

Boys and Books

By: Jane McFann (2004)

The statistics are consistent: Young male readers lag behind their female counterparts in literacy skills. This article looks at the social, psychological, and developmental reasons why, and suggests solutions — including the need for more men to become role models for reading.

It's a chilly, rainy day with a wind that rattles the windows. The reader settles deeper into the cushions of the sofa, smiling with satisfaction. What a perfect day to read. "I really can't wait to tell my friend about this book," the reader thinks.

Now the question is, as you imagine the above scenario, what sex is the reader? Is it almost automatic to envision a female? In today's culture, is the image of an enthusiastic reader often a feminine one? Certainly there are many committed male readers, but where are they in the popular culture? And, perhaps more important, what images exist that encourage young boys to read?

The statistics are consistent: Young male readers lag behind their female counterparts. According to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2001, fourth-grade girls in all of the 30-plus participating countries scored higher in reading literacy than fourth-grade boys by a statistically significant amount. Similar findings show up in the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores, as well as in studies in New Zealand, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Searching for "why"

Why does this disparity exist? Theories abound. According to Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men* (Heinemann, 2002), research on gender and literacy provides some interesting insights:

- Boys take longer to learn to read than girls do
- Boys read less than girls read
- Girls tend to comprehend narrative texts and most expository texts significantly better than boys do
- Boys value reading as an activity less than girls do

According to a national survey conducted by the Young Adult Library Services Association in 2001, boys of an average age of 14 listed their top obstacles to reading:

- boring/no fun 39.3%
- no time/too busy 29.8%
- like other activities better 11.1%
- can't get into the stories 7.7%
- I'm not good at it 4.3%

Jon Scieszka, author of children's books such as *The Stinky Cheese Man* and the *Time Warp Trio* series, believes that boys are slower to develop than girls biologically and therefore often have early struggles with reading and writing skills. On his *Guys Read* website, he also says that the male way of learning, which tends to be action oriented and competitive, works against boys in many classrooms.

Serious subject, sensible solutions

The issue is certainly a serious one, and the solutions must come from a multitude of sources: parents, teachers, librarians, and communities. Michael Irwin, a Massey University, New Zealand, professor, claims that "girls talk more than boys, speaking 30% more words over a day than boys. And they talk more from an early age — to toys and dolls and playing school — so it's natural they are more adept with language."

In this *Massey Magazine*, Issue 14 article, which appears on the Massey University website, Irwin suggests strategies to help boys read better: clear, structured instruction; short bursts of intense work; specific goals; praise; hands-on learning; and use of humor.

Irwin notes that some New Zealand schools have even experimented with splitting classes into single-sex groups for language subjects and have found some success in this. "Boys are very conscious of what their peers think of them," Irwin says. "Their fear of failure curbs their classroom participation. They don't answer questions because they don't want to risk being wrong, and having their peers laugh. And after puberty there are the hormones to deal with, too. They start to worry about what the girls will think of them."

An area that seems to be critical to stimulating reading success among young male readers is the choice of materials. According to Smith and Wilhelm in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, boys differ from girls in the choices they make of reading material:

- Boys are more inclined to read informational texts, magazines, and newspaper articles
- Boys are more inclined to read graphic novels and comic books
- Boys tend to resist reading stories about girls, whereas girls do not tend to resist reading stories about boys
- Boys like to read about hobbies, sports, and things they might do or be interested in doing
- Boys like to collect things and tend to like to collect series of books
- Boys read less fiction than girls
- Boys tend to enjoy escapism and humor, and some boys are passionate about science fiction or fantasy

On his Guys Read website, Jon Scieszka concurs with this research, saying that adults need to "let boys know that nonfiction reading is reading. Magazines, newspapers, websites, biographies, science books, comic books, graphic novels are all reading material."

According to Wendy Schwartz in the ERIC Digest entry *Helping Underachieving Boys Read Well and Often*, the male perspective needs to be considered in the selection of reading material. "Reading choices made for boys frequently do not reflect their preferences, since girls are clearer and more vocal about what books they want, elementary school teachers are predominantly women, and mothers rather than fathers select reading materials for their children," Schwartz says.

"Further, boys, like all children, want to see characters like themselves sometimes," Schwartz adds. "Therefore, materials should feature people of different ethnicities, races, and backgrounds who live in a variety of types of homes and communities."

