



Turning boys of all ages into life-long readers



School resources

Strong literacy skills are needed for young people to reach their academic, social and vocational goals. However, boys trail behind girls when it comes to literacy performance. In New Zealand, as in much of the rest of the world, the literacy performance of girls is significantly higher than boys¹. Given the impact of literacy skills on boys' performance across different subject areas, we need to do more to help boys to develop the literacy skills they need to succeed both in school and beyond.

What can we do to improve boys' literacy outcomes?

In some cases, boys' literacy issues are related to gaps in foundational literacy skills that may persist beyond the early years. These boys may have a skill barrier to reading fluency which can hold them back, and they will need tailored and multi-faceted interventions to help them to close the performance gap between themselves and their peers². In other cases, boys have learned to read independently, and have the required foundational independent reading skills. However, they continue to fall behind the girls in their class as they move through the years of schooling. While this can be due to many potential factors, infrequent reading for pleasure may play a part.

Where independent reading skills have been acquired by boys, this is not the end of their literacy journey. As with most activities, practice is needed for improvement to occur. If boys do not read frequently, their reading skills may decline³, and research suggests that boys in New Zealand read for pleasure less than girls. More than half of boys in New Zealand do not read for enjoyment compared to 34% of girls⁴. Improving boys' attitudes toward reading can be the answer for improving boys' literacy skills⁵, as this review explores.

Why does reading engagement matter?

We know that boys who view reading in a positive light tend to read more often and develop their reading skills⁶. Positive attitudes towards reading that lead to reading frequency are in turn related to literacy skill development, particularly in relation to reading comprehension⁷. Once young people can read independently, they need to read regularly in order to both maintain and develop their reading skills⁸, so we need to encourage boys to have positive attitudes toward reading, and to read often.

Parents, classroom teachers, school library professionals, and friends can all influence boys' attitudes toward reading, and boys have described experiencing changes in their attitudes toward reading based on positive interactions about reading with these social influences. For example, research suggests that encouragement from their father may be an important factor in boys' interest in and motivation to read⁹.

Do boys and girls receive equal encouragement to see themselves as readers?

Many people believe that boys are just 'naturally' not readers, and that is why they do not regularly engage in literacy supportive practices such as reading for pleasure. However, if attitudes toward reading were predetermined by biology, there should logically be no avid male readers, and this certainly is not the case. Research suggests that from the early years, we socialise boys and girls differently when it comes to reading. Parents spend more time supporting and encouraging girls to read, starting as young

as nine months¹⁰. By the time teachers have the chance to influence boys' attitudes toward reading at school, this unbalanced encouragement provided at home is already likely to have had an impact.

This unbalanced parental encouragement persists into the schooling years. Recent research with children in upper primary school found that even though boys read less frequently than girls, parents were still more likely to encourage their daughters to read than their sons¹¹. If we want boys to read, and see themselves as readers, we should be providing them with just as much support and encouragement to read as girls, particularly given that research suggests that young people's leisure practices can be shaped by social influences such as parents and peers¹². However, boys are less likely to have friends who read, with girls more than twice as likely to receive encouragement to read from their friends than boys¹³. As such, teachers and school library professionals may play a vital role in encouraging boys to read, particularly if they are not receiving any encouragement to read at home or in their friend groups.

Do all boys prefer to read non-fiction?

If we want boys to read more, we need to give them access to reading materials that meet their interests. However, rather than taking into account their unique individual interests, teachers may fall back on stereotyping that can lead to unintended effects on boys' literacy progress. It is a popular myth that all boys prefer to read non-fiction. In response to this myth, books in classrooms have, in some cases, historically been sorted into pink boxes for young girls, and blue boxes for young boys, to meet the perceived differences in demand in relation to gender. The blue boxes might hold non-fiction books about trucks, dinosaurs, and computer games: perceived acceptable boys' books. The pink boxes might hold fiction books about princesses and other equally gendered themes.

However, research does not support this idea. Boys actually typically prefer to read fiction. In primary school, less than 10% of boys prefer to read exclusively non-fiction, and older boys who read at least several times a month are more likely to choose fiction than non-fiction in international research¹⁴. This means that, in general, boys are actually more likely to choose to read fiction for pleasure. But why does this myth even matter?

Pushing boys toward reading 'blue box' non-fiction may contribute to boys' reading infrequency if non-fiction is not actually their preferred text type, as the research suggests. Some students report feeling pressure from parents to read non-fiction, despite having a preference for reading fiction. This may lead students to see themselves as non-readers, even though they are keen readers of certain genres¹⁵.

The reading of fiction books is more strongly associated with literacy benefit than the reading of non-fiction¹⁶, so when we encourage boys to exclusively read non-fiction based on a false stereotype, we are actually steering them away from reading the text type that can offer the **greatest literacy benefit**. If we are encouraging boys to read in order to close the literacy gap, pushing them to read non-fiction will be less effective. Finally, research suggests that the reading of fiction can also develop other skills and capacities, such as empathy and perspective-taking, and boys need these skills too¹⁷.

