

Guys and Reading

Riverbank Review

What does it take to get boys and books together?

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By Jon Scieszka

A lot of boys out there are having trouble reading. You may know this from experience with your own sons or brothers, or with boys in your neighborhood, classroom, or library. More boys than girls seem to be the students at the bottom of the reading classes, at the top of the list of "behavior problems," the majority of the group saying they don't like to read.

Or you may guess that boys are having trouble reading from the blunt statistics:

- The U.S. Department of Education reading tests for the past thirty years have shown boys scoring lower than girls every year, in every age group.

- Eighth-grade boys are 50 percent more likely than girls to be held back a grade in school.

- Two-thirds of special education students in high school are boys.

But what most people don't know is that we are not doing much to help boys read. New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom have at least begun to study what seems to be a gender-linked phenomenon. The United States has not. We have literacy programs for adults, literacy programs for families, literacy programs for speakers of English as a second language, literacy programs for prison inmates.

But we have no literacy programs for boys.

So I've founded a reading initiative for boys called Guys Read, to start looking into what's going on with boys and

reading, to offer some ideas for concrete changes we can make, and to try to get guys reading.

Though the statistics on boys and reading were part of what motivated me to start this literacy campaign, Guys Read comes mostly out of my own personal experiences. I grew up with five brothers (no sisters). I taught elementary school for ten years. I write for kids. I have a son, now in high school, who has never been crazy about reading.

Having grown up in the boy-filled Scieszka household, I had an appreciation for the male point of view that as a teacher I sometimes found missing in the female-dominated elementary-school world. Some of my female colleagues seemed convinced that the majority of the boys in their classes were wild or mean or crazy—or all of the above. It seemed to me that they were a lot like me and my brothers. My second-grade girls would volunteer that they wanted to be teachers when they grew up. Most of my boys, answering only under direct questioning, would say they wanted to be jet fighter pilots.

Teaching taught me to listen to kids, respect them as learners, nurture their desire to learn. I remember one little

guy who, after struggling through pages of a "Pam has a cat. Matt has a pan" kind of story, asked why we were doing this. I told him books could be exciting. He replied, sensibly enough, "Show me something exciting."

When my son Jake was in third grade, the one book the entire class was required to read over the summer was *Little House on the Prairie*. A lot of readers have loved *Little House on the Prairie*. Jake thought it was pure torture. His assessment? "Nothing happens in this book. They should have had some wolves on motorcycles."

Teaching reading is a complex, challenging process. Reading researchers tell us that kids need high-quality teachers, a wide variety of books, and a range of reading activities. They also need to practice reading, they need to hear books read aloud, and they need to spend time talking about books.

But in order for any of this teaching to be successful, kids need to be motivated to want to read. This seems to me to be the crucial element most often missing for boys and reading—motivation. And what is going to provide this inducement? Boys will be motivated by books they really want to read. They will be motivated by books of their own choosing. They will be motivated by positive reading role models.

All of my second-graders learned the most when they were in charge of their learning, and when they *wanted* to learn. The most successful math lesson I ever

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taught was a lesson in which I had prepared to describe and demonstrate, at length, all of the amazing connections between the operations of multiplication, division, and fractions in a simple equation. Come class time, I had laryngitis and couldn't say a word. I tried to croak out the beginning of my brilliant lecture. Nothing. My kids cracked up. I grabbed the math manipulative materials we used and tried to mime what I had planned to say. They laughed harder. A few started trying to guess what I was showing. The debate was on. Groups formed, argued their case, asked me if they were right. I could only show a different configuration of the materials.

Now the class was crazy to figure out this puzzle. A student started writing one group's ideas and equations on the board. The other group countered with their equations. No one looked to me for confirmation anymore. They figured I was useless. I faded to the side of the room and watched in humbled amazement what could happen when I got out of the way. By the end of the class period, the board was filled with more variations on the simple equation than I had prepared. Kids were still debating their mathematical theories on the way out the door to the next class. I cheerfully raised my hand and squeaked good-bye.

Kids will find a way to learn when they are inspired. The question is, How do we change what's not working for boys, so that they will want to read? How can we motivate boys with role models, independent choice, and engaging books?

Providing boys with role models seems to be the toughest challenge. Seventy-five percent of elementary-school teachers and librarians are women. Is it any surprise that our boys see reading as a feminine activity? We tell boys that reading is important. We show them that reading is something mostly women do. I don't think it is enough to show

boys the occasional poster of an athlete millionaire posing with a book.

As a second-grade teacher, I had guys who were already seen as "problem kids" blossom into readers. This wasn't a result of anything extraordinary I did. It wasn't anything different from what women teachers I knew were doing. I think it was just the fact that I was a guy. I was



reading. I was a role model for how a guy could be interested in books.

The answer to this need for male role models would seem obvious: get more men involved in teaching, involved in reading with their boys, involved in showing boys that reading is important. But, to put it mildly, this is a lot more easily said than done.

Individual book choice and engaging books are the two areas where we can do something right away to help our boys. Again, considering the 75 percent majority of women elementary-school teachers and librarians, it's understandable that required reading lists and favored books in schools might reflect women's reading tastes.

In his academic career, my son Jake has been required to read *Little House on the Prairie*, *Charlotte's Web*, and, more

recently, Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*. All of these books have confirmed his suspicion that, as he bluntly puts it, "reading is for girls." That's not to say that any of these books are inherently bad, or should only be read by girls, or that some boys might not love them too. But I think schools sometimes handicap their own efforts to get guys reading by not offering choices, and by not offering books boys want to read. Imagine how motivated you would be to read, as an adult, if you were told: "First you have to read the books your spouse likes." Let's start by giving them choices, and giving them books that they will want to read. Boys just might surprise us if we get out of their way.

