

# **Boys, Blokes and Books: Engaging boys in reading**

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## **Abstract**

Research reveals that boys in OECD countries continue to achieve less well than girls in standardised literacy testing such as NAPLAN and PISA. The combination of an intensive literature review and a qualitative study reveals what it takes to gain boys' attention, hold their interest and engage boys in the meaning making process of understanding texts. This paper contributes to a better understanding of boys and their literacy learning and draws on the unique perspectives of fathers in understanding their sons' attitudes to, engagement with and behaviour around reading.

The role fathers play in engaging their sons in positive literacy activities is central to this qualitative study. Zambo and Brozo (2009) recognise fathers as a unique and untapped resource and define the link between engaging fathers in literacy activities explicitly and their sons' progress (p.132). As well as being informed by the literature about boys and literacy, 20 in depth interviews were conducted with fathers in order to gain insights into how and what they regard their role to be in supporting their son's literacy development. The boy's ages ranged from 7 to 11 years. The study highlights in part the value of fathers in participating in literacy activities with their sons and modelling enjoyment of reading. Fathers' understandings of reading and the correlation with their son's reading behaviour is investigated. How boys select texts and what is selected is explored. Practical collaborative approaches to boys' reading and writing and methods to bridge and foster home-school relationships are reported.

Zambo, D & Brozo, W.G (2009) *Bright beginnings for boys: Engaging young boys in active literacy*. International Reading Association. USA

## **Boys, Blokes and Books: Engaging boys in reading**

### **Introduction**

This paper explores how educating fathers and male caregivers about literacy impacts on their sons' learning. The involvement of fathers in supporting young children's learning is an emerging field. Of those studies conducted, there is an increasing awareness of the value and importance of the contribution fathers and male care givers have on the learning outcomes of their children. A study conducted by Flouri and Buchanan (2004) found that children do better academically when fathers are involved in literacy-related activities. Nord (1997) demonstrated that children whose fathers participated in their child's learning usually achieved higher marks, enjoyed school and never repeated a grade. A study conducted by Ortiz (2000) concluded that when fathers are involved with their children's literacy education from a young age, their children demonstrate increased cognitive abilities, higher self esteem and greater social competence.

All too often, parental involvement conjures up a picture of a mother reading to her child and this is often reinforced through media images. A study by Anderson, Streelasky and Anderson (2007) found that the image of a mother reading with her child dominated one hundred randomly selected family literacy websites. However, in recent years with changes to the traditional family, there is evidence of greater involvement by fathers in their children's school and home lives (Baskwill, 2009).

In homes where fathers are actively engaged in reading and modelled literacy practices, the benefits to children are evident. Gadsden (2003) found that fathers' reading habits influenced children's reading habits, choices and interests. Shared literacy activities lead to a strengthened father-child bond (Stile and Ortiz, 1999).

### **Boys and literacy**

Boys make up the vast majority of students who struggle with literacy learning. Zambo and Brozo (2009) reflect that since the early 1930's there has been increasing evidence of boys far outnumbering girls in remedial reading classes (Holbrook, 1988; Gambell & Hunter, 1999; Rutter et al., 2004).

The National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) 2009, compares students' results in literacy and numeracy across all Australian states and Territories for years 2008 and 2009 and for students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Year 3 students demonstrated an overall improvement in the means for Reading, Grammar and Punctuation for both male and female students from 2008 to 2009. In spelling, in particular, females improved from 2008 whilst males did not. Overall, 95.6% of female students achieved results at or above minimum standard compared to 92% of males.

Year 5 results paint a similar picture of females achieving a higher mean for reading than males. The overall score for those achieving at or above national minimum standard, fell from year 3 levels to 89.6% for males and 93.9% for females in year 5. This was largely due to a decline in both male and

female student literacy results in NSW, Queensland and Victoria with Western Australia increasing whilst the other states remained the same.

Analysis of year 7 literacy results indicates that in every jurisdiction and for each literacy component (reading, writing, grammar, spelling, punctuation) the percentage of students working at or above national minimum standards is greater for females than males. The largest difference is found in the results for writing. The difference in levels of attainment between girls and boys is 6.4%. This is consistent with year 3 and 5.

In the United States since 1992, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has assessed the reading abilities of students in grades 4, 8, and 12. Girls consistently outscore boys. On average, boy's reading scores were 10 points less than girls in 1992 and 2005. Boys have made greater gains in their average reading score across the three grades during this period. In 2007, boys in Grade 4 and 8 continue to score, on average, 10 points below girls' reading performance.

