

# BOYS AND GIRLS GROWING TOWARD GOD

**W**hen reading a recent notice from the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.,<sup>1</sup> the Valuegenesis research team was surprised to learn that the gender gap in underage drinking among public school students had closed. When public school students were asked about their use of alcohol during the past 30 days, more 8th-grade girls than boys said they had consumed alcohol (boys, about 18 percent; girls, about 19 percent). In addition, more 9th-grade girls than 9th-grade boys also report binge drinking (boys, 34 percent, vs. girls, 39 percent). When studying these alarming statistics, the Valuegenesis team wondered about Adventist boys and girls in our church's schools.

Given the current trend of girls engaging in more at-risk behaviors, would our data reflect the same results? And in reflecting on the larger issues in our research, are there implications for faith development, when comparing the religious lives of boys and girls? Just what can we learn?

## Faith Development Theories

We know a great deal about how boys' and girls' brains develop and the implications for educational theory, and so by abstraction, we can make some assumptions about growth in faith as well.

Michael Gurian and Arlette Ballew's book, *The Boys and Girls Learn Differently Action Guide for Teachers* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), reviews current brain re-

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search and provides a wealth of information with physiological evidence of the source of gender difference. It also provides a variety of interesting pedagogical strategies that teachers from the preschool to high school level can use in their classrooms. Some of their conclusions regarding gender are described below.

## Research on Girls

- The *corpus collasum* that allows for communication between the right and left hemispheres is 20 percent larger in females. This may mean that they can use more oral vocabulary.
- Girls take in information more effectively through touching.
- Girls are better at remembering names and faces in social situations and in relationships.
- Girls are often more verbal and more adept at multi-tasking.
- Girls sense emotions earlier, which promotes more immediate discussion and handling of problems.
- Girls often need to move from specific and

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concrete in order to build up to conceptualizations.

- Girls work better in groups and in low-light rooms.

### Research on Boys

- Boys are often seen as better at spatial and abstract reasoning, but they tend to need clear evidence.
- Boys are unable to multitask.
- During puberty, boys are often more aggressive and stimulated to abstract thinking.
- When physically active, boys are more competitive.
- Boys have a tendency to physically explode to release pent-up emotions.
- Boys think about a way to solve a problem, then often work alone in solving it.
- Boys prefer to work independently.
- Boys tend to need a louder voice rather than a softer one.
- Boys work better in well-lit rooms.
- Boys often need more physical space in which to work.<sup>2</sup>

Religious educators can learn much from this research and its implications. Other research helps to increase our understanding about how faith develops. Researchers in faith-development theory have thought about gender differ-

ences for a long time, and the North American Division research project, Valuegenesis,<sup>3</sup> has previously shared some insights and implications about gender differences in our publications.

Theorists such as James Westerhoff<sup>4</sup> and James Fowler<sup>5</sup> represent two theoretical positions about how faith develops. These, along with my research on faith development,<sup>6</sup> show that because of the range and complexity of human experience, no single theory is sufficient to explain everything. It seems that a great deal is going on with young people as they explore their own personal faith and experience their church and school's understandings of what the kingdom of God should be like, in the process of growing to be fully mature individuals with their own faith experience.

We should therefore anticipate some differences between boys and girls as they grow in their relationships with God. Perhaps there is something we can learn from these findings? But first, let's make sure we understand how faith is nurtured.

### Faith Development Theories

Westerhoff claims that faith is best understood as the perception or awareness of God's rich grace. Faith becomes a part of human life in response. In a sense, it is complete

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from the beginning. Little children have it, yet it grows as a tree does from a seed to sapling and then to full size. Faith development for Westerhoff is a style or mode change as people mature.<sup>7</sup> This means that one must expect young people to see their religious life in different ways, and that these understandings will change as time goes by. Expect it, celebrate it, and watch them change. Differences in gender are related to normal physical, emotional, and spiritual growth. And while both boys and girls experience the same type of growth in faith, it may occur at different times.

