



Boys and Girls

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What's co-education? Should we allow girls? How to mix? Dealing with sexuality.

- What is the value of co-education?
- Mixing the unit but not the patrols?
- Significant attitude differences
- Allowing girls to join?
- Sexual issues

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF CO-EDUCATION?

Q - I am debating the argument of co-education is best and I have to show some pros and cons of the situation. I was wondering if you could give me a list of pro that co-education is best. What is the value of co-education?

A - Many people think that the simple fact of having boys and girls in the same group gives added value in terms of education. However this is not always true. Having boys and girls in the same group is not sufficient in itself. If you want to educate young people successfully, you need to have precise educational aims, or objectives, and appropriate methods to achieve them. Educating boys and girls means helping them to grow and acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to take their place in adult society.

One can distinguish two main attitudes regarding the situation of men and and women in society:

1. Gender Complementarity: some people think that men and women are radically different and should play complementary roles in society. According to this perspective, educators have to prepare boys for male roles in adult society and girls for female roles in adult society. Also, both boys and girls should be educated to respect each other and accept their complementary roles.
2. Gender equality: other people think that there are no fundamental differences between males and females, or more exactly that differences between individuals are bigger than gender differences. According to this perspective, boys and girls should not be closed into pre-determined gender roles. Educators should do their best to help each individual, whatever his or her gender, to develop his/her full potential. Young people should be educated in order to be able to challenge gender prejudices and to co-operate between boys and girls on an equal footing.

The gender complementarity perspective is still prevalent in some societies (Southern Europe, Latin America, Arab countries, etc.) whilst the perspective of gender equality seems to be prevalent in countries like USA, Northern and Western Europe, etc. In the 19th century, gender complementarity was the dominant ideology. It was believed that men and women had different natures and had to play very different roles in society. Women had to stay at home and take care of domestic tasks, while men had to work outside the home.

Two different educational systems were set up: one for boys, with the aim of preparing them for male roles and one for girls, with the aim of preparing them for female roles. Of course, behind the idea of complementary roles there was also an idea of "hierarchy": to be brief, men had the power and women had second roles; men were active in society and women stayed at home. Today, this is still the case in many countries or families.

At the beginning, the idea of practising co-education was linked to the aim of challenging this hierarchy and the unequal sharing of responsibilities between men and women in the society. Coeducation was practised by those promoting the "gender equality perspective". However, in reality, those who practise co-education often forget this perspective, or consider it so "normal" that it is no longer necessary to pay attention to it. As a result, the old idea of hierarchy between men and women has returned and influences educators' behaviour.

Recent research undertaken by the World Organisation of the Scout Movement in co-operation with the University of Oslo shows that in "co-educated" groups girls' skills are systematically "underrated" compared with boys' skills. This means that even in "co-educated" groups, adult leaders - men and women - tend to reproduce the old gender hierarchy and division of roles between males and females. For example, it seems "normal" for boys to do "hard" work such as chopping wood, while girls wash dishes. Of course, at the same time, chopping wood is valued (a male task requiring strength and energy) whereas washing dishes is viewed as a boring task requiring very few skills and qualities).

Similar research conducted in schools, shows that teachers unconsciously interact more with boys and underrate girls' skills. This is why some female educators, concerned by the need to prepare girls better to challenge gender prejudices and achieving gender equality, now propose and promote single-sex schools rather than "co-ed" schools.

Therefore, you can see that co-education in itself is not sufficient. Recently the World Scout Conference (gathering the leaders of all National Scout Organisations) approved a "policy on girls and boys, women and men in Scouting", with a clear commitment:

- to the fulfilment of its educational purpose: to contribute to the education of young people, females and males, as equals and on the basis of the needs and aspirations of each individual

- to the principles of equal opportunities and equal partnership

- to reach, in societies where mixed gender relations are the norm, a situation where gender equality is a reality in terms of youth programme, adult resources, management and all other aspects of the Movement at all its levels.

