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Girls allowed

Physics is still a boys' club. Here's how to fix it

WHY are there so few women in physics, and what more can be done to encourage others into the field? That's the focus of our special report on page 32. The writer, Valerie Jamieson, herself a former particle physicist, found that the barriers against women getting into the field start at school, and accumulate with every step along the career path. That's the bad news.

The good news is that there are things that can be done to encourage girls into physics. Trials in schools suggest that the whole culture of the learning environment must be changed – not just promoting female

physicist role models, for example – if you want girls to stick at physics beyond the age of about 14. It is also crucial to build up the general confidence of young girls.

There's more good news: many women are not only succeeding, but excelling in physics – despite the barriers. And they have useful advice to offer potential future female physicists. By far the most common tip is to find some mentors, and to surround yourself with a network of friends and colleagues who can support you. Employers too, have a lot of work to do, as our report makes clear, to provide much greater

assistance to women.

The report raises another important point. For too long, physics has been fetishised as something that requires some sort of special genius – by which people generally mean special male genius – and that ends up being incredibly off-putting for girls. As one of the female physicists we spoke to put it, the “true story” of doing good physics isn't about bringing an unearthly cleverness to the party, it's actually about old-fashioned hard work. Less glamorous and mysterious, yes, but also a club that far more people are going to feel able to join. ■

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