

The Challenges of Boys and Literacy
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The challenges of getting boys to read are well documented, but not necessarily well understood. Census data and research studies suggest boys are diagnosed more frequently than girls as having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), more likely to end up in Special Education programs by a two to one ratio, three times more likely to be retained, and represent the majority of students that dropout from high school. Yet, through all of this boys do end up going to college and doing well in business and other fields. What makes the difference between those that succeed and those that do not?

One factor is well documented; boys from low-income families have less chance of becoming a proficient reader than boys from middle class and wealthy families. The difference between success and dropping out has more to do with one's income level than one's gender. However, girls from low-income families become proficient readers more often than boys, so gender does seem to play a role. Some of the reasons for this might be the lack of positive male role models for boys. Boys see mothers and other females read more frequently than they see fathers and other males reading. In general, boys do not identify themselves as readers because the role models they look up to don't engage in reading as frequently as females. This means eventually boys don't value reading as a life skill. Young boys need to develop their identities as readers in and out of school by seeing other males reading and using reading to enhance their potential. Just finding more books that are interesting will not help if boys don't see themselves as readers.

One of the biggest challenges is making changes at home and in schools to support boys as readers. Some challenges associated with boys and school based on research and my experiences as an educator:

- The things boys like to read are often not allowed in schools.
- Boys are generally less concerned with reading to please the teacher.
- In general, boys spend less time reading (especially fiction) than girls.
- Most elementary school teachers are female (around 90%) and may not relate to boy readers as well as girl readers.
- Boys need more books with positive role models.

These challenges mean parents and teachers must become more aware of the problems of getting boys to read and some of the ways in which they can support their male readers at home and at school. There are several ways we can help boys develop a sense of themselves as readers and get the books they want into

their hands. First, boys need help in finding and selecting appropriate reading material. On-line book reviews at (www.carolhurst.com) booklists on (www.guysread.com) peer recommendations, children's choice awards like the International Reading Association (www.reading.org) and teachers that are familiar with titles that will get boys excited about reading.

Second, we need to help boys see themselves as readers and understand both the immediate as well as the future purposes for becoming a proficient reader. In other words, we have to find ways to make reading cool both in and out of school.

Third, we need to provide access to a wide variety of books and reading materials. Teachers and parents have to let go of some of their biases about books with underwear, farting and misbehavior, and allow boys to read books that they enjoy and are engaging. There is time to read more difficult material, but first we have to get boys reading.

Finally, we have to learn how to help boys make sense of what they are reading and keep comprehension of texts as the primary goal in reading instruction. The focus must remain on making sense of texts and the purposes for reading. The more purposeful we can make reading, the better chance we have of enticing boys to become readers.

Side Bar #1

Providing Opportunities to Read:

- **Access** to Reading Materials
- **Time** to Read (at home, in school, in between)
- **Choice** in What to Read as Much as Possible
- **Support** in Selecting Appropriate Materials
- **Response** to What has Been Read (time to talk about books)

Sidebar #2

Texts For Boys Should Be:

- Focused on plot not drama and emotions
- Visually Appealing – interesting visual elements – graphic novels, magazines

- Purposeful – provide information boy readers can use
- Readily familiar –main characters boys can relate to
- Engaging – sustains boys reading over time – books in series are important
- Edgy – often contain controversial or contemporary issues
- Humorous – contain a sense of mischief, slapstick
- Brief – shorter books can be read more frequently

More Information:

My Website for Booklists: www.frankserafini.com

Jon Scieszka' Website: www.guysread.com

James Patterson's Website: www.readkiddoread.com

Biographical Information:

Dr. Frank Serafini is an Associate Professor of Literacy Education at Arizona State University. He travels throughout North America working with teachers and educators to improve literacy education, especially for boys.