

## Boys and Books: Encouraging Middle School Males to Read

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What are little boys made of, made of?  
What are little boys made of?  
"Snaps and snails, and puppy-dogs' tails;  
And that's what little boys are made of."

What are little girls made of, made of?  
What are little girls made of?  
"Sugar and spice, and all that's nice;  
And that's what little girls are made of."

### ***-Mother Goose***

Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mother Goose noted an obvious difference in the preferences of boys and girls. When compared to their female counterparts, research recognizes

- ◆ that boys learn to read at a slower pace (Jones, 2005),
- ◆ read fewer books (Jones, 2005; Moss, 2000),
- ◆ have problems comprehending fiction (Jones and Fiorelli, 2003),
- ◆ read less fiction (Taylor, 2005),
- ◆ score lower on standardized reading and writing tests (Bafile, 2005; Moss, 2000),
- ◆ are more likely to be placed in remedial reading classes (Bafile, 2005),  
and
- ◆ read less for pleasure (Jones and Fiorelli, 2003).

In today's climate of high stakes accountability, educators are examining every aspect of literacy including the many facets of the effects of gender on classroom performance. In many cases, schools are discovering that male students are performing lower than their female counterparts in the area of reading. Numerous studies have shown the existence of a reading gap between

boys and girls and that the gap widens as children grow older. Research from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2000) found that girls are much more likely than boys to read for enjoyment: 78% of girls in comparison to 65% of boys. The same research also suggests that reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socioeconomic status. This finding should be a jolt to educators.

### **I Hate to Read!**

When asked why they do not read for pleasure, boys often respond that they "hate to read." SmartGirl.org, a website aimed at teen girls, paired with the American Library Association, to survey teenagers about their reading habits in October 2001. Of the 2,809 students responding to this joint survey, 37% were boys. All respondents were given an opportunity to share their feelings about reading. The reasons the boys gave for why they did not like reading included

- ◆ *I think the reason I don't read is because I never run into a book good enough to keep my attention.*
- ◆ *I don't read because I am a visual learner so I find it hard to learn with pages and pages of words.*
- ◆ *I like to see what I'm being taught (Smart Girl, n. d.).*

These quotes from adolescent boys sum up a great deal of what some researchers have found on why boys do not like to read. Other causes researchers have identified to explain boys' dislike for reading include

- ◆ they do not see enough men reading (Moss, 2000),
- ◆ their reading preferences are underrepresented in the library and in classroom activities (Moss, 2000),
- ◆ they find reading boring (Smart Girl, n. d.),
- ◆ they feel it is a feminine activity (Kohn, 2002; McKenna, 1997; Jones and Fiorelli, 2003),
- ◆ they see little value in reading (Kohn, 2002),
- ◆ they think that they are poor readers (Jones and Fiorelli, 2003), and
- ◆ they do not have enough time to read independently (Kohn, 2002; Smart Girl, n. d.).

### **Now that we know the reasons, what can schools do to promote boys' reading?**

All students like to read about things that interest them. Schools should do an inventory of classroom libraries and media centers to determine what type of books and magazines are available. There should be a wide range of materials for all students. While boys' interests and preferences may vary slightly from one student to another, they seem to be fairly similar when considered as a whole.

- Many boys prefer informational texts such as magazines or newspapers (Jones and Fiorelli, 2003; Wilhelm, 2001; Sullivan, 2004; Langerman, 1990);
- Many boys look to the cover to determine if they would be interested in the book (Jones and Fiorelli, 2003);
- Most boys like to read about subjects that interest them (Jones and Fiorelli, 2003; Jones, 2005);
- They favor shorter books or texts written in short sections (Wilhelm, 2001);
- They are drawn to extremely visual and interactive texts (Wilhelm, 2001; Sullivan, 2004); and
- They seem to prefer male characters (Beyard-Taylor and Sullivan, 1980).
- Young men are also very specific in the genres they choose. Most boys prefer to read about sports, humor, science fiction, fantasy, animals, biography, history, and hobbies (Jones and Fiorelli, 2003; Reeves, 2001; Smart Girl, n. d.; Jones, 2005).

A quick inventory to the classrooms and the media center will provide information to guide future purchases aimed at promoting boys' reading. Other small changes may help to promote reading. Following are a few suggestions that are free or very inexpensive to implement:

- ◆ Having a "Guys' Rack" on the bookshelf to show boys which books may interest them (Taylor 2004)
- ◆ Having students act out what they have read (Taylor, 2004; Sullivan, 2004);
- ◆ Welcoming men into the classrooms to do book talks or read to the students (Taylor, 2004; Jones and Fiorelli, 2003);
- ◆ Posting pictures of males reading (Jones and Fiorelli, 2003);
- ◆ Allowing as much choice as possible in selecting the book that they would like to read (Sullivan, 2004).

These ideas are great ways to encourage reading among the most unwilling boys.

### **For Further Study**

Teachers can make a difference in the reading habits of their male students and maybe even turn non-readers into readers. The sites below may help as you ponder how you can encourage boys to get connected with books.

- ◆ A review of a wonderful book from Jon Scieszka.

<http://www.teenreads.com/reviews/0670060070.asp>

- ◆ Guys Read is a literacy initiative for boys from author Jon Scieszka. This fabulous interactive site should be shared with boys. It includes book lists for boys, information about literacy and boys, and suggested books for parents.

[http://www.guysread.com/about\\_guys.html](http://www.guysread.com/about_guys.html)

- ◆ Sites with suggestions of book titles that boys might enjoy

[http://www2.soe.umd.umich.edu/rpkettel/booklists\\_forboys-p.html](http://www2.soe.umd.umich.edu/rpkettel/booklists_forboys-p.html)

[http://childrensbooks.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ/Ya&sdn=childrensbooks&cdn=parenting&tm=29&gps=130\\_11\\_1050\\_713&f=00&su=p284.8.150.ip&tt=14&bt=1&bts=1&zu=http%3A//www.bpl.org/kids/booklists/booksolderboys.htm](http://childrensbooks.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ/Ya&sdn=childrensbooks&cdn=parenting&tm=29&gps=130_11_1050_713&f=00&su=p284.8.150.ip&tt=14&bt=1&bts=1&zu=http%3A//www.bpl.org/kids/booklists/booksolderboys.htm)

<http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/promos/greatbooks/boys/booklist.html>

[http://childrensbooks.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ/Ya&sdn=childrensbooks&cdn=parenting&tm=70&gps=126\\_5\\_1050\\_713&f=00&su=p284.8.150.ip&tt=14&bt=1&bts=1&zu=http%3A//www.bpl.org/kids/booklists/seriesolderboys.htm](http://childrensbooks.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?zi=1/XJ/Ya&sdn=childrensbooks&cdn=parenting&tm=70&gps=126_5_1050_713&f=00&su=p284.8.150.ip&tt=14&bt=1&bts=1&zu=http%3A//www.bpl.org/kids/booklists/seriesolderboys.htm)

[http://www.parents-choice.org/full\\_abstract.cfm?art\\_id=114&the\\_page=reading\\_list](http://www.parents-choice.org/full_abstract.cfm?art_id=114&the_page=reading_list)

<http://portal.chaminade-stl.com/Portals/3/Archetype%20Book%20List.pdf>

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