Fowler, in contrast to Westerhoff, sees faith in stages that represent changes in the way people organize the experiences of life into a reality that is coherent and meaningful to them. He sees growth as a gradual process of building and reconstruction as they move toward this worldview.<sup>8</sup> The implication is that faith should move regularly through stages, but may not do so for a number of reasons. He spends little time talking about the differences between boys and girls; being more concerned with how the worldview of faith is impacted by perceptions and failure to progress to higher stages.

I prefer to look at faith as a total personal experience with God, rather than an intellectual way of constructing the world. This means that the situations of life are infused with the possibility of seeing God at various stages of growth. This provides practical, workable moments when we can enhance that faith growth. It is important, then, to truly know “who” we teach, as well as what it is we are trying to model or explore with students. Thus, as coworkers

with the Holy Spirit, we can enrich the young people’s experiences so that their decisions about God can be better understood and facilitated. This means that we must comprehend that boys and girls bring to the table different gifts, skills, and development at different times, and carefully study the types of situations that might nurture faith best.

Faith, after all, is personal—God’s gift to us. It is our unique and very personal response to His astounding grace. As teachers, we can assist in its growth by becoming sensitive to the way we model God’s grace and watching for those “teachable moments” when the experiences of daily life, the classroom, or the home invite religious response. “Different times, different problems, different needs shape one’s faith response and provide touchstones for nurture and religious educational theory to take over and for methodological considerations to become important.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is crucial to understand the subtle differences between how boys and girls understand their faith.

But for theories of faith development to be effective, applications need to consider the context and range of young people’s experiences where both teaching and learning take place.

#### What We Already Know

Much has been made of the differences between genders in relation to religious life. For example, in doing research for her book, *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan found that men and women use fundamentally different approaches





to decision-making about the religious concept of morality. The male approach to morality is to believe that people have certain basic rights, and that you have to respect the rights of others. Thus morality is seen as the governor that imposes restrictions on what one can and cannot do.

The female approach to morality recognizes that people have responsibilities toward others, so morality is an imperative to care for others. The contrast is thus, according to Gilligan, that male morality has a “justice orientation,” while female morality has a “responsibility orientation.” She says, “The discovery now being celebrated by men in mid-life of the importance of intimacy, relationships, and care is something that women have known from the beginning.”<sup>10</sup>

According to Gilligan, when boys have a dispute while playing, they usually work actively to resolve it. When girls have a dispute, she says, they quit playing in order to protect the relationship. Thus a responsibility orientation probably suggests an act of care rather than a decision for restraint in moments of potential aggression for boys.<sup>11</sup>

In a Web comment, “Women and Faith: What a Journey!” Condy Scheetz shares her experience, which reflects some of the journal entries I receive as an assignment in my Religious Faith and Life class at La Sierra University in Riverside, California. Scheetz suggests three areas where men and women are different: (1) Women clearly have a need for friendship; (2) Women take on multiple roles and responsibilities, which implies their faith often must be flexible and adaptive according to the needs and involvements; (3) Women are very often the catalysts for change in their homes and churches.<sup>12</sup> This centrality of women in faith growth is reflected in the Valuegenesis research.

When asked who was the most influential person in their lives who helped their faith grow, both boys and girls in grades 6 through 12 selected their mothers. Fathers were on the list, but often, according to the respondents’ grade in school, as low as 10th on the list of their importance to personal faith.

### What Does Valuegenesis Say?

When we look at the high school data sets for the North American Division, some interesting insights can be gleaned from this ongoing research. And while there do not seem to be many gender differences in most of the variables, a few do appear.

### At-Risk Behavior and Gender

Tobacco use, alcohol use, binge drinking (5+ drinks in a row), and shoplifting are common at-risk behaviors among middle school and high school students. It is helpful to compare the findings of our research with that of the national studies on public education. We can clearly assert that Adventist education is a safer place in this regard.

Tobacco use data among public school students in the middle grades (6th-8th) comes from a 2004 survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and reflects little

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change from research completed in 2002.<sup>13</sup>

In public school, about 12 percent of students reported using some form of tobacco. Boys (about 13 percent) were slightly more likely than girls (about 11 percent) to use some form of tobacco.

Adventist students in Adventist schools scored better in comparison. About 7 percent of students in middle school grades in Adventist education claimed use of some form of tobacco one or more times during the year 2000. Boys in Adventist schools (about 8 percent) were slightly more likely than girls (about 6 percent) to use some form of tobacco.

