

Getting boys to read

'Reading is the last thing I would want to do. I would rather die than read'¹

Boys' attainment and the gender gap in reading and writing are key issues in education; DFE statistics for 2009-10 indicate that girls continue to outperform boys by up to 10% in KS2 English, with girls achieving significantly better in writing throughout their primary school years.²

This is not just a UK issue; the PISA study 'Equally prepared for life' (2009) identified a gender gap in all the participating countries, but 'on average children in England read less frequently for pleasure outside school' and 'have less positive attitudes to reading than children in most other countries'.³

At what age do boys 'go off' reading? Research studies consistently show a link between reading enjoyment and children who think they are 'good readers'. This doesn't only apply to boys, but more girls respond that they enjoy reading than boys. Boys who are achieving less well in learning to read will tend to associate books with difficulty and failure. We need to keep alive their sense of discovery and pleasure in books from the early years.

This guide will give you strategies for capturing boys' interest in reading, and, by making reading a focus in your classroom, this will benefit the girls as well.

The reading environment

'The best reading environment is one where there is an expectation of pleasure in reading, where there is excitement in talking about books and enjoyment in being read to'.⁴



What message does your classroom and school give about reading in general and to boys in particular? Key research, such as the PIRLS study, indicates that by Year 6 many pupils regard reading as a technical skill, rather than an enjoyable activity.

Quick checklist

- Who chooses the books in your classroom? How often is the collection changed?
- Is there other reading material in your classroom? e.g. comics, magazines.
- How are they displayed? How do you promote them in class and around the school?
- How much time is given to talking about what your pupils are reading, in and out of school?
- What provision is made for boys who are reading above their expected level?
- How often does your class visit the school library?

‘Learning to choose is as important as learning to read. Selecting books to read for pleasure is an experience that should be introduced as soon as possible at school. There is evidence to show that being able to choose what they read is a major factor in a youngster’s attitude to reading’⁵

Pupils who have not experienced a variety of reading materials will not have developed the skills to choose for themselves. If they have always been directed to the next book to read on a reading scheme, they do not know what books they might like to read. Faced with shelves of books, boys especially can be discouraged. They need plenty of guidance to help them choose: separating shorter, easier reads from more challenging texts is an effective first step, but isn’t always apparent in class collections.

Direct their choices: have some face-out display, leave a few books lying around on classroom tables. Use book talk to introduce unfamiliar books: read short extracts, ask other pupils for recommendations and display their suggestions as captions.

Strategies

Reading for a purpose: if boys can ‘see the point’ of an activity, they are more likely to be engaged by it. Most non-fiction reading is purposeful, in the sense that the reader is adding to a body of knowledge about a specific subject – even if it’s their stock of ‘knock-knock’ jokes!

This may (in part) explain why boys prefer non-fiction. A National Literacy Trust survey⁶ into young people’s reading habits found that

- Significantly more boys stated that they do not read fiction
- More boys than girls preferred reading comics and graphic novels, newspapers, jokes, annuals, factual books, and manuals.

If we’re to be successful in encouraging boys to read for pleasure and to read widely, we need to build bridges between what they do read and what is on offer in school.

Link reading with a definite outcome. Set a task based on non-fiction reading: construction, following instructions, rules of a game, setting up equipment etc. It's all reading and boys don't have to worry about hidden meanings and lurking emotions.

The Reading Champions (National Literacy Trust) initiative offers a framework for boys to develop an enthusiasm for reading and share it with others. Schools can set up their own framework, with bronze, silver and gold levels of achievement. Working towards a defined outcome, with a reward scheme, helps to keep boys motivated.

- Top Trumps: Top Trumps is a social activity with an element of competition that will appeal to boys. Working in small groups of similar reading ability, boys are given a choice from pre-selected books in categories. Use the [Boys' reading questionnaire](#) to profile your group, and offer books that will appeal. Ask them to read, rate and compare the books. They are given a set time to finish the books, and then rate them using the Top Trumps [template](#). The cards can then be used to play Top Trumps. See [Rules of the game](#).



Make it social: when reading time is set aside in schools it is often called 'silent reading'. This goes against what boys find pleasurable in reading; see boys gathered over the Guinness book of records, sharing facts, encouraging each other to find the most interesting or outrageous record. Boys respond well in paired reading or as 'reading buddies'.

- Create teams of 3 or 4 boys to promote something they have read to the rest of the class each week. Top teams can share their reading choices with the rest of the school.
- Reading Roundabout: this is a Key Stage 2 activity run by SLS in your school, to give children practice in choosing books using cues e.g. cover, blurb, opening, and discussion.
- The Reading Game (Carel Press) offers a similar experience for older KS2/KS3.



SLS supplies new books in a range of genres as part of the game (for subscribing schools, this will form part of the twice-yearly exchange; non-subscribers can buy the Reading Promotion package for primary schools).

Challenge: Most boys like competition and they like to succeed. [Ready Steady Read!](#) and [Go reading!](#) are themed book trackers produced by SLS.



For Years 1-3. Readers win stickers for their tracker leaflet as they complete and talk about books they have chosen from a range of genres.



For Years 4-6 plus Transition. 8 eye-catching tracker leaflets encourage boys to explore a wider range of texts and genres. Stickers and certificate celebrate their achievements.

Keep it moving: change the setting for your reading time. Go to the library, go to a different class to share stories, read outside if weather permits! (If moving the class is impractical, think of switching with another teacher for storytime. Everyone has a different 'voice' and enjoys different stories.) Can you link class reading with drama, dance, art or music? Playscripts can be borrowed from SLS to include in your book collection.