How to encourage boys to read in the early years and primary school

Support of boys as readers in the early years needs to be about developing not only reading skills, but also positive attitudes toward reading. Children's early literacy experiences influence their literacy skill development, and children who learn to read in an enjoyable context are more likely to become avid readers later in life¹⁸.

Practices such as reading aloud can play an important role in shaping young people's attitudes towards books and reading, while also improving spelling and vocabulary, and fostering foundational literacy

skills and cognitive development¹⁹. However, teachers may struggle to find time to read aloud to their students, and reading aloud is not usually a daily classroom activity in primary school²⁰. Recent research in Australia found that, while most children in primary school enjoy being read to, many are not being read to often in the home, or at school, and most children indicated that they would like to be read to more often²¹.

It cannot be contended that all parents are confident and knowledgeable when it comes to reading aloud in the home. Research found that nearly a quarter of parents were not read to as children, so we cannot assume that even literate parents have intergenerational knowledge of supporting home reading practices²². Schools can offer seminars for parents who want to support their child's literacy learning at home, but who lack knowledge and experience of how this can look. They can also use these opportunities to encourage parents to see their boys as readers.

We also need to encourage fathers to be more involved in reading aloud at home where possible, as only 45% of children reported being read to by their fathers at home²³. If we want young boys to view reading as an acceptable thing for boys to do, we need to encourage greater participation from fathers, who can be valuable reading models.

How to encourage older boys to be life-long readers

Boys have reported experiencing a withdrawal of encouragement to read as they moved through the years of schooling, which can lead them to the conclusion that reading is no longer important for them²⁴. If we want boys to keep reading, and to view themselves as readers, there are many things that teachers can do that are research supported. First, as previously noted, we need to keep up the **encouragement**, and motivate boys to read right across the years of schooling. It is important that boys not be dismissed as non-readers simply because they are boys. Research suggests that teachers' negative perceptions of boys and the resulting practices they employ can have a detrimental influence on boys' attitudes toward themselves as readers²⁵.

Boys should be exposed to **models who are avid readers**. Research with primary school children found that mothers are more likely to model positive attitudes than fathers²⁶. For boys to believe that reading is a socially acceptable pastime that boys can enjoy, they should be exposed to avid male readers in school, which could be particularly important when they are not being exposed to these models within the home. This noted, female models can also be effective influences on boys' reading, so female teachers and mothers can make a difference too²⁷.

Teachers should endeavour to establish a **whole-school reading culture** in their schools by fostering a whole-school environment that positions reading as socially acceptable, valuable, and enjoyable, and an activity both boys and girls can enjoy. Given that boys are less likely than girls to view reading as a socially acceptable pastime²⁸, creating a rich reading culture where reading is enjoyed and celebrated can be particularly valuable for boys.

Research suggests that the attitude of friends toward reading is more likely to impact boys' own attitudes toward reading than girls²⁹, so we need to create environments where friend **recommendations of books** are encouraged. Lively discussion around books and reading for pleasure can help connect boys with books that may appeal to them, and give them the courage and interest to extend their reading beyond preferred genres. Discussion about books also enhances the appeal of reading as a leisure pursuit.

Given that boys are less likely than girls to **read for pleasure**³⁰, we need to provide opportunities to read for pleasure during class time. If we do not provide these opportunities at school, we cannot assume that

boys will engage in the practice at home, and it is essential that boys have opportunities to develop the cognitive stamina needed for deep reading.

We also need to **support access to books**. Boys are less likely than girls to access the library in their free time³¹, so we need to give them the opportunity to select books during class time. For this to be possible, we need a **book-rich and well-resourced library** in all schools, and qualified **school library professionals** to staff them. Boys should be able to choose from a wide range of books to match their breadth of interests.

It should not be assumed that just because many boys enjoy engaging with technology, that they uniformly prefer to read books in eBook form. **Paper books** should still be available to them. Research with primary school students suggests that ownership of devices is negatively associated with reading frequency for boys, and that boys who are daily readers with access to devices do not use them frequently for book reading³². Paper books are still preferred by teenage boys³³. As research does not support the contention that boys prefer to read eBooks, we need to make sure that boys can still access paper books in order to read their preferred book type without distractions.

Finally, while this review highlights ways to turn boys of all ages into life-long readers, boys are not the only group worth the attention of literacy educators looking to improve students' literacy and related reading engagement. Socio-economic status is also significantly related to the literacy performance of students in New Zealand³⁴. Furthermore, New Zealand has also been identified as a country with worrying declines in the reading performance of girls³⁵. While attention to notable gaps can help us to concentrate our efforts on underperforming groups, we should seek to improve the reading engagement and literacy performance of *all* students.

Endnotes

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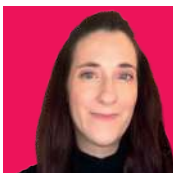
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