In order to progress in this direction, we have to review all our educational programmes and develop more appropriate tools than just a vague idea of "co-education". We are progressing step by step. For example, six years ago the first woman was elected to the World Scout Committee and this year, for the first time, the new elected chairman of the World Scout Committee is a woman. I hope I have answered your question.

MIXING THE UNIT BUT NOT THE PATROLS?

Q - I'm a Scout leader, and here, there's no group that uses the coeducational Scout system (mixed troops and/or patrols with boys and girls) which is used in many countries. I've made some tests during 6 months with my troop obtaining excellent results by just mixing the troops but not the patrols. Am I doing anything wrong? Where can I get more info about coeducation around the world? Please also let me know if there is any psychological problem

for the boys/girls doing activities in this system?

A - I guess that your Scouts are aged from 11-15. Am I right? If it is the case, this is an age where young people are trying to build up their identity (due to the many changes they have to face at this age: puberty, physical growth, new stage of intellectual development, enlargement of their social background, etc.).

Therefore, we can often observe a spontaneous sexual segregation at this age: boys want to be with boys and girls want to be with girls. Young people feel the need to be with peers of the same gender in order to share common issues, problems and explore their gender identity. Therefore, it is good to provide them with the opportunity to have both mixed activities and activities with peers from the same gender.

The patrol system allows this opportunity: you can have boys' patrols and girls' patrols acting separately but also co-operating with each other on a regular basis.

I don't think that by using such an organisation you can create psychological problems among young people provided that you maintain an atmosphere of genuine co-operation and equality between boys and girls. Take care to prevent excessive competition among patrols, particularly if it is based on gender prejudices ("Boys are stupid!"; "Girls should take care of cooking and stay home...", etc.).

Scout leaders should understand that there is a difference between co-education and just mixing young people of different genders. It is not by putting boys and girls in the same group that you will achieve good co-education. Co-education means giving the opportunity to both boys and girls to learn from each other, discover that they have equal dignity, and learn how to co-operate on an equal footing. Co-education is a good thing if you have clear educational objectives.

The World Scout Bureau is currently undertaking a research project on gender, in co-operation with the Eurasia Scout Region and the European Scout Region, under the guidance of Professor Harriet Bjerrum-Nielsen, from the University of Oslo.

SIGNIFICANT ATTITUDE DIFFERENCES

Q - My country has had girls in Scouts for some time and in some sections they form a majority. In my Troop boys dominate in numbers and in positions although we are about to have our first female APLs for some years.

Until 12 months ago the Troop had been all male for a couple of years. PLs do choose their APLs and are expected to do so on merit and ability to get along with their APL. There are significant attitude differences. Females decide on participation in an activity after they have checked which of their friends are interested, the males decide to participate then see who is going.

Do you have any ideas why this might be? There also seems an issue of critical mass. Once girls comprise around 40% or more the dynamics of the group change and there is more interest in traditional female type things. Again I would be interested in knowing why?

In January 2001 we had our national jamboree. I led a Troop of 36 Scouts, 29 boys and 7 girls. PLs and APLs selected on merits and some patrols were of mixed gender. Each patrol had its own tent with boys and girls sharing the same tent (six in a 14ft x 14 ft tent). The tents had provision for a privacy divider with each patrol making the decision about how it was used. This worked well and each Scout knew that they were being trusted to behave in accordance with their law and promise. There were no breaches of this trust and girls accepted the leaders insistence on being escorted to/from their destination by our male Scouts going out at night.

This seemed to work well for us and parents were aware of our intentions. Do you have any views on the issue?

A - Thank you for sharing your interesting experiences with me. Many national Scout associations have been open to both boys and girls for years. However, the Scout Movement, in general, is just starting to reflect on the respective needs of girls and boys and on the ways to develop our programmes in order to meet these respective needs better.