**NAEP Reading Scores of Males and Females 2005-2007**

<b><u>Table 2</u></b> <b><u>Student</u></b>	<b><u>Grade 4</u></b>		<b><u>Grade 8</u></b>	
	<b>2005</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2007</b>
Total	219	221	262	263
Male	216	218	257	258
Female	222	224	267	268

The scale ranges from 0 – 500 and includes both public and private schools

When it comes to writing, in 2002 girls scores were on average 17 points above boys in grade 4 in terms of writing aptitude (NEAP). The gap widens with boys achieving up to 21 points less on average than girls in Grade 8. In terms of levels of proficiency in writing, amongst fourth graders, many more boys than girls, at a ratio of 2:1 demonstrated lower writing levels falling in the Below Basic score range. Basic denotes partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at a given grade. At all levels from Below Basic to Advanced, boys' writing ability was reported lower than girls. This same pattern is reflected in the Grade 8 results. ([http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08\\_125.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_125.asp))

Whilst it is true that boys consistently score lower than girls in the area of literacy in numerical terms, it is important to contextualise the role NAPLAN and PISA statistics play in the debate about the gender gap and boys' under achievement in literacy. Warrington and Younger (2006) warn that this debate is complex and multifaceted and in large part influenced by the government agenda to raise literacy standards. Statistics, if not contextualised and analysed sufficiently, may result in a

kneejerk reaction to league tables of this kind, which often results in an inequitable effort of time, resources and attention being directed at a small number of borderline students, many of which are boys. This overemphasis on boys can distort the equitable educational provision for other students (p.45).

An additional factor to consider when using statistics of this kind to identify students who require assistance, is being cognisant of teacher and parent assumptions and expectations and the role of self fulfilling prophecy on the part of boys. Hart et al (2004) found that both teachers and parents may confuse the inability to perform well in tests, such as NAPLAN, with an inherent inability. This may lead to the labelling of a child as lacking educability and a lowering of teacher and parental expectations. Skelton (2001) and Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) warn that boys who are singled out for extra literacy coaching may be resistant to the attention as it is critically important for them to be accepted by their peer group. When addressing literacy improvements for boys who need assistance, the research contends that teachers and parents would do well to be mindful of the strength of “belonging” that boys need to experience as being a part of and accepted by their peer group. As Smith (2006) suggests we need to welcome boys into the “Club of Readers” so that they feel a sense of achievement and belonging and reap the subsequent benefits (pg.113). It may also be beneficial to take a longer term view of these results, for example, assessing the child’s progress through primary school rather than one year at a time (Warrington & Younger, 2006, p.46).

### **Boys, blokes and books**

The National Capital Centre for Literacy Research located in Canberra (Australia) conducts a variety of parent education programs in literacy. One of the programs it offers is specifically designed to assist fathers and male care givers support their sons’ literacy development. The program, “Boys, Blokes and Books (BBB)” is specifically designed for fathers and their sons. The word “blokes” was deliberately selected to be inclusive of **all** significant males including biological fathers, grandfathers, uncles, male teachers, stepfathers, foster fathers, brothers and those who played a fathering role in the lives of young children.

*BBB* is conducted over 2 sessions of two to three hours each. The first session is run for blokes and the second, for the blokes to attend with their boys.

The program aims to:

1. To provide blokes with ideas, knowledge and support about reading
2. To demonstrate skills and strategies to support boys’ literacy learning
3. Share current international research in best practices in literacy learning
4. To provide a network of support that includes the U-CAN Read: Literacy Intervention Years 3-10 program.

## **Methodology**

Data was collected from a variety of sources to ascertain fathers' roles in supporting their sons' literacy development and the impact of the intervention program that introduces them to strategies and ideas was evaluated. The project involved two stages.

### **Stage 1: Background knowledge**

In order to understand the support fathers needed in assisting their sons, an intensive literature review was completed and in depth interviews were conducted with four fathers with at least four sons each. The interviews explored each father's journey as a literacy learner and how this impacted on what they do with their sons. On analysing the research and interview data, common themes emerged about what was essential for fathers to do. Their advice included:

- ✚ Be encouraging
- ✚ Be patient
- ✚ Be a role model, let your son see you reading
- ✚ Encourage reading around the interests of your son
- ✚ Use humour; make it a fun experience
- ✚ Don't assume they will be like you
- ✚ Continue reading and talking about reading through the middle years of primary school.

