

# ED467687 2002-08-00 Helping Underachieving Boys Read Well and Often. ERIC Digest.

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**ERIC Identifier:** ED467687

**Publication Date:** 2002-08-00

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**Source:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education New York NY.

## Helping Underachieving Boys Read Well and Often. ERIC Digest.

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The ability to read well is the most important skill children can acquire. Reading ability and the desire to read vary significantly among groups of children, however. This was demonstrated, for example, by the findings of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K), a national study on school readiness that measured children's ability to identify by name uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet, associate letters with sounds at the beginning and ending of words, recognize common words by sight, and read words in context. ECLS-K found that on all these measures girls were more proficient than boys, whites more proficient than non-Asian students of color and Latinos, and children from higher socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds more proficient than lower SES children (reported in Coley, 2002). Moreover, the reading gap between whites and students of color frequently widens with age (Coley, 2001).

There are many reasons why some children do not read well and do not like to read, some of which are related to biological and cognitive factors. Other impediments to reading achievement include the use of ineffective teaching strategies and materials; the lack of sufficient and enticing reading resources in schools, communities, and homes; and family habits that do not include reading. This digest provides information on how schools and families can improve the reading skills of native English speaking children, particularly poor elementary school level boys of color. It focuses on ways to increase the time they spend reading and the enjoyment they get from doing so; it does not cover strategies for teaching reading. The recommendations presented below, based on the analysis and experience of experts, have proven to be particularly useful with boys who are most at risk of underachievement but least likely to view reading as an important activity.

## HOW BOYS VIEW READING

Boys tend to learn to read at an older age than girls, take longer to learn, and comprehend narrative texts less easily. Boys also value reading less, and see reading as a way to get information rather than as a recreational activity (Simpson, 1996; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). While researchers differ on whether boys of color see reading as "acting white," and, thus, something to be avoided (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), one study of African American boys found that they resented activities they defined as schoolwork, believing that they will never benefit from an education (Tanksley, 1995).

## READING MATERIALS THAT BOYS LIKE

Boys tend to read a "wider number of genres over a broader range of topics" than girls (Simpson, 1996, p. 272). They are usually most interested in books and periodicals about hobbies, sports, and activities they might engage in, and in informational resources. They like escapism (science fiction, adventure, and fantasy) and humor more than fiction and poetry, and they like to collect series of books (Simpson, 1996;

Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

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. Obviously, then, involving boys in the selection process will increase their attentiveness (Simpson, 1996). Further, boys, like all children, want to see characters like themselves sometimes. Therefore, materials should feature people of different ethnicities, races, and backgrounds who live in a variety of types of homes and communities. (One resource for materials of particular interest to African American children is a bibliography produced by the National Association for the Education of Young Children [Brown & Oates, 2001]).

## CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING BOYS' READING

Reading aloud by teachers, guest readers, and students is a valuable classroom activity to which substantial amounts of time should be allotted. It is especially beneficial for boys who may not be reading at other times and need to be introduced to the pleasure that reading provides. Teachers can capture boys' interest by associating the material to be read with their existing knowledge. When they read aloud to boys, teachers can help them to associate sounds with symbols by letting them follow along with the text. Rotating reading materials of different genres allows boys to see the many types of reading materials available--not just novels and textbooks, but also newspapers and magazines, how-to guides, comics, and computer programs--and their multiple uses (Simpson, 1996).

Boys gain confidence in their reading ability when they read aloud in class. Frequent interruptions or corrections undermine this confidence, however. Since teachers correct boys' reading more than girls', they need to be sensitive to the effects of their criticism (McCarthy, Nicastro, Spiros, & Staley, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Additional time for silent reading promotes the independent development of skills and the enjoyment of reading.

Teachers can help boys comprehend reading materials and promote analytical thinking by involving them in class or group discussions. Students can review the content, purpose, and presentation of particular types of books, and how they differ. They can "talk about stories as constructions of the world, not as reflections of it," and can consider whether they empathize with the characters. They can use their imaginations to recast a story using characters of a different sex or ethnicity. Because girls tend to dominate discussions of books, teachers need to take care that boys participate (Simpson, 1996, p. 278).

A library in the classroom stocked with attractive age- and ability-appropriate books encourages boys to pick up one when they have a free moment. Inviting all children to

design the library area, and to choose and organize the books, promotes use. Regular visits to the school library show boys a much wider range of reading materials and foster their desire to improve their skills so they can read the more sophisticated material there. Outings to the public library serve the same purpose. Also, getting children library cards encourages future visits with their families (Calkins, 1996).

## JOINT STRATEGIES FOR THE SCHOOL, COMMUNITY, AND HOME

Schools, libraries, and community groups can join with families to improve boys' reading. Adults can talk about how reading alone and with friends, looking for books in stores, libraries, and flea markets, giving books as gifts, and sharing what they have learned, makes them happy and helps them relate to others (Calkins, 1997). More formally, organizations can implement reading programs. They can provide male reading role models of color to help boys develop the habit of reading. Such role models are especially important for boys living in homes without men, and including them in a supplementary education program can help compensate for families that do not read at home. Men can model reading by doing so themselves and reading aloud to children, and by telling children why reading enriches their own lives (Tanksley, 1995). A tutoring program can also employ adult role models. Alternatively, it can pair less proficient readers with more accomplished students who can instinctively select appealing books, articles, and manuals providing instructions for engaging in an activity or constructing a model. Of course, all tutors can use school texts (Tanksley, 1995).

## ACTIVITIES FOR PARENTS

Schools can help parents promote their children's reading by communicating that it is important to read to sons (every day, if possible), that they do not have to be well educated to do so effectively, and that schools cannot be solely responsible for their children's education. Schools can direct parents to free sources of reading materials (such as the school itself, libraries, and community organizations) and manage book swaps. They can also encourage parents to allow their children time for reading and provide an inviting place for it. Parents can also be helped to integrate reading with their children naturally into their schedules (Coley, 2002; McCarthy et al., 2001; North Carolina, 1999; Tanksley, 1995).

Parents can model reading, sharing what they have learned, recommending good books, and mentioning what they want to learn from reading in the future. Parents and sons can read together, selecting increasingly difficult materials to help boys improve their skills and promoting positive interactions as they predict what will happen in a story and then discuss what did happen and why. Parents and sons can look up information together both to show the value of reading and to help boys develop problem-solving skills. Parents can take books along on long trips or to places where waiting is anticipated to help boys appreciate the value of reading as recreation. Finally, parents

can maintain a reading log with their sons that indicates what, when, and how much the boys are reading. The log keeps parents informed, supports their sons' efforts, and encourages reading together (Calkins, 1996; McCarthy et al., 2001; North Carolina, 1999; Tanksley, 1995).

## CONCLUSION

Many enticements compete for children's time, television most especially. For boys, the desire to be physically active can further impede their interest in reading. Therefore it is necessary to help boys select and use reading materials that are as entertaining as television, tap into their special interests and answer their unique questions about the world, and provide information that facilitates their participation in sports and other group activities.

Finally, 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. 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.

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This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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**Title:** Helping Underachieving Boys Read Well and Often. ERIC Digest.

**Note:** Digest Number 176.

**Document Type:** Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

**Available From:** ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll free); Tel: 212-678-3433; Fax: 212-678-4012; e-mail: eric-cue@columbia.edu. For full text:

<http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/pubget.asp?show=1>.

**Descriptors:** Elementary Education, Elementary School Students, Low Income Groups, Males, Minority Group Children, Parent Responsibility, Reading Aloud to Others, Reading Attitudes, Reading Skills

**Identifiers:** ERIC Digests

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