The World Scout Conference has approved a general policy on "Girls and Boys, Women and Men in Scouting", which you can download. In Scouting, every person should find equal opportunities for his/her personal development whatever her/his gender. Every boy or girl should be supported in order to develop her/his full potential without being limited to the traditional male and female roles in society.

Therefore, it is excellent that, in your troop, boys and girls have an equal opportunity to become patrol leaders. In many societies people are still suffering from gender prejudices which tend to keep girls and women in lower positions or provide them with fewer opportunities for personal development. Refusing full participation to 50% of the population is very detrimental to the development of the society and prevents the development of real democracy.

By offering boys and girls the opportunity to work and live together on an equal footing, Scouting contributes to challenging these prejudices and to changing the mentality of future men and women. According to human rights, both boys and girls should be equally respected in their dignity as a human being. For example, their intimacy should be respected and I agree fully with the arrangements you have taken for camping.

Even in the most developed societies, gender prejudices persist. In general, it is more difficult for a woman to accede to leadership responsibilities than for a man. For example, in Scouting, both at national or world levels, the proportion of women on decision-making bodies is still low: there are 2 women and 10 men among the elected members of the World Scout Committee. This is the main reason why many women want to keep a "Guide" organisation (different from the "Scout" organisation) at national and world levels.

We still have many efforts to do to change this situation. However, the desire to provide both girls and boys with equal opportunities should not make us forget that boys and girls have different needs. To be short, I would say that informal education provided to many girls, from an early age, makes them more effective than boys in social relations: they are better able to negotiate with others and reach an agreement. Boys are more encouraged to develop their assertiveness and ability to compete. Therefore, if we want Scouting to help boys and girls develop their full potential we should encourage girls to develop their assertiveness and ability to compete and help boys to be more effective in negotiation and relationships. Our programmes should be adapted in order to respond to the respective needs of boys and girls.

This is the reason why a research project is presently being undertaken in the European Scout Region and the Eurasia Scout Region, in co-operation with the University of Oslo, with the following objectives:

I: Gain knowledge about the implicit and explicit understanding of gender roles which underlies youth programme implementation Ū in situations where there is co-education and the understanding of gender equality may be based on ignoring or denying the significance of gender.

II: Find methods to change this to a more conscious practice of gender equality, which includes: 1) Ensuring that each individual is given opportunities to develop his or her personal identity and full potential despite gender role conventions; 2) Assisting each individual to free him or herself from gender stereotypes both in his or her self-conception and in the conception of others, and teaching individuals to co-operate on the basis of respect and equity.

ALLOWING GIRLS TO JOIN?

Q - The group that I am an Assistant Scout Leader for is currently looking into allowing girls to join the group from Be

through to Scouts. All of the sections have at least one female leader in its leadership team. However the Scout section at the group only has a male leadership team. Is there anything that we should be considering to make this a an easy transition for all concerned?

A - If you want to open your group to both boys and girls, the first question you have to ask yourself is WHY? If it is just because it is more convenient or if you consider it a way to recruit more members, I believe you should think again before implementing this decision. In fact, before starting you need to have a clear "educational proposal" agreed by all the leaders of your group.

By "educational proposal", I mean a text explaining clearly the EDUCATIONAL reasons why you want to offer Scouting to both girls and boys. You cannot do proper educational work if you don't have some clear educational goals.

Therefore, you should first organise a meeting of all the leaders of your group to examine the following issues:

1. What are the educational goals that we want to achieve by offering Scouting to both girls and boys?
2. What added value will a coeducational framework bring us?
3. What are the potential difficulties or risks?
4. How to prevent or overcome them?
5. What conditions should we respect in order to do good educational work?

To give you some "hints", I think that Scouting has a very important role to play in order to challenge the gender stereotypes which still exist in our society.

We have to help each individual, whatever his/her gender to develop his/her full potential and we have to free young people from gender stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes can prevent children from developing their full potential (because they state that some roles are reserved exclusively to women or to men). Gender stereotypes can prevent girls and boys from working together on an equal footing.