### **Stage 2: Implementation of Boys, Blokes and Books**

The intervention program BBB was conducted and 16 fathers attended. Fathers completed pre and post surveys. BBB is delivered over 2 consecutive evenings. The workshops run for approximately three hours. At each workshop pizza, juice, tea and coffee were provided as fathers often come straight from work. In addition to a formal presentation of how reading works and strategies for literacy success, two male presenters at each session shared their perspectives on what it means to assist their sons.

The focus of workshop 1 is the reading process and how this may differ from the way in which fathers were taught reading at school. Through demonstrations and practical experience fathers are informed of the following:

- ✚ Readers strive for meaning
- ✚ Readers change text to reflect the knowledge and experience they bring to the reading situation

- ✚ Students need support for reading success. Practical ideas include book orientations, echo, shared and paired reading.
- ✚ Ways to relax and enjoy the experience and creating a lifelong love of reading.

Opportunities to ask questions and discuss issues are included. Their questions generally relate to their experiences of reading at home.

Workshop 2 is completed one week later and involves fathers attending with their sons. It is a practical work-orientated session and focuses on applying the strategies introduced in workshop one. The emphasis is on providing fathers and their sons with strategies for reading and writing and an opportunity to practice each of these during the course of the evening.

The room is set up with tables and chairs in groups of eight. A stack of picture books is placed on each table and around the room. Prior to the session starting, fathers and their sons were observed enjoying the books together. There was a quiet hum and laughter.

Fathers and sons chose a book that they would like to read and after demonstrations of specific **reading strategies**, they practised with each other. The strategies included:

<b>Book Orientation</b>	This is a quick overview of what the book may be about. The emphasis is on having fun, using the pictures, finding and saying difficult or unusual words, looking at the content, drawing on prior knowledge to make connections, talking about the author, identifying the type of book, reading the blurb. This takes no longer than a few minutes and sets the context for reading.
<b>NIM (Neurological impress method)</b>	The father reads with normal intonation whilst moving his finger under the words in a fluid motion to show direction. The son reads along repeating (echoing) the words.
<b>Paired Reading</b>	Fathers read with their sons and discuss the various text features such as illustrations, headings, rhyme and interesting words as they read along together.
<b>Shared reading</b>	Father and son take turns to read. The father reads a sentence, paragraph or page which ensures comprehension is maintained. The son resumes reading on a turn-taking basis.

Each strategy is designed to build confidence and familiarity with books at an independent reading level, share the reading experience and model and support good reading.

Writing strategies to promote fun and interest were modelled and applied. These included minute writing about a topic of interest then sharing the experience. The writing of a group poem constructed from a collection of 24 randomly selected words from a newspaper or magazine where fathers and sons could elect to add 10 additional words only. The poem was completed in groups of four. Other activities included completing a collaborative cloze.

It was explained that:

- ✚ Real writers don't plan a topic, it evolves
- ✚ Writers write many drafts with many revisions
- ✚ Writers reject more than they keep
- ✚ Writing can be a fun, enjoyable and collaborative process

Fathers and sons responded positively with many requests for another workshop. Both boys and blokes indicated that they had learned new strategies.

## **Results of Stage 2: Evaluation**

Prior to the first workshop, fourteen fathers completed a survey in which they were asked to identify current reading practices in their home. The boys attending BBB ranged in age from six to eleven years with the majority (58%) of the fathers falling into the forty to fifty age category. Fathers rated their sons reading ability anecdotally at the start to the program with 8% of boys considered fluent. Others had diagnosed learning difficulties (25%). The remainder of the boys were considered reluctant readers by their fathers. Two thirds of those attending reported that reading at home took place on most nights of the week. This was supported with a regular bedtime routine and may involve either the mother or father reading with the son. One third of the fathers reported occasional reading times and a non-routinised bedtime regime. When asked who initiated reading at home, fathers in the above forty age bracket (58%) consistently reported they did, those under forty reported their partner as the initiator with them being willing participants in the reading process once it was suggested.

