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Primary | Secondary | University | Student life | Tutors | League tables | Professiona

🏠 > Education

## Sensitive girls should be taught 'banter' at school to toughen them up for the workplace, leading headmistress says

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48



Lucy Elphinstone, headmistress of Francis Holland School, Sloane Square CREDIT: FRANCIS HOLLAND SCHOOL

By **Camilla Turner**, EDUCATION EDITOR

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**S**ensitive girls should be taught “banter” at school to toughen them up for the world of work, the headmistress of a leading school has said.

Young women need to learn how to laugh at themselves and overcome “the curse of the good girl”, according to Lucy Elphinstone who is head of Francis Holland School, a girls' school in Sloane Square, west London.

“I think girls are, perhaps by nature, sensitive and easily hurt,” she said. “Very often when we hear something that is just gentle teasing, we tend to call it bullying and boys would never call each other that.

“They are used to calling each other nicknames, pushing each other around a bit and making fun of each other - but often it’s a sign of endearment.

“And girls need to learn to not take themselves quite so seriously, to laugh at themselves a little bit more and to understand that teasing isn’t necessarily something that is cruel or unkind.”

She said these important lessons at a young age will “toughen them up a little bit” and prepare girls for life beyond the classroom when “they will get far worse than teasing”.



The actress Sienna Miller was educated at Francis Holland School, Sloane Square CREDIT: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY

Mrs Elphinstone said that girls must also be taught about how to “wing it” so they are not at a disadvantage to their male peers when it comes to applying for jobs.

The head of the £20,000-a-year school, which counts the actresses Sienna Miller and Cara Delevigne among its alumnae, explained: “I don’t mean pretending that they are something that they are not.

“I like the fact that we as women tend to be much more authentic and truthful than men do, than men are, sometimes to our own detriment.

“I certainly teach my girls that well known trait - how to blag it. Sometimes you have to go for that job or that position when you are not sure whether you have all the experience or qualifications necessary but you are brave enough to have a go and believe in yourself.



Francis Holland School in Sloane Square counts the model and actress Cara Delevigne among its alumni CREDIT: SUZANNE PLUNKETT

“Sometimes we need to be able to take risks, to be braver, and sometimes to learn how to wing it a bit.”

Perfecting the skills of banter and blagging at schools will help girls “a great deal” when they enter the workplace, in particular male dominated professions such as law, politics, banking and finance, Mrs Elphinstone said.

Girls’ schools are the idea environment to perfect these skills, she argued, since they can practise banter and blagging “without fear of losing a boyfriend or losing a boy’s respect or being called brainy or what have you”.

“They can take risks in a supportive environment, and I think that’s the most important thing,” she said.

“They can learn to speak up and be brave, without thinking ‘oh my gosh, my whole street cred [will be ruined] now and will be all over social media’, which is what can happen in a co-ed environment.”



Perfecting the skills of banter and blagging at schools will help girls “a great deal” when they enter the workplace, in particular male dominated professions CREDIT: PETER JORDAN

Students at Francis Holland School are taught about how to overcome the urge to be a perfectionist and to take themselves too seriously

“I talk at my school about the ‘curse of the good girl’ and how we women are hard wired to want to please, and how we learn that from a very young age,” she said.

“We encourage girls to take risks, to encounter failure, to learn that a grade B is not a disaster, and to laugh at themselves a little bit more.”