Role models: it is usually mums who read with children at home and most primary teachers and librarians are female, so from an early age, boys can assume that reading and writing are inherently female activities. Contact community groups for volunteers who can talk about their reading and enthuse boys: sports teams, community police, fire fighters, fathers, ex-pupils.

Involving Dads: see [Getting the blokes on board](#) (NLT) for lots of ideas and case studies.

[The Premier League Reading Stars online challenge](#) promotes reading through boys' interest in sport.

What to read?

Boys do read, but we don't always regard what they are reading as 'proper' reading. Therefore they are more likely to call themselves non-readers. Girls are significantly more likely to say that they enjoy reading and rate themselves as good readers.⁷

Every classroom needs a variety of reading resources to tempt boys. Always have a choice of fiction, non-fiction, comics or magazines to let them know that reading for enjoyment means reading whatever they enjoy. Books of lists, records, facts and comparisons all provide the opportunities to share and discuss that engage boys with the books.

Why is it important that boys read fiction?

Left to themselves, many boys prefer non-fiction or 'activity' books such as puzzles. Fiction needs to be part of their varied reading diet, because it explores imaginative language in context and thus enriches their vocabulary. Boys will not become good writers unless they know what good writing is. Reading fiction helps boys to broaden their horizons, gain empathy, and make sense of the world.

There are studies in the field of education that show the involvement and use of the imagination during childhood is critical to the acquisition of higher thinking skills i.e. the ability to analyse, gather together ideas and consider possibilities.

How do we get boys to read fiction?

Build on what they enjoy. Ask them to think about the sort of books they like to read, funny? scary? action-packed? Try the [Boys' reading questionnaire](#). This will start them on the path of making critical judgements about their reading. Involve them in creating a classroom display of books in their favourite genres. The SLS [Boys' reading booklists](#) offer wide range of titles for different ages.

Funny books. e.g. Horrid Henry, Dirty Bertie, Seriously Silly stories, Mr. Gum and, for older readers, Diary of a wimpy kid or the Jiggy McCue stories. Joke books are brilliant too – especially if you read a few good ones out to encourage them to want to read some more.

The books that come in series are great. They know that they are going to enjoy the next book if they enjoyed the last. Research shows that reading books in a series reinforces pupils' skills and helps them to gain stamina in their reading. Try Beast Quest, Astrosaurs, Charlie Small, or the Dimond brothers series by Anthony Horowitz.

Have a variety of puzzle books, following clues etc. – e.g. Where's Wally, 'Space Pirates' books by Scoular Anderson, or choose-your-own adventures: the 'I hero' series by Steve Barlow and Steve Skidmore is popular with older KS2.

Picture books in your collection need to be lively and visually challenging. For younger readers, include pop-up and lift-the-flap, rhymes for joining in, and humour. Picture books for older readers allow boys to experience the flow of a narrative and understand how a story is structured, while taking a relatively short time to read. Using words and pictures together to interpret the story, where the pictures provide the subtext, is less abstract for some boys to understand than conventional multi-layered narrative. This provides a good introduction to how fiction works, for all readers. SLS can provide picture books for older readers as a topic loan.

Authors' websites can encourage further reading with games and opportunities to contact the author. See this [list](#) for a few good boy-friendly ones. Visits by an author writing for boys can inspire their reading and writing. They don't have to be 'big names', but communicate well with boys: e.g. Paul Cookson, The Two Steves, Ivan Brett, Jeremy Strong. For tips on how to organise an author visit see the [Book Week Best practice guide](#).



As well as directing them, we need to value what boys enjoy reading. The message must be that 'reading is fun'. The school library should have a wide range of books that appeal to boys' interests e.g. dinosaurs, cars and trucks, sports, fierce animals, space are popular non-fiction subjects.

Boys are much more likely to read books they have chosen themselves. Boys need to have ownership of their reading. Give a group of boys the chance to choose books for the classroom or for the library. If your school has money to buy books, or credits from book fairs, give the boys some 'money' to spend. This will stimulate book talk as they decide what to buy, and they are much more likely to read and promote these books.

Further help

SLS School Library Advisers can provide INSET to school staff on how to make your school a boy-friendly reading school (free as part of Devon SLS comprehensive subscription).

See the Books for Boys list on the [SLS website](#). You will also find the Ready Steady Read and Go Reading booklists which include lots of titles in genres to appeal to boys.

Other useful resources

[A U.S. teacher resource linking science and literacy.](#)

[Me read, no way! A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills.](#) Ontario Education.

Been around for awhile but worth a look for ideas and strategies. Very clear layout.

[National Literacy Trust.](#) An excellent source for reading promotion research and ideas. A number of their activities, such as Reading Champions, are now subscription based.

[Galactic Reading Project 2010](#)

report on a Reading Champions project involving Year 3 and 4 boys and male family members.

[The reading game.](#) Carel Press

Wilson, Gary [Getting the Best out of Boys: a school improvement toolkit.](#) Oxford Univ. Press 2010

1. Quoted in Lockwood, M. [Surveying the pleasures of reading.](#) NATE Classroom Issue 01

2. National Literacy Trust. [Literacy: state of the Nation.](#) 2010

3. Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2006

4. Reading Connects. [Creating a reading culture.](#) DfES

5. Reading Connects. [Creating a reading culture.](#) DfES

6. [Children and young people's reading habits and preferences.](#) National Literacy Trust. 2005 updated in [Setting the Baseline: reading report](#) NLT 2011.

7. [Setting the Baseline: reading report](#) NLT 2011.