

## **“Women Make Better Students than Men”**

If I had a dime for every time that I’ve heard that sentence, I’d be a rich woman today. There are only three things wrong with it:

- 1) It isn’t true.
- 2) It isn’t helpful.
- 3) It is insulting.

### **Truth**

First, it isn’t always true. When we take a brand new shooter who has literally never handled a gun before, and give them some good instruction, that person immediately makes a big jump in their skill level. That’s huge and it’s very exciting to watch. We can take another student, someone who also says they are a beginner, but who has had some small experience with firearms in the past – either shooting as a child or shooting with friends – and give them the same level of good instruction. We will see rapid improvement in the second person’s shooting, too, but it won’t be nearly as big a jump as we see with a true beginner. That’s because it takes much more effort to erase bad habits than it does to build good ones in the first place.

Often, when instructors say women naturally shoot better than men or naturally make better students than men, they are remembering the brand-new female shooter who has literally never before had a gun in her hand, and comparing her progress with a male shooter who maybe handled guns as a child or with friends as a young adult. It’s really comparing apples and oranges. That error of memory and mistake of category is almost certainly where this untruth comes from.

Don’t believe my bald assertion that it’s untrue? That’s okay. The next time you get a chance, take a look at the best shooters in the competitive shooting world. There are many excellent female athletes in different types of shooting competitions. Pick one of those sports, any one. Now ask yourself: in your own favorite shooting sport, how many women win top honors compared to men who do? How many female USPSA competitors have become Grandmasters?

If women were naturally inclined to be better students of the gun than men are, most women who took classes would eventually learn to shoot better than most men who did the same thing. We would see women completely dominating at least some of the shooting sports at every level. Your local IDPA match would have a “High Gentleman” award for male competitors, because nobody would really expect any of them to beat the entire female half of the field.

## Helpfulness

Second, even if it were true, it isn't helpful. It isn't helpful because it removes the motivation to learn and to keep learning. How does this work? Let me tell you about a study that was done by Dr. Carol Dweck. She is the author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, and is also the author of several ground-breaking studies about what motivates students.

During one ten-year period, Dr. Dweck and her team gave a series of tests to more than 400 fifth-grade children. In one study, a research assistant gave each child a set of puzzles to solve. The puzzles were easy enough that all the children would do fairly well. When each child had completed the task, the researcher would say one of two things to the child. In some cases, the researcher would praise the child's effort: "You must have worked really hard." In other cases, the researcher would praise the child's intelligence: "You must be smart at this." That was it – just one single line of praise that complimented either the child's hard work or the child's natural aptitude.

Then the researcher would ask each child which type of puzzles the child wanted to try next. The first choice was a harder set of puzzles, which the researcher promised would help the child "learn a lot." The second choice was to keep working on easy puzzles. Of the kids who were praised for their effort, 90 percent chose to try the harder puzzles. Of those praised for their inborn talent, a majority chose the easy ones. The kids praised for their natural aptitude did not want to risk making mistakes or fall off the pedestal the researcher's misguided praise had put them on.

Grown men and women remain sensitive to the same pressures that affected us as children. When we praise our adult students for their own hard work and the strategies they use to improve, we give our students a variable they can control. Then it's up to them to decide what to do with it, how hard they want to push and how far they want to go. But when we praise them for an inborn talent that falls outside their control, they have no good recipe for tackling the hard tasks or for recovering from a failed effort. When they find it hard to learn more, they are more likely to rest where they are, satisfied that others think they are "good at this" without any effort on their own part.

Falling off a pedestal hurts. It's much safer to remain statue-still if someone puts you up on one.

Even apart from that, let's take another look at the beginning shooter, the one just starting to learn. She might be struggling a little, but she's trying to hide that her struggles from the other students. The instructor genuinely wants to encourage her. He steps up behind her, smiles, and says the magic words: "Women naturally shoot better than men." In the instructor's mind, that's an encouragement to his female student. But that's not always what the new shooter hears. She's just as likely to hear, "Other women learn this stuff naturally, so *this should be easy for you!*"

It's no wonder so many of our female students walk away from the class and never come back after we've given them that kind of encouragement.

## Insulting

Finally, even if it were true and even if it were helpful, “women naturally shoot better than men” translates to an insult. Think about the shooter who has worked hard, struggled and sweated with effort, sacrificed long hours on the range to reach the skill level she's achieved. Try telling Lisa Munsen – twelve times national champion! – that her achievements must have come easily to her because she's a woman. Tell Annette Evans, a sponsored shooter who wears blisters in her hands during her dry fire routine, that she shoots well just because she's a girl. In what world would that *not* be insulting?

Although my accomplishments in no way reach the pinnacles that these athletes have reached, for the past 17 years, I have worked hard to become more skilled as a defensive handgun shooter. To afford classes, I scrimped and saved and scrounged and took stupid odd jobs to earn enough money for range fees and tuition. To practice what I'd learned, I watched our pennies carefully at the grocery store and socked away every spare dime I saved so I could buy more ammunition. And I dry-fired like it was going out of style. Don't tell me that I shoot well “because I'm a woman.” When I shoot well, it's because I *worked* for it. Not for any other reason.

“A genius! For thirty-seven years I've practiced fourteen hours a day, and now they call me a genius!” – Pablo de Sarasate

Female students – just like male ones – deserve to know that their skill will grow with good instruction and with deliberate practice. They should be motivated by seeing their skills grow as a result of the work they put in. Praise students for factors *within their control* and watch them shine.