Binge drinking during these middle years, as indicated above, is on the rise in public education. And it is here that girls' use is beginning to exceed that of boys. Here is how the Adventist data compared with public school statistics.

- For 8th and 9th grades in public school, according to the above statistics, 26 percent of the boys said they had engaged in binge drinking one or more times, while 29 percent of the girls admitted to this form of at-risk behavior.

- Adventist students in Adventist schools scored lower in contrast to the above percentages. Boys (about 13 percent) were slightly more likely than girls (9 percent) to be involved in this at-risk activity.

Keep in mind that these are middle-grade students. Comparing public high school students with Adventists in Adventist schools, again one can see the difference. Across the U.S., about 28 percent of high school students reported using some type of tobacco, while only 12 percent of Adventist students admitted use one or more times during the year.

For all of the at-risk behaviors studied in the Valuegenesis research (getting into trouble in school, getting into fights in school, shoplifting, drug use, alcohol and tobacco use), Adventist students scored significantly lower than students in public education. In our research, there were no significant differences in gender as to involvement or participation in these negative behaviors. Let's look now at religious life to see if there are significant differences between boys and girls.

### Faith Maturity and Gender

The insights provided by the Faith Maturity Scale used in all of the Valuegenesis research reflects a rich and growing faith life with both deep devotion and piety, along with concern for others and compassion for the world. In both Valuegenesis 1 and 2 projects, girls have higher faith maturity scores than boys do at all of the grade levels. (See Chart 1 at right.)

### Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religion and Gender

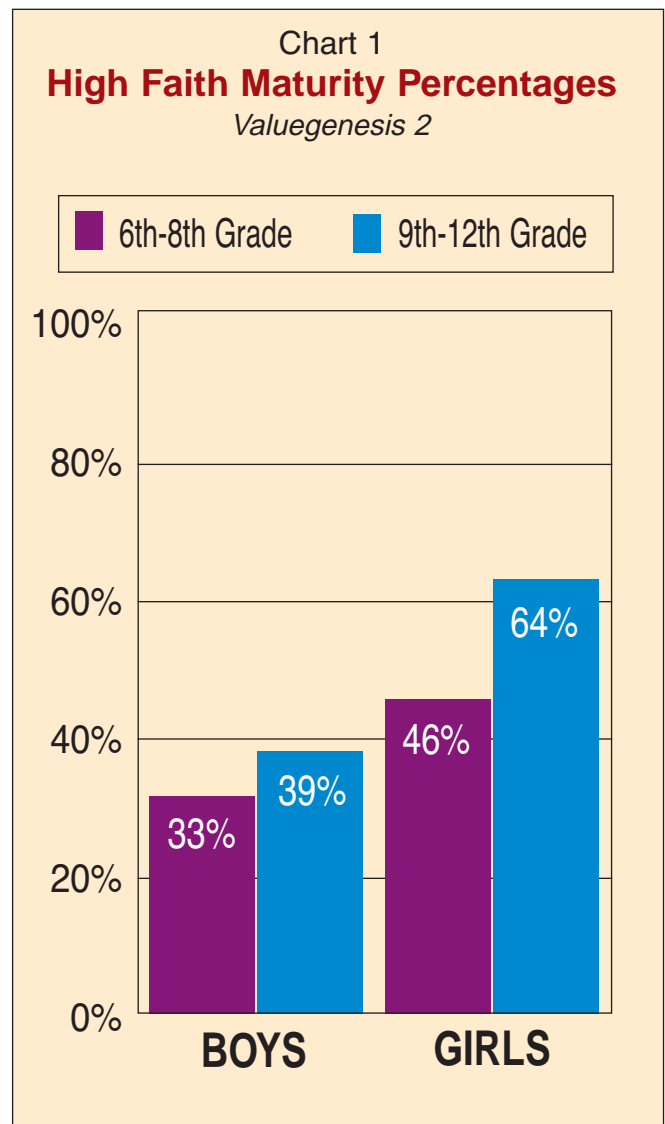
Another significant advance in the Valuegenesis 2 research was the use of the Intrinsic and Extrinsic religion scales. This is a measure of what might be seen as "good" and "bad" religion. Extrinsically religious people see their faith as an end in itself, a central motive for living that is

more important than other concerns. They use religion as a way of gaining status or personal security; thus, it tends to become utilitarian and self-oriented. By contrast, intrinsically motivated persons internalize their religion and live by it, regardless of outside social pressure.

