

## **Nurturing the Reader in Our Sons**

By Cathy Puett Miller, *babyzone.com*, March 2008

Graded tests show boys trailing behind girls in the world of reading. Are they doomed to become second-class students? Learn how to create a rich literacy environment for your son.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the nation's report card, shows that boys have trailed girls at reading and writing in every grade tested since the exams began in 1971. What's happening? Aren't our boys growing up in the same environments as our girls?

The voice of children's author and creator of the reading initiative *Guys Read*, Jon Sceizska, joins many others when he says, "Something is not working for boys in the world of reading."

The first issue is that it's OK to say boys and girls are different. Part of the struggle, according to experts such as Michael Gurian, author of *The Wonder of Boys*, is that boys' and girls' brains function differently. Biology accounts for differences between how boys and girls communicate, learn, and reason. For example, boys crave movement and don't do well in classrooms where they are expected to sit quietly for 100 percent of the day. In addition, boys tend to be slower developmentally, which creates an unbalanced result in test scores in which ages rather than developmental levels are compared. Does that mean that our boys are doomed to failure and being second-class students? I answer with a resounding "No!" Rich literacy environments *can* make the difference.

### **Make sure your son sees men in his life reading**

Daddy or Grandpa doesn't have to read a novel within plain view of Junior every night, but we do need to re-think the role models our children see. Seventy five percent of our elementary school teachers are still female. Mothers are most often the ones who read with their children. Boys are told they must succeed, but they don't often see the most popular, or the highest paid athletes or rock stars, or even Daddy, picking up something to read. No wonder our boys start to view reading as a "sissy" activity that's only good for girls.

As the parent of a thirteen-year-old son who informed me that John H. Ritter's book, *The Boy Who Saved Baseball*, was intoxicating, I am convinced that example is the most powerful tool we have. From the first day Charlie came home from the hospital, he saw both his father and mother reading many different things: books, magazines, how-to manuals, computer screens, the newspapers, recipe books, and car repair manuals. He saw us choosing to spend time reading for information and pleasure, alone and with him. That made an impression and, because of it, he independently gravitates to reading today.

### **Recognize that boys may not be interested in reading the same materials as girls**

Every child is different. Jane Yolan's great bedtime story, *How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?* was born of necessity when her editor told her, "My little boy hates going to bed at night but loves dinosaurs. Can you write something for him?" Ms. Yolan recognized that tying pleasure into an experience was vital to the acceptance of that experience. Let your little guy choose to read about trucks or puppy dogs or space aliens or toads. Let him develop discretion in choosing what he reads from the beginning. When it's time to read, let him choose the book or books he'd like to hear, those that appeal to him. Feed that discretion so he grows up without any limitations: reading is fun because you get to find out about "stuff" you like.

If your boy wants to read (or hear stories) about adventure, building airplanes, inventors or creatures from the black lagoon, encourage it. If he wants to look at the pictures in *Sports Illustrated*, comic books, or baseball cards, feed that passion. Dr. Michael Pressley says, "Attractive and interesting materials are a must. We do not only want to teach kids to read, but we also want to teach them to be readers. If reading is a pleasurable experience for children, they will want to repeat it."

The fact that our boys can find purpose and pleasure in reading is the key to helping them survive the limits that other components of society may put on their literacy. Discover what your little man's passions are and hunt down books or any other reading material that relates to that. Get to know your child to lock into real motivations for reading.

## **Read to him early and often**

The landmark report, *Building A Nation of Readers*, states that the simplest activity we can do with our boys is reading aloud to them. This activity is identified as being the single most important one for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading. Whatever you choose to read with your boy, have regular times set aside daily, or nearly every day. Let him act out his favorite characters to burn off energy. Picture books are great at this age but don't forget to point out words on signs, cereal boxes and scooters to send the early message that reading has to do with life. Use "how-to" books to improve his budding soccer game. Take advantage of those times when he's tuckered out to whip out a short book and read him to sleep. Every time you do that, a mental and emotional connection is made between the sound of your voice, a story, and a sense of warmth and security.

## **Create a rich literacy environment**

Make sure he has a variety of written text readily available to him, and specific times during which reading is a preferred activity.

How can we expect our boys to be readers if all we have around the house is "stuff" he finds boring? There is competition out there between computer games, TV and the Internet. How can we expect him to choose to read once he's beyond the "snuggle and cuddle stage," if by then it hasn't become a familiar and meaningful experience?

Washington DC author, Elizabeth Drew, says, "The true test of literature is, I suppose, whether we live more intensely for the reading of it." As parents of boys, we must make sure we help our sons view reading as the tremendous tool it is and feed the idea that

reading has direct personal significance to them. Then they will choose to be readers and live more successful, fulfilling lives because of it.

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