

# What We Want: Boys and Girls Talk about Reading

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## Abstract

*Most school-age boys score lower than girls at every level on standardized tests of reading comprehension in almost every country where tested. The amount of reading that a child does is directly related to reading fluency; the more one reads, the more proficient one becomes. After reviewing theories and research studies investigating why boys perform less well than girls, a consensus emerges that one reason boys read less is because the kind of reading they are given to do in school does not connect to their interests. A small empirical study in one rural elementary school provides further insight into motivations for reading and non-reading by both boys and girls.*

*The evidence is incontrovertible that as a group, school-age boys score lower than girls at every level on standardized tests of reading comprehension, in almost every country where tested, most notably in the United States (NCES 2002), Canada, England, and Australia, where students are continuously tested. Therefore, the obvious conclusion from this data is that we are failing to make readers of our sons. Analyses of statistics are many and controversial, especially as the latest round of “educational reform” fueled by the Education Act of 2001 has generated more high-stakes testing of students and measurable accountability on the part of teachers, schools, and school districts. Additionally, computers have made gathering, storing, and analyzing statistics simpler than ever before, and the Internet has made it easier to publish and retrieve them. But how do the children themselves feel about reading? Teachers and school library media specialists (SLMSs), trained in reading, in books, and in best practices, often assume that they know what is best for students. At what juncture should the students’ viewpoints be taken into consideration?*

## Review of the Literature

In “Guys and Reading,” former teacher Jon Scieszka (2003) laments his son Jake’s view that “reading is for girls.” While Scieszka’s daughter reads voraciously, when he asked his son, “What books are you packing to take on vacation?” the unenviable answer to a famous author father was “Why would I take books? This is supposed to be a vacation.” Scieszka says:

Researching the problems boys have with reading, I’ve come to the conclusion that much of the cause of boys’ reluctance to read can be reduced to a single, crucial element—motivation. Reading research shows that young people need high-quality teachers, a wide variety of books and a range of reading activities. They need to hear books read aloud.



and individual. Because most teachers and SLMSs work with particular groups of children over an extended time, they can learn the interests of each child within the group, and in so doing gain powerful, effective knowledge to use in successfully matching children and books. This requires conversation and communication with the individual child.

In defining the term reading itself, there are those who maintain that “readers” are only those who, in Louise Rosenblatt’s (1995) terms, are “aesthetic” readers. She defined aesthetic reading as the habit of explaining the literary qualities of a work such as rhythm, imagery, metaphor, and departures from ordinary diction. Other reading, in her terms, was “efferent” reading, or reading that is for a practical purpose—selecting out and analytically abstracting information, ideas, or directions for action that will remain when the reading is over. Most classroom reading instruction is aesthetic reading. Many, if not most boys, however, tend to read efferently.

Because an information book is much more difficult to read at storytime due to the lack of storyline, teachers often don’t bother. When reading aloud to children, teachers and most parents inevitably choose fiction. Adults want boys to choose books that help them become mature readers, that reward reflection, and that emphasize the emotional rather than the physical; books that will help them study for standardized tests in reading comprehension that emphasize narrative. In short, what boys believe to be “girl books.” Girls are much more motivated by interpersonal relationships and character analyses than boys.

These facts support Sullivan’s (2004) proposition that educators are far less respectful of boys’ reading preferences than those of girls. We define “good” books, he says, as those that conform to the way that girls think. When teachers assign students to read a book or to do a book report,

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- x Boys are more inclined to read informational texts.
- x Boys are more inclined to read magazines and newspaper articles.
- x Boys are more inclined to read comic books and graphic novels than girls.
- x Boys like to read about hobbies, sports, and things they do or want to do.
- x Boys tend to enjoy escapism and humor.
- x Some groups of boys are passionate about science fiction or fantasy.
- x The appearance of a book and cover is important to boys.
- x Few boys entering school call themselves nonreaders, but by high school more than half do.
- x Boys tend to think they are bad readers.

If reading is perceived as feminized, boys will go to great lengths to avoid it (Smith and Wilhelm 2002).

