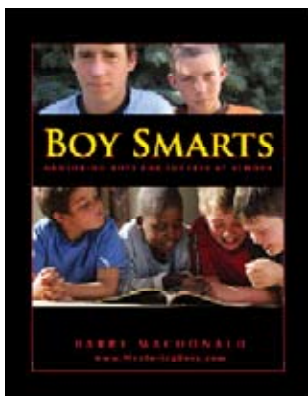




12 Tips to Encourage Young BOYS to READ



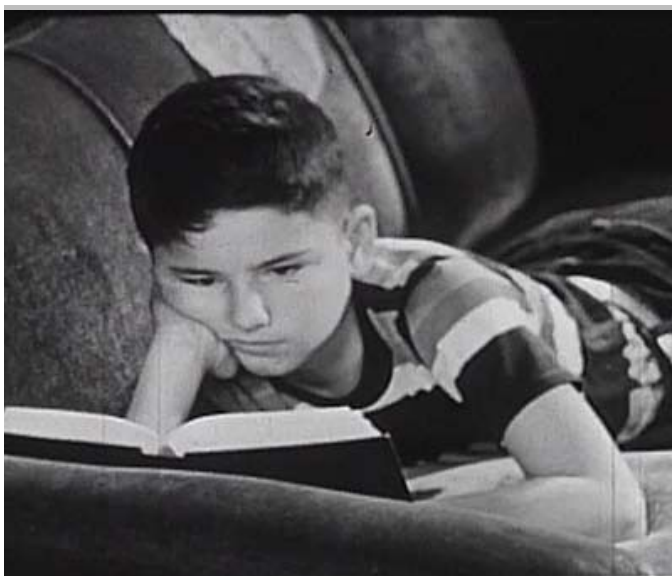
A growing body of evidence indicates that Canadian boys are lacking the single most important tool for success in school—the ability to read and make sense of text. In *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm discuss their findings, after extensive interviews with a diverse group of boys, that compared to girls, school-aged boys value reading less, tend to read more often only for a specific purpose, and are more likely to declare themselves to be non-readers. While only a decade ago the claim that we ought to do more to help boys at school would have raised eyebrows, today many people are eager to help boys develop literacy skills that will help them in life as well as school. Given that successful learners are active readers and thoughtful writers, how do we reach out to boys who seem to be shying away from reading and writing?



Whatever you think about standardized test scores, data from across Canada highlight a disturbing trend: boys are struggling increasingly with reading comprehension. Sally Shaywitz, author of *Overcoming Dyslexia*, reports that children who score in the top 10th percentile on standardized literacy tests read for pleasure for 20 minutes or more per day after school. Twenty minutes a day? Not much, but over a school year, this daily reading means a person has read about 1.8 million words over a school year. Shaywitz also indicates that students who read less for enjoyment—only five minutes per day—score near the 50th percentile, and that students who read the least for enjoyment—only 1 minute per day—read only 8,000 words per year.

This inadequate language nourishment means that these children are more likely to score at the bottom 10th percentile on standardized tests.

Naturally, many parents and teachers are seeking ways to engage reluctant readers. This month's newsletter features an email from a mother concerned about her young son's reluctance to read, and offers practical suggestions in setting the stage for boys to develop a love of reading.



Dear Barry,

My son is in kindergarten and shows very little interest in learning how to read. Among my closest friends who have boys the same age, one has a boy who is already reading and my other girlfriend's boy is showing a ton of interest in learning how to read. My Evan doesn't have a clue about what is going to hit him when he is in Grade 1 next year. I am worried that he will become one of those boys who will wander the classroom searching hungrily for distractions or seeking any escape from reading lessons by taking a trip to the bathroom whenever the reading lesson begins.

Unfortunately, Todd, my husband, doesn't worry about Evan's lack of interest in reading. He tells me that boys don't take to reading like girls do. When he argues that

"boys will be boys," I disagree. He is a good man but tends to be over-reactive suggesting that Evan just needs a good smack to get him back on track. I am curious though as Todd says that he was also an unwilling reader at school. Despite being forced to learn how to read in Grade 2, he remained unenthusiastic about reading throughout school, especially when it came to storybooks. He says that reading was not important to him until he went to university to become an engineer, and that Evan is just like him.