Download the "Policy on girls and boys, women and men within the Scout Movement"

If you want to free young people from gender stereotypes you have to adopt some basic rules for your work. For example:

- Adult leaders have to set an example to young people of men and women working on an equal footing, sharing roles and responsibilities according to their skills and not according to (more or less implicit) "gender roles".

This means that you need to have both male and female leaders in your team and that you should share responsibilities in a fair way (for example, the female leaders are not automatically appointed as "assistants" or given menial tasks).

- This should be the same at the level of children and young people: a girl should have the same opportunities as a boy to become patrol leader... Roles, tasks and responsibilities should be distributed according to skills and not gender.

- If you want to help each individual to develop his/her full potential, you also need to review the way you consider the educational needs of both girls and boys. Nowadays it is often still implicitly accepted that boys be trained to become assertive, competitive, able to resist to stress and pain ("a boy does not cry!"), whereas girls have to develop relationship skills, be able to communicate and negotiate, develop artistic skills, etc.

You should challenge these stereotypes and give each individual- whatever his/her gender - equal opportunities to acquire all whole range of skills and attitudes which are necessary for his/her full development. Girls also have the right to be assertive and competitive and boys also have the right to develop their skills in relationships, negotiation, arts, etc.

If you agree on this educational approach, then you will discover the great added value that a coeducational framework will bring to your group and how it will help accelerate the maturity and development of both girls and boys.

On the contrary, if you put girls and boys together without any further reflection, without any educational vision, the coeducational framework will bring nothing more and you will quickly discover that, despite being open to both boys and girls, the membership of your group is not growing.

The World Scout Bureau is currently undertaking research on "gender education" in partnership with the University of Oslo.

SEXUAL ISSUES

Q - I'm leading a group of 11 - 17years . At this age young people start having problems with sexual life. How can I be close to them and help them face their problems? They don't want to talk about that.

A - If I understand your problem, you know that your Scouts have questions about sexuality but you cannot help them because they do not dare to speak to you about that.

You have to consider that at the time of adolescence (between 11 and 17) young people have many personal problems, not only about sexuality. At this age, young people have to face many changes both individual and social. Their body is changing (it grows and will reach adult size and maturity quickly), their mind is changing (they will acquire the ability to think by hypotheses and deductions), their social relations are changing (they become aware of a larger social world and look for more experience and more autonomy). They have to build their personal identity and discover their role in the society as a man or a woman. They have to discover new emotions and sexual relationships.

This is a challenging time for any young person and even if they refuse to admit it, they are confused and anxious and they are looking for trusting relationships with adults able to understand them and communicate with them.

You have to respect their intimacy. Trying to force confidence - particularly on sexual matters which are very intimate - would be a mistake. It is essential to keep some distance. Young people do not like adults who pretend to be like them. However you have to be prepared to seize an opportunity and welcome any question or confidential information.

Scouting is a method of non-formal education. It provides many informal opportunities for discussions and reflection. While cooking or walking or sitting around the camp fire there is often time for free discussions and exchanges.

Do not lose these opportunities, as they are often the best. For example, during a hike, when walking in small groups, young people frequently raise serious issues and ask their questions.

This is also a matter of confidence. Young people speak to you about their personal problems because they trust you and confidence is built step by step during Scout activities.

When young people discover that you are reliable they will speak with you. And for them, reliable people are people who are able to listen before giving lessons, people who are friendly but mature (not people "playing a fake role"), people who speak to them about daily problems and not only about Scout activities, people who share with them their questions and their hopes (not people who are certain about anything), people able to keep their intimate secrets, etc.

Do not try to go too fast. Take your time and the day will come when young people will speak to you about their intimate problems.

Then maybe, if needed, you could propose some more formal time to bring support and advice (a debate or a meeting with a professional counsellor or psychologist)