

Growing up in Sparta



The goal of education in Sparta, an authoritarian, military city-state, was to produce soldier-citizens. In ancient Sparta, they wanted to produce a well-drilled, well-disciplined marching army. In order to achieve this, every Spartan, male or female, was required to have a perfect body. Spartans believed in a life of discipline, self-denial, and simplicity. They were very loyal to the state of Sparta.

BOYS

When babies were born in Sparta, Spartan soldiers would come by the house to examine them and take it to be inspected by the Council of Elders. These old calloused and scarred veterans would look at the naked infant carefully for any birth defects or the slightest sign of weakness or sickness. If they judged the crying baby to be unworthy of carrying a Spartan shield it would be taken immediately to a nearby cliff off Mt. Taygetos and thrown over the edge. Those too weak to be soldiers were too weak to be Spartans.

Babies that were healthy lived with their mothers in the women's quarter until they were 7 years old. They slept in wicker baskets or wooden cradles. The children played with balls, miniature chariots, rattles, yo-yos, rocking horses, and dolls and animals made from clay. Many had pets. They especially liked dogs. Other pets included ducks, quail, birds, goats, tortoises, mice, weasels, and grasshoppers.

However, at the age of 7, the boys of Sparta were obliged to leave home to join sternly disciplined groups under the supervision of a hierarchy of officers. The mother's softening influence was considered to be damaging to a boy's education. From age 7 to 18, they underwent an increasingly severe course

of training. They lived, trained and slept in the barracks of their brotherhood and were taught to not be afraid of the dark or frightened of being left alone. At school, they were taught survival skills and other skills necessary to be a great soldier. School courses were very hard and often painful. Spartan boys were educated but only enough to count soldiers in a formation, read war sagas and sing and recite war poetry. Learning how to endure pain and conquer in battle was considered more important.

The boys endured harsh physical discipline and deprivation to make them strong. They learned to fight, endure pain and survive through their wits. The older boys willingly participated in beating the younger boys to toughen them. The main subject they studied was command and obedience. The old men kept a close eye on them, and often tested them to find out who might turn out to be a good man in a real fight.



Only warfare mattered. They boys marched without shoes to make them strong. They were taught to endure pain and hardship, hunger, thirst, cold, fatigue and lack of sleep. It was a brutal training period.

The young Spartans were not allowed to wear anything but one cloak. No shoes, no underwear, and no additional clothes were permitted -- even in winter. They slept in their military groups, on reeds they plucked out of the river with their own hands. The boys were not fed well: it was a weak broth and in quantities only enough to exist. The boys were told that it was fine to steal food with ingenious schemes as long as they did not get caught. If they got caught, they got a severe whipping -- not for the moral wrong of stealing, but for the military sin of being careless enough to get caught. They believed that starvation made them grow taller, because too much food weighs down the spirit of a boy and makes him short and fat.

Legend says ... A young Sparta boy once stole a live fox, planning to kill it and eat it. He noticed some Spartan soldiers approaching. In ancient Sparta, students were encouraged to steal, but the trick was that you could not get caught stealing. If you were caught, you were severely beaten.

As the soldiers approached, the boy hid the fox beneath his shirt. While the soldiers quizzed him on why he was not in school, the boy let the fox chew into his stomach rather than confess he had stolen it. He did not allow his face or body to express his pain.

That was the Spartan way. Lie, cheat, steal, and get away with it, or else (you would be in big trouble!)

They walked barefoot, slept on hard beds, and worked at gymnastics and other physical activities such as running, jumping, javelin and discus throwing, swimming, and hunting. They were subjected to strict discipline and harsh physical punishment; indeed, they were taught to take pride in the amount of pain they could endure. At age twelve the lean and hungry boy was taken from the barracks and made to eat, live and sleep in one garment with no shoes under the open sky for one year, exposed to the beasts and the weather. This yearlong exercise taught survival skills in times of battle. At the festival of the goddess Artemis Ortheia, the older boys had to take part in a contest in which they snatched as many cheeses as possible from the steps of the altar to the goddess. They had to run the gauntlet of guards, with whips, who were instructed to use them as hard as they could. Some youths died as a result.

Somewhere between the age of 18-20, Spartan males had to pass a difficult test of fitness, military ability, and leadership skills. If they passed, they became a full citizen and a Spartan soldier. Spartan citizens were not allowed to touch money. That was the job of the middle class. Spartan soldiers spent most of their lives with their fellow soldiers. At 20, they joined the state militia--a standing reserve force available for duty in time of emergency--in which they served until they were 60 years old.

Any Spartan male who did not pass these examinations became a perioikos. (The perioikos, or the middle class, were allowed to own property, have business dealings, but had no political rights and were not citizens.)

A surviving poem, [written by Tyrtaeus](#) in approximately 630 BCE, tells us that Spartan soldiers were expected to be disciplined. An excerpt from the poem reads:

***‘Our man should be disciplined in the work of the heavy fighter,
and not stand out from the missiles when he carries a shield,
but go right up and fight at close quarters and, with long spear
or short sword, thrust home and strike his enemy down.***

***For no man ever proves himself a good man in war unless he can
endure to face the blood and the slaughter, go close against the enemy
and fight with his hands.’***

GIRLS

Unlike the other Greek city-states, Sparta provided training for girls that went beyond the domestic arts. The girls were not forced to leave home, but otherwise their training was similar to that of the boys. They too learned to run, jump, throw the javelin, gymnastics and discus. No one knows if their school was as cruel or as rugged as the boys school, but they did learn many of the combat skills the boys were taught. Some historians believe the two schools were very similar, and that an attempt was made to train the girls as thoroughly as they trained the boys. In any case, the Spartans believed that strong young women would produce strong babies.

At age 18, if a Spartan girl passed her skills and fitness test, she would be assigned a husband and allowed to return home. If she failed, she would lose her rights as a citizen, and became a perioikos, a member of the middle class.

In most of the other Greek city-states, women were required to stay inside their homes most of their lives. In Sparta, citizen women were free to move around, and enjoyed a great deal of freedom, as their husbands did not live at home.

No marvellous works of art or architecture came out of Sparta, but Spartan military force was regarded as terrifying. Thus, the Spartans achieved their goal.

Nearly all the other city-states, including Athens, had a grudging admiration for the Spartans. They would not want to be Spartans, but in times of war, they wanted Sparta to be on their side. The Spartans were tough, and the ancient Greeks admired strength.