My sister would also like to know what she can do as a single parent to help her 3 year old boy get ready to read. His father does not live with them and she already worries that her son may get left behind at school.

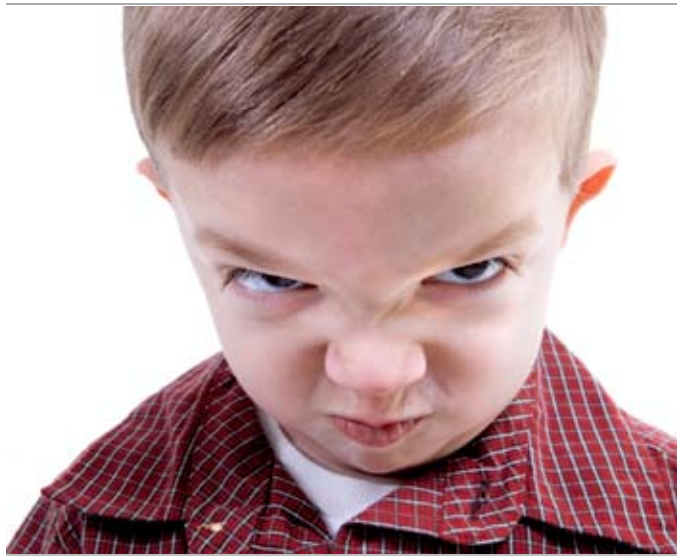
When I plead with Todd to read more frequently with Evan so that he will appreciate that men read, Todd says that Evan will start reading when he's ready. Despite Evan enjoying our mother-son nightly reading ritual, I can't help but think that Evan would be better off if Todd would read to him on a daily basis. I'd appreciate your thoughts about a father's role in helping boys read, as well as any suggestions you have about getting young boys to read.

Adela - Surrey, BC

P.S. – Todd says that he'll read your response!

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Dear Adela,

It can be very discouraging when we think that our child is off track. Research shows that your distress about Evan's reluctance to read is not unwarranted. Students who enter school performing significantly below their peers are at increased risk of remaining behind them for years to come, and problems resulting from limited exposure to literacy in the preschool and primary school years can become magnified when reluctant readers are faced with increasingly challenging text in intermediate grades. Studies also show that children with under-developed reading readiness are more likely to lag behind their peers, and that without intervention, the majority of 8 year olds who are poor readers remain poor readers when they enter secondary school.

In my personal experience I have also found that it is common for couples to have different points of view about their children's school learning and performance. Years of providing counselling to couples have taught me that it is likely both your viewpoints have merit. It is fairly certain that Evan will ultimately learn to read when he is ready, AND that he needs support and modelling from both of you to realize that reading is a rewarding activity.

Interestingly, parents who previously subscribed to the adage that "boys will be boys" have often confessed to me that they were unfamiliar with the current neuroscience

research suggesting that there are more similarities between boys and girls than differences, but that small gender differences present at birth become exaggerated as families, teachers, and society impose gender stereotypes. When we tell boys that they must not cry, or that reading and writing are things that girls do, boys may begin to shut down emotionally and academically, taking on restricted views of what their capacities are. In *Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion*, I stress that boys need caring parents and teachers to help boys navigate limiting gender stereotypes, and to support diverse understandings of masculinity.

Ultimately, I believe that boys, like girls, can become adept readers, writers, and lifelong learners who take pleasure in many forms of literacy—including the reading of old-fashioned books.

It is my hope that the following guidance and practical suggestions will help you to collaborate with your husband to seek out and identify ways to bolster your son's development as a reader. The suggestions contained in this article may also be helpful to your sister, a single parent.



BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK

St. John's, NL - September 15
Edmonton, AB - September 29
Calgary, AB - October 13
Maple Ridge, BC - October 27

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build boys
than to
mend men...