According to Schwartz, the boy who reads the sports page or instruction manual needs to be applauded. "The reading that boys do should not be dismissed as inconsequential even though it often does not include the novels and other traditional materials usually read by girls," Schwartz says. "The genres preferred by boys can be equally helpful in their development of reading, thinking, and problem- solving skills, and should be considered key resources in their education."

Teachers who allow boys to see the rich variety of forms that the written word can take may help to create more enthusiastic readers. Librarians also can play a key role in providing male-enticing reading materials.

According to Patrick Jones and Dawn Cartwright Fiorelli in "Overcoming the Obstacle Course: Teenage Boys and Reading," an article in the February 2003 issue of *Teacher Librarian* magazine, there are immediate steps that librarians can take to improve attitudes toward reading among boys. These include:

- planning programs aimed just at boys
- doing book talks in the classroom that include a lot of nonfiction
- buying American Library Association *Read* posters that feature males
- encouraging coaches of boys' sports teams to participate in a Guys Read program such as having athletes read to younger children
- increasing the number of periodicals, magazines, comic books, and newspapers in the library
- actively recruiting boys to work in the library
- surveying boys about their reading
- buying books that boys recommend
- putting books where the boys are: next to the computers, copy machines, and study tables

Allowing boys to find reflections of who they are and what they like in a library may encourage a return visit.

Males needed as role models for reading

An additional issue that comes up in virtually all resources on male literacy is the shortage of male reader role models. As Jan Greer of New Brunswick, Canada, says in one of her "The Literacy Post" columns, "Research states that young males see reading as a feminine activity and therefore steer away from it. There is only one way to change this perception and that is for men both at home and in the community to read aloud to boys and to show that reading is an activity of value."

"It would also help if men's organizations made literacy one of their primary aims by following the example of Wayne Gretzky, who publicly supports literacy and lifelong learning. A boy will follow the lead of his male role model, usually his father or other significant man in his life. If that man values reading, the boy will too."

To promote that view, the province began Family Literacy Day, encouraging fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers, and uncles to become reading role models.

In Ireland the Duleek Library introduced a "Dads and Lads" project to encourage reading among young boys. More than 250 new books that focus on sports were purchased, and boys and their fathers shared a reading program that is also tracked by their teachers.

Another Irish initiative, Boys 'N' Books, pairs the St. Patrick's Primary School with the Newry Library; both are located in an area that was identified as having the worst literacy levels in Northern Ireland. A special feature of this program is to promote performances by storytellers as well as to bring students books that have proven to be popular with boys.

This program makes an interesting distinction: "Teaching boys how to read did not necessarily make them readers. Reading was often viewed as a task to be done, rather than something to be enjoyed." The storytellers, including males, helped the boys to actively enjoy and discuss stories, develop their listening and concentration skills, and build a foundation for enjoying reading.

In England the reading campaign of the National Literacy Trust includes the recruitment of Reading Champions — any man or boy who inspires others with his enthusiasm for reading. The program "believes it is vital to provide boys with positive examples of reading men who they can identify with and relate to, and support families, carers, and practitioners in creating an environment where every boy has access to a positive male reading role model."

These may be male students or teachers, dads, granddads, brothers, family friends, tutors, reading buddies, storytellers, or performers. The program seeks to provide boys with advocates for reading on a national level.

Families play a critical role in promoting male literacy, and the impact is especially powerful if the father is involved to help boys see reading as something that males do. According to Wendy Schwartz, some possibilities include:

- parents modeling reading, sharing what they have learned, recommending good books, and mentioning what they want to learn from reading in the future
- parents and sons reading together, moving into increasingly difficult materials
- parents and sons looking up information together to show the value of reading and the development of problem-solving skills
- taking books along on long trips or to places where waiting is anticipated to help boys see reading as recreation
- keeping a reading log with sons to show what, when, and how much boys are reading

No part of society — parents, teachers, librarians, community members — wants to see boys begin a lifetime of reading deficits, especially as more and more jobs require higher levels of literacy. Perhaps it is time for father–son reading time to become just as customary as that catch in the backyard or television viewing. The Harry Potter phenomenon has proven that boys will embrace books that tap into their interests and imagination; now it is up to the adults in their lives to feed that potential.

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