Michael Gurian (2001) argues that what boys like to read springs naturally from their experiences and how their brains are wired. He asserts that boys' brains engage in less cross-hemispheric activity than girls'; therefore, they need an extra jolt of sound, color, motion or some physical stimulation to get their brains up to speed. This internal wiring explains boys' preferences for sports, action, and adventure books, and also nonfiction titles that satisfy their innate desire to make sense of the universe and to test its boundaries. Boys' fascination with comics and graphic novels can be explained using this rationale. The details of the drawings are as important to the story as text, and reward close examination of pictures rather than words.

In their controversial book *Brain Sex*, Moir and Jessel (1989) premise that a baby's brain is born sexually biased. They also believe that the discipline of school is deeply unnatural to boys. "His is a world of action, exploration and things. But school tells him to sit quiet, listen, not fidget, and pay attention to ideas; everything, in fact, that his brain and body are telling him not to do" (64). They assert that understanding the difference between the male and female brain has implications for education, and that it makes infinitely more sense to reform our educational





## Methodology

The study was conducted in two parts. Thirty-five boys, aged ten to thirteen, comprised the main sample group. The students were from four fifth-grade classes at a rural elementary school in north central North Carolina. The racial composition of the group was nineteen white, twelve African American, two Hispanic (both native Spanish-speakers), one Asian, and one biracial. Each student consented to a nineteen-question, open-ended interview about reading, with the interviewer's assurance that there were no right or wrong answers and that she was seeking their opinions. A random group was asked a twentieth question about the reading materials in their home. For consistency, all interviews were conducted by the researcher over a period of two consecutive days. The questions were:

- x What kind of reader are you?
- x Do you like to read for pleasure? Why or why not?
- x What would you rather do than read?
- x If you could change something about yourself as a reader, what would you change?
- x What is your favorite thing to read? Why?
- x Do you have a favorite book? A favorite author?
- x Do you think reading will be important to you when you're a grownup? Why?
- x What types of things will you read when you're a grownup?
- x What do you want to be when you're grown? What types of things might a person doing that job read?
- x Do the men in your family read? What do they read?
- x Are the reading tests you have in school fair? Why or why not?
- x Are the reading assignments you have in school worthwhile to you? Why or why not?
- x What could your teachers do to make reading more enjoyable for you?
- x If you could give your language arts teacher some advice about helping boys, not just you, but other boys as well, to read more or read better, what advice would you give?
- x Do you have things in your home to read, and, if so, what sorts of things?

For the second portion of the study, as a potential counterpoint to the interviews, all four classroom teachers conducted a free write created by the researcher with both boys and girls. Sixty-nine students participated. The prompt was, "If you could read anything you wanted for your next reading assignment (not just a book, but a magazine, a Web site, a newspaper, or anything you choose as long as you are reading and can tell me about it) what would you read and why?"

## Findings and Analysis

### Part One: The Interviews

During the interviews, not every boy answered every question. In the cases where they offered more than one answer, such as the career question, all answers were included in the totals. Totals were arrived at by simple percentages. In the case of two-part questions, separate totals were calculated for each part.





Over a third, 37.1 percent, stated either that reading teaches them or they learn from it; learning new words was specifically mentioned by 22.9 percent; and 11.4 percent said that reading helps them read more or better. Thus a total of 71.4 percent of the boys indicated some aspect of learning from their reading. In addition, 5.7 percent said that reading takes their mind off things, and another 5.7 percent indicated that they get nothing from reading (these students also answered that they did not like to read for pleasure). The final student answered that he did not know (this was potentially a linguistic problem with a student who is a native Spanish speaker).

Interestingly, not a single boy mentioned enjoyment or entertainment. It seems that the adults in their lives have inculcated the value of reading in order to learn, but that the leap to reading for enjoyment—the foundation for a lifelong reading habit—has not been realized.

What would you rather do than read?

