

## **SUPPORT FOR CHANGE IN SCIENCE CURRICULUM**

Girls are not as turned off by science as is commonly believed but they are much more concerned than boys about the ethical issues surrounding the subject, according to a new study from the Nestlé Social Research Programme.

This finding has implications for the teaching of science according to the study's author, Professor Helen Haste. "If we want to get girls more interested in science and technology, we must move away from purveying the 'space and techie' stereotype that seems to appeal to boys and bring ethics and the human context into the science curriculum." Professor Helen Haste is Director of the Nestlé Social Research Programme.

Of the young people interviewed, a third of boys and a third of girls would be interested in a job relating to science; an encouraging finding, given the declining numbers entering some fields of university science.

### **Girls like their science with a conscience**

The most striking finding is that girls who are enthusiastic about a career related to science are the most critical of it. They are most concerned about ethical issues and are most sceptical of claims that science can solve human problems like poverty and unhappiness. These girls are also less interested in science fiction. Boys who would like a career in science, in contrast, more closely fit the popular image of science. They are keen on space and technology, believe that science can be applied widely to human problems and are less concerned by ethical issues.

According to Professor Haste, "These results are very surprising. We might expect that girls who are critical of science or worried about ethics would be those who are least tuned into science. But it seems that for girls, being more interested in science goes hand in hand with sensitivity to ethical issues, dangers, and the context in which scientific development happens. Also girls don't seem to equate science and technology in the

way that boys do. Girls separate science, which they like, from technology, which they find much less appealing."

These findings come from a national study, 'Science in my future', of 704 young people aged 11 - 21 years, conducted by the Nestlé Social Research Programme, with fieldwork undertaken by MORI. The project explored young people's attitudes and values around science and technology.

The study shows that overall, young people are quite positive about the benefits of science and technology, but many are concerned about animal experimentation, and how science can be applied to ordinary human concerns. Over one half of young people trust scientists to make responsible judgements about the dangers of their work, but only a third trust government to make necessary laws to control any dangerous developments in science. The majority would like more money spent on finding a cure for AIDS, and making environmentally-friendly products. They are less enthusiastic about spending more money on space exploration and developing robots.

Other findings:

Seven out of ten (69%) agree that 'Science and technology are making our lives healthier, easier and more comfortable'. Around four out of ten would like to see more money spent on genetic research for improved food production (43%), on research for national defence (41%) and on finding out what makes people aggressive (39%). 48% of boys, but only 24% of girls, would like more money spent on space exploration, and about the same proportion (46% and 27% respectively) would like to see money spent on trying to find life on other planets. Six out of ten (66% of girls, 51% of boys) agree that 'Experimenting on animals is always morally wrong'.

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Technical Note – A sample of 1,058 young people aged 11 – 21 were interviewed between 22 April and 21 May 2004. 600 pupils completed a paper based self completion questionnaire across 25 schools/colleges. 159 university students and 299 of those aged 16 – 21 no longer in full time education completed an online self completion questionnaire. Data were weighted to the known population of this audience. The questionnaire was versioned with 704 young people answering the section on Science.