Researchers have found that girls have higher intrinsic scores than boys (see Chart 2).

It is for this reason that girls are often seen as more "religious" or "spiritual" at an earlier age than boys. This is due to many factors, among which is personality development and physical maturity,

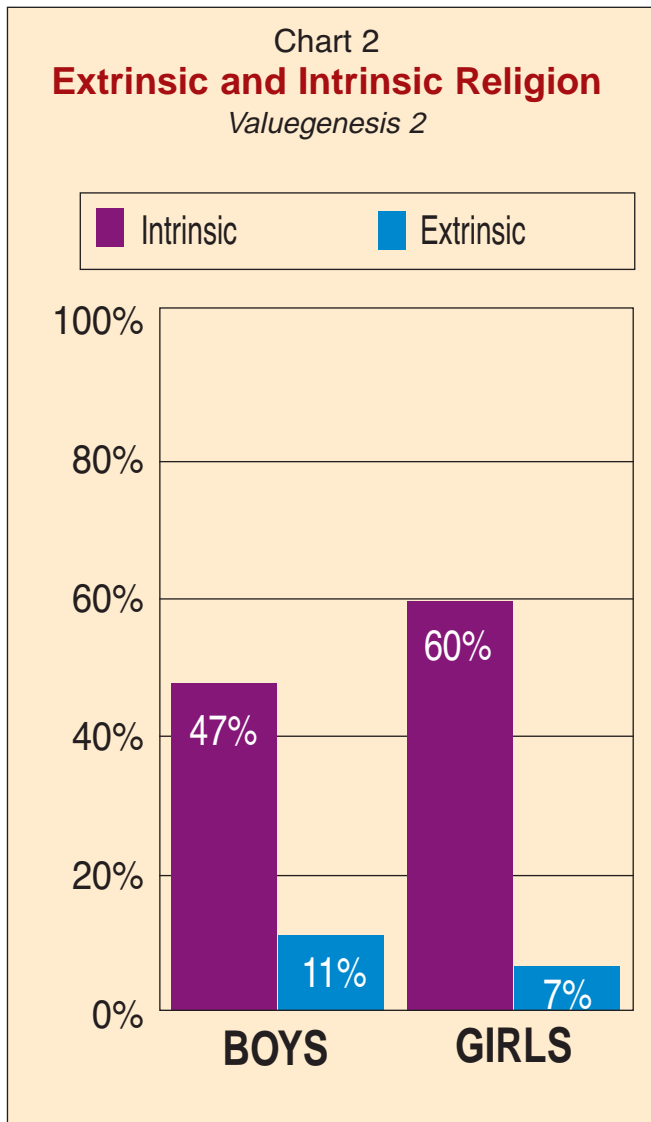
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and girls' concomitant concerns for relationships and clearer morality. The gender difference seen in this scale suggests that during the middle years (10-13), girls might benefit being taught as a homogeneous unit, rather than mixed with boys, whose religious concerns are different, less intrinsic, and who are, as our research shares, less mature in their faith response.

**Summary**

There are, in essence, very few gender differences in our Valuegenesis 1 and 2 research regarding boys and girls. But the slight changes we do see reflect what other major research about gender has explored in greater depth. For example, among Adventist students in grades 6 through 12, boys are slightly lower in intrinsic religion, faith maturity, and their concern for service, while in contrast, girls seem slightly stronger in their understanding of doctrines, involvement in service to others, and altruism. Except for getting into fights and getting into trouble in school, where boys score significantly higher, our children's religious lives



seem on-target and stable. We can be proud of the impact that religion has on our young people and their faith growth.

These hints at differences discovered in the Valuegenesis research could provide us reason enough to attempt to understand the unique religious development of each sex and its own physical maturity. Obviously, more research targeted at gender differences needs to be done, and perhaps if we are fortunate enough to do another Valuegenesis project in 2010 (a third decade of understanding Adventist youth), we might explore in greater depth the differences examined in this article.

