

More than 99% of male and female genetic coding is exactly the same. But that percentage difference influences every single cell in our bodies - from the nerves that register pleasure and pain to the neurons that transmit perception, thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Brizendine, 2007

This factsheet is one of a series, produced by sports coach UK and the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation (WSFF), aimed at coaches who coach women or who are interested in coaching them in the future. Each factsheet provides insight into the female athlete and her needs, and guidance as to how better to coach and support her.

Although the information contained within this factsheet has been academically evidenced, sports coach UK recognises that it is a generalisation. All people are individuals and it is for you, the coach, to contextualise the following information to your own coaching environment.

This factsheet aims to provide some of the evidence on differences in how men and women think to allow you to develop your coaching style and bring out that extra potential in the women you are coaching.

The difference between coaching male and female athletes has long been the subject of speculation, debate, discussion and certainly despair for some male coaches, who, unable to understand 'what women want', have decided to stay away from coaching the opposite gender altogether.

I just couldn't hack it with the girls' team. It was too complex and so mentally demanding. They needed to know why they were doing everything they did so I went back to coaching the boys.

Football coach

Attitudes like this have not helped the development of female sport. If anything, they have contributed to create stereotypes and perpetuate a number of myths that hinder the opportunities for women and girls to access quality sports coaching.

It is only recently, however, and thanks to new technology and research, that some of these myths and stereotypes surrounding women and girls have been disproved to great effect. For example, areas like teaching (Ambrose, 2002; Healy, 2004) and marketing (Cunningham and Roberts, 2006) have already started to make good use of this information and have benefited hugely from it. Likewise, the implications for sport, and specifically coaching, are potentially huge.



So what is psychologically unique about females?

In her book, *The Female Brain*, psychologist Louann Brizendine explains what makes women's brains distinctively different to those of their male counterparts. Primarily, her research shows that although smaller than a male's, the female brain contains the same number of brain cells, only packed together more densely.

There are two main differences between the male and female brain:

1 Brain structure and function

Certain features of the female brain's architecture are vastly different to those of a male's white-and-grey matter. These can be differences in shape, size, or allocation of functions to different brain areas.

2 Brain chemistry

As expressed by Brizendine, *'the female brain is so deeply affected by hormones that their influence can be said to create a woman's reality. They can shape a woman's values and desires, and tell her, day to day, what's important. A woman's neurological reality is not as constant as a man's.'*

But how are these two differences manifested? Here is a summary of how some women's actions and reactions may differ from a man's:

- The female brain has a higher level of sensitivity to stress and conflict
- Women use different areas of the brain to solve problems, process language or experience and store strong emotions
- The brain centres for language, hearing, emotion and memory formation are bigger in women
- Men have larger processors in the more 'primitive' areas of the brain that register fear and trigger aggression compared to women
- In the main, women have outstanding verbal agility, an ability to connect deeply in friendship and an almost psychic capacity to read faces and tone of voice.



Think: How would these findings impact on how and why women and girls participate in sport and physical activity?



Could your style of coaching change in recognition of the information above?

As previously mentioned, this information is a generalisation. As a coach, you have to ensure you get to know your athletes or team as individuals and 'tailor' your interaction with them to suit their specific needs. It is clear, however, that knowing about some of these proven female 'tendencies' or 'traits' could be useful in finding the right strategies to engage with different athletes and groups.

From their study of current literature on the topic, Cunningham and Roberts (2006) describe the following six main areas in which academic research has shown men and women to be different.

Area of Difference	Men	Women
Intellectual function	Analytical, focused, linear, logical perspective	'Whole-brained' perspective
Base reaction	Action	Feeling
Stress response	Fight or flight	Tend and befriend
Innate interest	Things	People
Survival strategy	Through self-interest, hierarchy, power and competition	Through relationships, empathy and connections
Mental preferences	Hard-wired to systemise	Hard-wired to empathise

The psychology bit...

Intellectual function

Men show a predisposition to be more analytical, linear and logical in their processing of information, whereas women show a clear tendency to process information in a more 'whole-brained' or 'bigger-picture' way.

This seems to be thanks to women's brain's ability to access information from, and make connections with, both sides of the brain in order to solve problems.

The use of the 'whole brain' seems to explain why women are generally more comfortable with emotion, higher awareness of non-verbal cues and the enhanced ability to look at the full picture.

How can this knowledge affect the way you coach?