As one would expect, most boys this age prefer active to sedentary activities. More than half, 65.6 percent, indicated that th 4227

Answers to the second question were more evenly distributed. Nearly a fifth of students, 19.4 percent, indicate that they like to read a specific thing in order to learn from it (these were all nonfiction readers). A like amount read specific books or materials because they are funny. The next largest group, with 16.1 percent, enjoyed what they read for action or fighting. Entertainment, or the fact that it keeps them wanting to read more was the choice of 12.9 percent, and a further 9.7 percent chose the type of material they did because it pertained to their favorite sport. Two students, 6.5 percent, indicated that they enjoy reading about magic and wizards. One student each indicated: he reads the Bible because it is the truth; he enjoys graphic novels because the pictures help him understand the text; he likes the challenge of reading difficult novels; the thrill of being scared by a horror novel is pleasurable; and finding hidden pictures on the pages is fun. [This is the only time the word fun was used by a boy, and finding pictures, even in a book, is not, strictly speaking, reading.]

The specific types of materials that interest these boys are validated in the research literature. Yet, again, with the exception of the action or adventure novel, are not used as literature for the classroom. Although teachers make many of these types of materials available in the classroom, they are not used for instructional purposes, and this generally tells boys that whatever their favorite types of books and materials, it is irrelevant to the classroom curriculum. Reading instruction will take place with narrative fiction only. Told often enough, even indirectly, that what they enjoy is not important, it is not surprising that so many boys do not enjoy reading.

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contracts in order to know what they're signing, will have to read more as adults, will need to read letters or mail, or that "I won't get anywhere without reading." One student each indicated: that he will need to be able to read sports plays from his playbook, that he'll occasionally need to read something important, that it depends on the job that he gets, that he won't need to read when he becomes a professional ballplayer, and that he won't read because it's like a hobby to him now that he doesn't think he'll pursue as an adult.

Again, although the importance of being able to read has been inculcated into these students, not one mentioned that reading is entertaining, enjoyable, or fun. They obviously equate reading with work. While that is not necessarily bad, it is antithetical to the love of reading that libraries and librarians seek to encourage.

What do you think you'll read as a grownup?

If more than one thing was mentioned, it is included in the totals. The largest group, 38.6 percent, indicated some area of nonfiction pleasure or informational reading, including books, articles, magazines and newspapers. Nearly a fifth, 18.2 percent, indicated work-related items and fiction books. In addition, 6.8 percent think they will be reading contracts, either as a professional athlete or for purchasing homes or cars; 4.5 percent indicated that they had no idea of what they might read when they grow up. The final 13.7 percent, one student each, indicated that they would be reading: bills and mail; applications such as job applications; the Bible; to his students (this child wants to be a kindergarten teacher); to his own children; and papers from the government (this student is a recent immigrant).

One inference that could be drawn here is that these students are looking to parents and guardians as role models for their future reading behaviors. In most cases, the answers that they gave are the materials that adults deal with daily in their lives at home; items that deal with the day-to-

Five students from the previous question did not know what they wanted to be, so had no idea about this question, either. Another five knew what they wanted to be, but did not know what a person in that occupation might read. There were twenty-five specific responses to the question, and some students answered with more than one thing; percentages are based on those twenty-five replies. Six boys, 24 percent, felt that a person in their chosen occupation would read some sort of instructional book or manual. Twelve percent, all athletes, feel that ballplayers read plays and playbooks. The two budding chefs know that their job requires the reading of recipes and cookbooks. Two others feel people in their occupation will read contracts. The other 48 percent of the total was singular answers to the question as follows: weather patterns and history; scientific formulas; letters; children's books; newspapers; the Bible; blueprints; biographies; crime reports; sports magazines; law books; and books about trucks.

The majority of the boys did, indeed, have a grasp of the types of materials that people in their choice of occupation would read. This is, in large part, due to their familiarity with the jobs; most know an adult that is currently engaged in the profession that they chose.

Do the men in your family read?

The largest group, 35.1 percent of the thirty-seven answers to this question, answered just, "Yes" with no specifics. A particular relative that reads, a brother, grandfather, father, or uncle (in this descending order) was mentioned 29.7 percent of the time. A further 29.7 percent said that the men in their families do not read at all. The final 5.5 percent, two students, rather wistfully replied, "Some of them," with no further specifics.

