



Are Diamonds a Child's Best Friend?

In the single-sex versus co-ed debate, Anya Waddington considers a third way.

Illustrations by Charlotte Cleveland



Here's a puzzling fact. Nine out of the top ten independent secondary schools in 2018 are single-sex (although three of the boys' schools take girls in the sixth form)*. And yet, single sex education is less fashionable than it used to be. Today only 18% of independent schools are single-sex and the majority of those are all-girls schools.

Thirty years ago, many boys' schools opened their doors to girls in the sixth form, often in an effort to boost A-level results. Of these, most are now fully co-educational. The increasing popularity of co-education is partly driven by finances, as a single-sex school by definition can only attract half the market. But parents are also warming to it – co-education feels less old-fashioned and better reflects the world around us. And, as any parent with children in different schools knows, the logistics can be challenging, while there are real benefits to shared school experiences and memories. Some schools even offer additional incentives in fee reductions for siblings.

The Oratory and Charterhouse have both recently announced that they will be going fully co-educational in the next two years. The Oratory, whose prep school is already mixed, has commented, "Parents are increasingly looking for a family-based school that can serve daughters and sons at one school." Similarly, Hawkesdown Prep (who have announced their intention to accept girls) cite the "increasing preference for co-education". Since the announcement, the Headmistress of Hawkesdown, Jenny Mackay, says enquires have spiked. In part, the decision to accept girls was a response to the general trend towards co-education, but McKay believes in

the value of educating boys and girls together. She stresses the importance of "preparing them for a world that is diverse." And in this vein, she believes "co-education breaks down the gender stereotypes."

But not everyone is keen. Supporters of single-sex education argue that girls and boys mature at different rates and learn differently. Some feel that it takes social pressures off and allows children to be children for longer. Single-sex schools are environments where girls can be girls, and boys can be boys, without feeling the need to impress one another. There is evidence that in co-ed environments, girls can hang back in the Science lab, and boys are less likely to participate in the Humanities, sing in choirs or play musical instruments.

The arguments for educating girls separately remain particularly strong. Women are poorly represented in science and maths subjects at university and beyond. The Girls' Day School Trust was founded to champion girls' education. Suzie Longstaff, Headmistress of Putney High School, echoes other GDST school Heads, when she says, "The benefits of a girls-only education are particularly apparent when entering the workplace. Putney alumnae are fearless and feisty, don't even consider that anything should hold them back, or that any career would be beyond them."

Similarly, advocates of all-boys schools point out that boys are taught best in the way that suits them. Sarah Segrave, Head of Eaton House The Manor Prep School, sees some powerful advantages. "Boys' schools are able to develop their resources, choose their teachers, and design their curriculums with only one goal in mind – to meet the educational and developmental needs of young men." Ben Beardmore-Gray,

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Headmaster of Moultsford Boys' Prep School, acknowledges the differing requirements: "Girls can be well ahead of boys in terms of maturity and academic performance and that's not a great environment for some boys to be learning in."

For parents weighing up both sides of the argument, there is a third option. The 'diamond model' – a compromise. Diamond schools offer mixed classes in the junior years (3-11) before moving to single-sex academic lessons for the tricky teenage years (11-16) and back to mixed classes for sixth form (16-18). Together-apart-together, making a diamond shape. True Diamond model schools are still relatively small in number (under twenty) but the numbers are increasing (the inaugural Diamond Model Schools Conference was hosted at Ipswich High in May last year), and some schools have adopted versions of the model.

Forest School has been a diamond structure school for over 40 years and is the only one in London. Marcus Cliff Hodges, Warden (headteacher), believes the model provides the best of both worlds, providing "all the academic advantages of single-sex education and all the social advantages of co-education." The structure does not stereotype boys or girls, instead it creates comfortable learning spaces for both girls and boys to make equally confident progress as individuals.

There's evidence that this hybrid model is working. New Hall School in Chelmsford, formerly a girls' school, first accepted boys in 2005, offering them a single-sex education between 11 and 16, and reuniting them with the girls in the sixth form. In 2017 New Hall recorded their best ever GCSE results and again in 2018. Kathryn Jeffrey, the Principal, has only seen benefits since becoming 'diamond'. While retaining the advantages of some single-sex teaching, the model "facilitates the real desire to embrace gender issues and to strive for equality".

The latest diamond convert is Leweston in Dorset. Originally an all-girls school, they are moving towards this model, but only in the STEM subjects. The transition is largely a response to demands from parents and prospective parents. Leweston prep school has been fully co-ed for several years, the first senior day boys arrived last September as part of a phased entry. This coming September boy boarders will arrive.

The Leweston version of the diamond model will work as follows: co-ed up to 13 (end of Y8) and then separate single-sex classes for Maths and Science only up to GCSE. All Humanities teaching will be shared. "The choice to concentrate on STEM subjects is based on world-wide research that girls are particularly vulnerable to low self-confidence in mixed science and maths classes," explains Claire Worsley. "However, in other subjects recent research has revealed that boys perform better when they are outnumbered by girls."

Unusually, Brockhurst & Marlston House offer a unique blend of co-ed and single-sex education at prep level – a sort of mini diamond structure. The boys' school and girls' school share a site and the academic staff teach across both schools in combined departments. The pre-prep and final two years (7 and 8) are mixed, while primary-aged academic lessons are taught in single-sex classes (everything else is mixed). Headmaster, David Fleming, is very persuasive about the advantages of this model. Separate teaching in the primary years "helps with confidence, interests and maturity at different rates." He points particularly to boys' concentration and ability to focus being less sustained than girls, and their organisational skills being behind. Separate classes enable the school to tailor lessons to different interests and develop shorter tasks for boys. In addition, in a class with girls, boys can struggle to come top, which can be bad for their confidence. But

bringing them together in Year 7 has advantages as it allows for more setting and the re-balancing of the girls' social groups. Mixed lessons at this older age can be good for the confidence of both boys and girls. For example, put a boy and a girl together to do a science experiment. Boys can teach girls that it's fine (indeed necessary) to make mistakes – if the test tube blows up, just have another go! Meanwhile, it's a good thing for boys to observe the positive attributes of girls – organisational skills and higher concentration levels (getting it done and completing it properly!).

There are clear academic benefits to single-sex teaching, but life is not siloed like this. Perhaps these imaginative teaching models combine both the best aspects of single-sex and co-educational teaching. With short-term flexibility that could deliver long-term benefits, a diamond could just be forever.

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