of the research examined the differences in attitudes toward education for boys and girls. I reasoned that if boys' schools were not to go the way of dodoes and carrier pigeons, I'd have to do the research myself. Fortunately, I found Herbert C. Richards, who wasn't exactly sure of what I was trying to study, but who had the instincts of all good teachers—let the student try to prove his point. I will never forget the day when he brought me a copy of *Scientific American* in which there was a report on the increasing number of countries around the world where more women were graduating from colleges than were men (Doyle, 1999). He pointed to the article and asked me if that was what I was talking about—he just needed to see some data before he was convinced. Dr. Richards has been my teacher, my friend, and my coauthor. He helped me learn to tell the story, and if any of this makes sense, you have him to thank.

If the research on cognitive gender differences is understandable, thank Elana Farace. I met Dr. Farace when I took her psychology class in gender-based cognition, and she has been a valuable mentor and model ever since. In an undergraduate class, she put up with me even though I was a graduate student who was the same generation as her parents, and

she helped me understand how neurobiology applies to cognition. My postdoctoral fellowship was in her lab sponsored by the American Pediatric Brain Tumor Foundation (thank you all) where I learned the fine points of good research and report writing.

While in graduate school, I was supported by two friends whose company, wise counsel, and lunchtime conversations made graduate school survivable. Marlie McKinnon (now Eversole) and I met on our first day in graduate school, in Statistics I, and discovered that we approached the world the same way. She is young enough to be my daughter, but she has an old head on her shoulders and has done me the honor to call me friend.

The other member of the Three Chicks is Lori Howard, and this book would not exist were it not for her. She has read every word, provided countless notes and suggestions, and interpreted the world of special education for me. Her wise counsel enabled me to frame this manuscript so that it makes sense and flows. She should be a coauthor, but she refuses to accept that label. We have written together before and will do so again. We work well together, and our collaboration produces countless ideas, some of which have come to fruition.

Those at the Woodberry Forest School have also had a hand in this. Emmett Wright gave me a job in spite of his better judgment and eventually agreed that I did a good job with the boys. Dennis Campbell, a recent head of the school who wrote the foreword to the first edition of this book, has supported me in this endeavor as well. Ben Hale and David McRae provided a place for me to teach in summer school and allowed me to teach the study skills class in which I tried out many of the suggestions you will find here. Jim Reid has long been a model of what excellent teaching looks like and gave me the freedom to teach science my way.

The journey from the day I left teaching at the boys' school until now was made possible by my family. My parents were my first teachers, and I owe a great deal of what I know about teaching to listening to them discuss what they did in their classrooms. The contrast in their approaches always fascinated me. My father taught boys and my mother taught girls, and they were the first who opened my eyes to the fact that good teaching should be gender specific. My son has been good enough to let me use him as an example (not that he had much choice in the matter) and has provided many suggestions for this work. My husband has been a rock of support for 44 years, and his sense of humor has made my world a better place. His ability to clarify problems is astounding.

Others who have helped include Fred Nichols, Charles Stilwell, John Sanderson, Harold Burbach, Samuels Real Estate, Germanna Community College, Orange County High School, and Marcus Hamilton. The support of Leonard Sax has provided many resources and avenues for my work. In addition, Dan Grogan has generously allowed me to use some of his pictures, and Sanford Wintersberger, also known as the starving artist, provided all the drawings.

Those who assisted with the second edition include Brad Adams, former executive director of the International Boys' Schools Coalition (IBSC; his help has been amazing) as well as all of the IBSC member schools and staff. They have allowed me to go into their schools and to learn from them how best to teach boys. Nancy Genero, who recently retired from Wellesley College, has become a source and a sounding board for finding substantive information in this area.

Others who have provided help include Ann Snider, Lori Howard (again), Ann Taylor Mohrman, Greyson Gillespie, and Jessica Allan from Corwin.

Most important, I thank every one of my students, both boys and girls. I learned much more from you all than I ever taught you. You trusted me to open the world of science to you, and in return, we explored what actually works in the classroom. If you think you recognize yourself in some of the stories, you should know that all the stories are made up (except the ones about my son), but they are based on what did happen in my classrooms. I used the underlying grain of truth to make new stories. Without that grain, there would be no authenticity to these words.

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# *About the Author*



**Abigail Norfleet James** taught for many years in single-sex schools and consults on the subject of gendered teaching to school systems, colleges, and universities. Her area of expertise is developmental and educational psychology as applied to the gendered classroom. Prior to obtaining her doctorate from the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, she taught general science, biology, and psychology in both boys' and girls' secondary schools.

Her previous publications include reports of research comparing the educational attitudes of male graduates of coed schools and single-sex schools and research describing the effects of gendered basic skills instruction. In addition, she has written on differentiated instruction at the elementary school level. She has presented workshops and papers at many educational conferences and works with teachers and parent groups in interpreting the world of gendered education.

Her professional affiliations include the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the Gender and Education Association, the International Boys' School Coalition, and the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education (advisory board member).



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