The research is clear that all children, in order to appreciate reading, need to see adults reading and valuing reading. Booth (2002), Brozo (2002), and Gurian (2001), among others, all make this specific point. Boys need role models, especially male role models, who read in order to value reading as an activity. As the boys' siblings were usually in school as well, brothers were the obvious answer to the question. In addition, several of these boys are in single-parent families headed by mothers, further explaining the fact that three of the top four answers indicated someone other than the student's father.

What types of things do they read?

There were twenty-six answers to this question, and several of the boys gave more than one answer. Books, with no further explanation, were the top answer, with 19.2 percent of the total. A further 15.4 percent indicated that the men in their families read newspapers. Three of the boys, 11.5 percent, said that although the men in their lives read, they don't know what they read; thus leaving their original answers rather suspect. Another 11.5 percent said that their relatives read history. The final two boys indicated that their relatives read fiction.

The boys' basic indecision on this question tends to leave the veracity of their answer on the previous question rather suspect. It was as if they knew that it was important for their relatives to read, and wanted them to be readers, but when pushed for actual examples, they had to work to retrieve (or perhaps invent) the information. They seemed much clearer on what they themselves would read in the future than what the male influences in their lives currently read.

Are the reading assignments you get in school worthwhile to you personally?

The majority of the boys, 65.7 percent said that yes, the assignments are worthwhile. Twenty percent said no or not really, and one student, 2.9 percent, said "probably." The final 11.4 percent said that the assignments are sometimes worthwhile.

Why or why not?

This follow-up question required some substantial thought, and the answers were not consistent with the previous question. The largest group, 26.6 percent, said that the assignments help them get the right answers on their tests or good grades. A further 16.6 percent said that, “they help me learn.” An equal 16.6 percent, however, answered that they didn’t know why the assignments were valuable; Ten percent replied that the assignments help them read better. One student equivocated saying, “Some are cool.” The final 26.6 percent explained their negativity in a number of ways: four students said that the assignments are not interesting or that they don’t like them; one said, “They are valueless because they have nothing to do with school”; one “You just read and tell what happened, that’s it”; one “They are boring and they don’t bring me anything”; and the final student said “They don’t help you, they just help your grade.”

More than a quarter of the students indicated that reading assignments are valuable because they help you get the right answers on the test or help you get good grades; several of the boys’ who expressed negative feelings did so because they felt the assignments valueless because they only helped their grades and were of no interest to them personally. This inverse relationship indicates quite a few of the students, at this tender age, have already figured out how to work the system and read with how they will be assessed on the material in mind. The fact that more than one fourth of the students answered this question negatively, and another 16.6 percent could not articulate the value of reading assignments, leads to a conclusion that at least with these boys, they want. Two students wanted more books that “I’m interested in,” and two specific titles. One student said “I want more books that I’m interested in,” and two specific titles: “The Hobbit” and “The Lord of the Rings.”



Potter gave boys permission to like the genre. Many fantasy books are also action-adventure oriented, and this aspect appeals to boys as well. Harry Potter media hype over the publication of a new book and the release of a new movie also likely played a role.

The remainder of the students chose the non-narrative formats of magazines, Web sites, and newspapers. These media offer information in shorter “chunks,” and stories are usually supported by pictures or graphics. There is no necessity to finish a long story, and no guilt with

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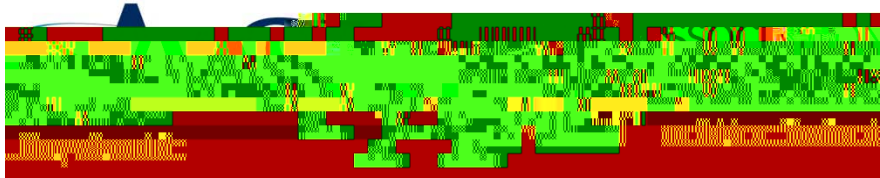




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