Guys Read is not a campaign against girls. It doesn't urge writing books only for boys. It's not a value judgment on the books that are being used in schools. It's a campaign based on an observation that something is not working for boys and reading, a thought that a big part of this something is motivation, and an idea that we might be able to motivate boys by letting them know what other guys have enjoyed reading.

I put up a Web site (www.guysread.com) last spring to announce the program, raise people's awareness of the problem of boys and literacy, and start collecting ideas and titles of books that guys like. I'm working on a more interactive version of the site now. But the response to even this basic outline of an idea for boys and reading has been amazing. I was a bit worried at the outset that the site would get a mountain of Harry Potter and Captain Underpants votes, and not much else. I'm glad to say I was mistaken. Boys, moms, dads, teachers, and librarians have written in from around the world to vote for their favorite book for guys, voice their encouragement, ask for help. Guys Read voters have recommended everything from *Hot Rod* magazine to Philip Pull-

man's fantasy trilogy to Louis L'Amour Westerns to Katherine Paterson's *A Bridge to Terabithia* to Terry Pratchett's science fiction novels.

What makes a "guy book," then? I'm not really sure. Guys have voted for action stories, but also introspective books. Guys like books with male protagonists, but also recommend some

written by men are big with guys, but books written by women are not excluded. Ultimately, I don't think we can—or should—try to distill all of these choices into some generalized definition of a "guy's book." The power of this collection of titles lies in its specificity. We're not telling boys that reading is magic, or lecturing them

them, "Other guys like Jack Gantos's Joey Pigza books and Margaret Peterson Haddix's *Among the Hidden*. You might like them, too." ~

GUYS READ

GUYS READ is a web-based nonprofit literacy initiative for boys founded by Jon Scieszka. It is a sponsored program of the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Statistics and anecdotal evidence shows that boys are having trouble reading. The basic idea of GUYS READ is that boys can be motivated to read by connecting with texts they will want to read.

What boys like to read is not often the same as what they are required to read. Literary fiction is the mainstay of required school reading. Yet boys often prefer non-fiction, humor, information, comics/graphic novels, and more humor.

A lot of boys aren't too crazy about reading

I grew up with five brothers. I taught elementary school for ten years. I've been writing books for kids for fifteen years. And I think I have an idea why boys might not like reading.

Boys often have to read books they don't really like. They don't get to choose what they want to read. And what they do like to read, people sometimes tell them is not really reading.

I think boys need to:

- Choose what they read.
- Pick from all different kinds of reading – not just school novels.
- Find out what other guys like to read.

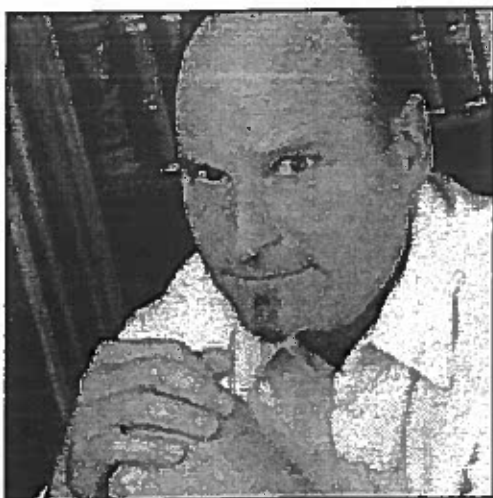
Statistics show that as a group boys:

✖ Score lower in all grades on standardized reading and writing tests than girls

✖ Are more likely than girls to be placed in remedial classes or held back a grade

✖ Rank lower in their class and earn fewer honors than girls

✖ Get into fights twice as often, and commit suicide four times more often than girls.



Something is not working for boys, but there is little to no direct research on gender and literacy, and not much in the way of support for boys' literacy. There are literacy programs for adults, for students of English as a second language, for women, and for prison inmates. There are no literacy programs for boys.

Our Mission

Our mission is to motivate boys to read by connecting them with materials they will want to read, in ways they like to read.

Our mission is to:

1. Make some noise for boys.
We have literacy programs for adults and families. GUYS READ our chance to call attention to boys' literacy.
2. Expand our definition of reading.
Include boy-friendly nonfiction, humor, comics, graphic novels, action-adventure, magazines, websites, and newspapers in school reading. Let boys know that all these materials count as reading.
3. Give boys choice.
Motivate guys to want to read by letting them choose texts they enjoy. Find out what they want. Let them choose from a new, wide range of reading.

Why might boys be having trouble

- Biologically, boys are slower to develop than girls and often struggle with reading and writing skills early on.
- The action-oriented, competitive learning style of many boys works against them learning to read and write.
- Many books boys are asked to read don't appeal to them. They're not motivated to want to read.
- As a society, we teach boys to suppress feelings. Boys aren't proud and often don't feel comfortable exploring the emotions and feelings found in fiction.
- Boys don't have enough positive male role models for literacy. If the majority of adults involved in kids' reading are women, boys don't see reading as a masculine activity.

For Young Guys

Cars That Go and Things That Go
by Richard Scarry

The Carrot Seed
by Ruth Krauss, illustrated by Crockett Johnson.

Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus
by Mo Willems

For Middle Guys

A Series of Unfortunate Events
by Lemony Snicket

The Baseball Card Adventure Series
by Dan Gutman

Bud, Not Buddy
by Christopher Paul Curtis