In terms of faith maturity, during these crucial faith-forming years, special attention should be given to the early emergence of concerns about religious beliefs and to the types of religious issues that seem to be unique to girls, such as in the areas of relationships and caring.

Here are some suggestions for applying what seems to be implied in all of the research about the uniqueness of boys and girls in the area of faith development:

1. **Learning environments.** Provide rich, stimulating



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environments full of color and texture. This is the “teaching architecture” will help both boys and girls at whatever stage to make exciting connections with the learning content, experience, and applications, and to claim personal ownership of it in their lives.

**2. Approaches to learning.** Find times when middle-school boys can work individually in well-lighted places. Ask them to think first about what they believe. At the same time, allow girls to work together in small groups to solve problems and see the implications of their conclusions about God to their lives.

**3. Consider creative groupings.** Try a variety of homogeneous groupings of students—age-related, gender-related, culture-related. Participating in different types of groupings may enhance students’ learning at certain ages and help them understand both the theology of faith and its experience.

**4. Respect students’ maturing faith.** Remember that mature faith means a personal one, rich in both a growing personal devotional life and a developing a capacity for caring about others in need. Plan projects that nurture both aspects of faith life. Balance is important here, but recognize that girls probably will develop a personal faith life before boys.

**5. Protect and educate for positive behaviors.** Be aware of the best ways to present information about risky behaviors to young people. Boys work well with information in order to build a strategy to cope, while girls first seem to understand multi-tasking and verbal orientations. Change displays regularly, link indoor and outdoor places, use movement, and engage the motor skills to heighten interest.

**6. Variety of places.** Think about developing active and passive places for boys and girls, respectively. These can include places and times for reflection and retreat, places that provide a variety of different shapes, color, light, nooks and crannies—these can all help ensure the personalization of faith as students find places to think, write, study, and explore the way God works in this world.

Be sure to present a balanced understanding of Christian faith. Respect the individuality of each young person, as well as gender differences. Try to do things that relate to the unique learning skills and needs of both your male and female students, ensuring that each feels special, loved, and needed. Respect the differences you see in your students. You will share the character of Christ with each student as you teach not only content and difficult theology, but also target each one’s personal needs. ☞



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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. See Karen Walker, University of Maine in Farmington, Research Brief from The Principals’ Partnership, sponsored by Union Pacific Foundation. A complete bibliography on brain research and development is available at <http://www.principalspartnership.com>. Accessed March 21, 2007.
3. Project Valuegenesis research provides insights into the faith, values, and commitments of Seventh-day Adventist young people between 6th through 12th grades in Seventh-day Adventist schools in the North American Division, 1990 - 2000 and ongoing. The data sets represent a total of more than 24,000 young people. Since the data sets are so large, much is still to be discovered in this research. This article reflects continued research not yet published in *Ten Years Later: A Study of Two Generations*, by V. Bailey Gillespie and Michael J. Donahue with Ed Boyatt and Barry Gane, published by AdventSource, Lincoln, Nebraska. If you would like further information about this book and research targeting the comparative generations of Adventist young people, contact the Hancock Center at La Sierra University, [hcyfm@lasierra.edu](mailto:hcyfm@lasierra.edu) or go to our Website at <http://www.hancockcenter.org>.
4. John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury, 1982), and *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston, 1980) are examples of his theoretical approach.
5. See James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); and *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991).
6. For a unique approach to faith growth, see V. Bailey Gillespie, *The Experience of Faith* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1992). Here faith situations are explored, rather than faith stages as faith is explored as a holistic personal experience which each individual lives in a different but related way over the entire lifecycle.
7. John Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, p. 19.
8. Fowler’s understanding of faith life is best seen in his article “Faith and the Structuring of Meaning,” in *Faith Development and Fowler*, Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks, eds. (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1986), pp. 25-26; and in more detail in James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).
9. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
10. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 17.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
12. Cindy Scheetz, “Women and Faith: What a Journey!” [http://www.transforminguseminars.com/women\\_and\\_faith.php](http://www.transforminguseminars.com/women_and_faith.php). Accessed March 5, 2007.
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