Women generally express emotion in a different, more overt way than men. They should not be considered to be interfering or 'hard to win over'. Women's ability to see the 'whole picture' means they need to understand why they are performing certain tasks and what doing will achieve them.

Base reaction to stimuli

This is not about conscious behaviour, but more about impulsive behaviour. It appears that when things happen, a man's base reaction is to jump into action, while women are more likely to react emotionally.



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Science shows that the basal (everyday) state of the male brain is dominated by the 'fight or flight' centres (ie reptilian/instinctive behaviours). In women it seems that more activity occurs in the brain's limbic system, which deals with emotions and feelings.

How can this knowledge affect the way you coach?

Does this explain why your women athletes may react to certain things in a way that seems alien to you?

How are you communicating with your women participants?

How can you ensure your athletes use their 'reptilian' brains and act, rather than feel with their limbic brain?

What reaction does shouting or raising your voice provoke in women?

Stress response

Hormone concentrations and their strengths vary considerably between men and women. This is even more so under conditions of stress.

Studies show how when under stress men produce 'fight or flight' hormones like testosterone and adrenaline, while women generally produce more oxytocin which buffers the 'fight or flight' response and has a pronounced calming effect.

It seems that under stressful conditions, women tend to respond by forming more connections with others and by looking for support from their community.

By contrast, men tend to react with alarm, aggression and individualistic behaviour.

How can this knowledge affect the way you coach?

When your athletes are under stress, do you know how to provide the right environment to enhance their performance?

Do you normally contribute to increase their stress levels or alleviate them? How, and why?

Innate interest: things vs people

Research into education and the workplace shows that males have a tendency to be more interested in things, while women and girls tend to be naturally interested in people.

While men want to understand how things work, women are more interested in connecting and bonding with people, understanding others' motivations and how they feel.

How can this knowledge affect the way you coach?

How is your coaching affected by women and girls' natural interest in people? Do you see it as a hindrance to technical/tactical work, or as a great opportunity for team building?

Perhaps a team bonding session every now and then might be more beneficial than technical or tactical work.

Survival strategies

Evolutionary theory establishes that, in terms of primary motivations, we exist to ensure the survival of our genes. The key difference seems to be in how men and women go about this.

It seems that males strive to survive through self-interest, hierarchy, power gains and competition. On the other hand, women and girls' survival strategy tends to be through the building of relationships, connections and high levels of empathy.

In short, for the boys it is all about being the 'alpha' male in the pack, while for the girls, it's more about getting along with everyone in the group.

How can this knowledge affect the way you coach?

How do your athletes respond to internal and external competition?

What is your best strategy for ensuring your athletes are motivated and happy within the group and in relation to the opposition?

Creating a climate of cooperation and personal improvement may pay off better than one where internal competition dominates the sessions.

Understanding and processing information

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen of Cambridge University shows that in the main, men understand the world by building systems to explain how it works, while women make sense of things by putting themselves into somebody else's shoes.

For women, it's not only about being emotionally in tune with another person, but also being able to gauge moods, atmospheres and successfully negotiate interactions with people.

How can this knowledge affect the way you coach?

What do your athletes expect from you emotionally?

Do your athletes share the same motivations, drive and picture of success as you do?

How does your mood affect the people you coach? Do they pick up on it? Of course they do, and women are more likely to!

So what does this mean for you?

Generally speaking, this research shows that a woman's approach to most things is different to that of a man. Drives and motivations, and the way in which these are fulfilled are, for the most part, different for men and women.

For women, and without trying to oversimplify female behaviour choices, this translates into an overall attitude to life based on the following concepts:

- Putting the greater good before their own
- A need to make the environment they work in as safe and appealing as possible
- Added significance to how things and people look
- Thorough decision-making and risk-assessment processes
- A tendency to take responsibility for everything
- Relationships (making and fixing them) matter above everything else
- Collaboration over competition is the main drive within groups.

Your job as a coach is to use this evidence and find the right strategies to engage with different athletes and participants.

A call to action

Think about how you could change your approach to your coaching sessions. You don't have to be able to identify with everything in this factsheet, but the differences you will achieve from changing a minor part of your coaching methodology could bring great results.

There are five other factsheets in the series. Each one explores a different area surrounding women in sport, which may help inform your approach to your current coaching practice. The factsheets are:

- Coaching Myth Buster
- Female Physiology and Considerations for Coaching Practice
- Developing Female Coaches
- Coaching Female High-Performance Athletes
- Socially Inclusive Coaching.

For further information about the series, please email coaching@sportscoachuk.org

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