In relation to the value and importance of reading in their sons' lives, fathers unanimously stated they considered the ability to read well was very important. They made statements such as the following:

*If he can't read when he's finished school, he will pick up rubbish for a job. (Brett).*

*We are in the information age. We also need it for enjoyment and relaxation (Eric)*

*Effective literacy and numeracy skills are the cornerstone to learning so providing greater opportunities and choices in life (Fred).*

At the conclusion of the workshops and three weeks after the program, eight fathers completed in-depth telephone interviews. They unanimously concluded that having a collection of reading ideas and strategies had increased the level of their participation with their sons. Their time together was less stressful and their sons were more engaged. They claimed their confidence had improved and that they could now “trust” themselves to help their sons. The following statements are indicative of their feedback:

*I will recommend this course to other dads because for me it broke down the fear of doing the wrong thing when reading with my son (Gary).*

*Spending time with my son (at the seminar) and hearing others telling my son how important reading is, was the best (Ian).*

*This course provides valuable information on motivating students to read and gives adults effective strategies for supporting their child’s literacy development (John, teacher).*

*Our relationship has changed - it’s more team-like (Kurt).*

Of the fathers interviewed most recorded that NIM and Shared reading were the strategies most utilised at home resulting in a measurable improvement in their sons’ fluency and confidence. This response concurs with Smith’s (2006) claim that when adults and children share the same text at the same time, it provides the child with the scaffold to begin to solve many of the problems of reading. It is in the process of reading together that children begin to identify and recognise words and select additional words they want to learn. Success breeds motivation and confidence (p.135).

The importance of place and structural language was central to the positive father-son reading experience. All fathers agreed that a regular bedtime routine with father and son sitting side by side, or shoulder to shoulder, in a special place had enhanced the quality of their time spent reading together. One father reported that on completion of BBB, he and his son had set up a dedicated reading space at home complete with comfy chairs next to each other with the result that ten minutes reading time regularly turned into half an hour.

Fathers unanimously agreed that the best advice they had received from BBB was to allow their son to read for meaning, without interruption. Boys were encouraged to select books that genuinely interested them ensuring that they were active participants. The result was a pleasant reading experience whilst boys gained familiarity with the concepts and functions of print. Giving their son opportunity to experience meaningful reading without constant interruption afforded the boy the insight into what it is that good readers do (Smith, 2006, p.134). One father commented that “reading without interruption has smoothed out our reading time” (Kurt, 2009).

The father-son relationship benefitted from the skills gained by fathers with the majority of the participants reporting increased confidence and understanding of their role in their sons' reading development. Several commented that reading was no longer seen as a test. Having conversations around the text improved their son's listening and speaking skills with 75% of respondents reporting an improvement in this area.

When asked to comment on the course design, structure and content, all but one of the fathers interviewed were extremely satisfied. He felt that the second session was half an hour too long for his son on a school night. This will be taken into account when planning future courses. Each father attending would advocate attendance at Boys, Blokes and Books course to other fathers.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the critical role that fathers play in their sons' literacy development. Participation in a parent education program gave the fathers confidence and strategies that they could see benefitted their sons and eliminated the stress they often associated with "saying or doing" the wrong thing. The benefits of parental involvement in children's literacy learning are well documented (Chen & Harris, 2009, Jaynes, 2005, Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins and Weiss, 2006).

This study revealed that the fathers were uncertain of the role they played in the literacy learning of their children preferring to leave it to their wives. BBB provided an opportunity for fathers' to rethink this role and reconsider what they could do to support literacy learning in the home. Karther (2002) in her study of *Fathers with low literacy and their young children*, found that despite fathers own school failures and difficulties with learning they attempted to support their own children's literacy learning when given the opportunity (p.191). In this study, it was found that fathers were motivated for their children to succeed and surpass their own levels of education.

Ortiz and Stile (1996) concluded that uncertainty in role definition prevents men from engaging with literacy activities with young children. According to Karther (2002) parents, and particularly fathers, when given the opportunity, only need affirmation that their efforts are beneficial to their children's literacy learning. Fathers attending BBB acknowledge their growing confidence now that they had available a range of strategies on which to draw.

Fathers in this study revealed that they increased their knowledge and understanding of their sons' interests and attitudes to reading. Ortiz (2000) found similar improvements relating to the bonding experience between fathers and sons. Involving fathers in their sons' literacy learning creates a dynamic reciprocity in the father son relationship to improve literacy attainment and enjoyment.

In response to attending the BBB workshops, fathers responded positively to the demonstrations and practical application of strategies and ideas that they could use at home. They appreciated learning in a fast-paced, active and light hearted way. The special bond between fathers and their sons was evidenced in Workshop 2 when the sons attended with their fathers. The conversations they had

around reading and writing and the positive interactions they shared as they engaged in literacy practices was evidence that they felt supported and the enjoyment of reading would endure outside the program.

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