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Road Signs Reveal Readiness



We learn at different rates. We do not all develop reading readiness, or other kinds of learning readiness, in lock-step formation. As suggested by recent evidence showing that boys born later in the school year are between 30% and 60% more likely to be labeled ADHD, we do well to question the system of checking off developmental benchmarks that supposedly apply across an entire grade.

While school staff may reasonably expect that children enter kindergarten as active, curious, and eager learners, it is not reasonable to expect that all 5 year olds will have the same attention spans, the same motor dexterity, or the same level of reading readiness. It is a teacher's job to meet each child's learning needs, not the child's job to meet the school's expectations upon entry.

That being said, the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study* shows that while most children can recognize letters by the end of kindergarten and many can make the connection to the primary sound associated with a letter, very few children are reading before grade 1.

As parents reflect on their young son's readiness to read, consider whether he exhibits the following ready-to-read behavioural road signs that can indicate that he is well on his way to becoming a reader:

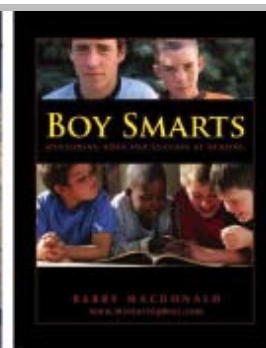
- + likes to be read to and to look at books on his own
- + holds books and pretends to read them
- + asks questions about the meaning of words or about pictures on the page
- + learns about words by looking at picture books and talking about what he sees
- + learns about words from songs, rhymes, traffic signs, and food packaging
- + notices where a story starts and finishes and which way the print proceeds
- + begins to understand that his thoughts can be put into print
- + uses pictures and memory to tell and retell a story

Why Reading Can be Hard

Teachers know that reading is probably the hardest thing we teach. How is it that humans are capable of associating signs and squiggles on a page with meaning?

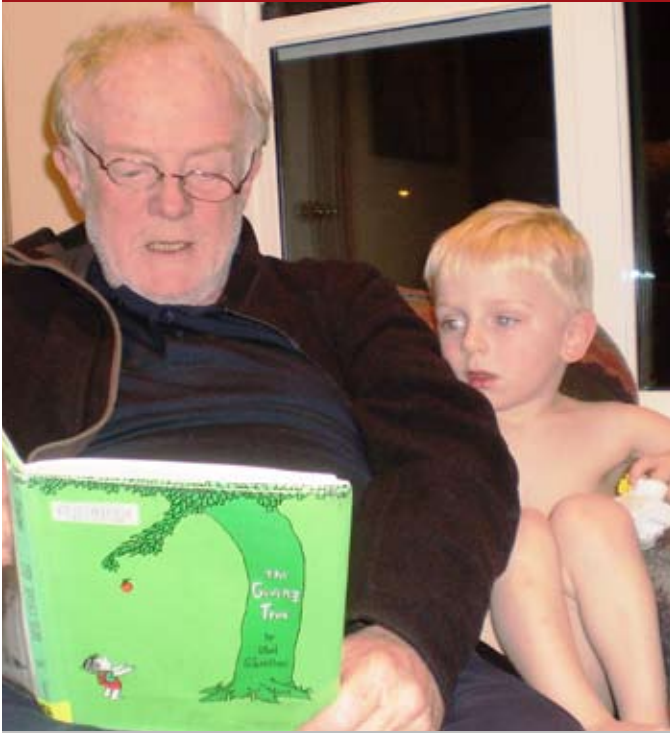
According to the editors of *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, there are several reasons why learning how to read can be especially difficult for some: a family history of reading difficulty; limited exposure to literacy during the pre-school years; a lack of age-appropriate phonological awareness; a specific early language impairment; and a hearing impairment. As a teacher and counsellor for almost 30 years, I can further add that learning to read can become a grind when children feel pressured to read or when joy and play are absent.

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Different Brains Read Differently



Even though early pediatric screening tools may identify many potential learning problems such as hearing difficulties or language impairments, they cannot explain why some children are quicker to read or why others are more reluctant.

A neuroscientist at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Dr. Martha Denckla, suggests that reading might be imagined as a talent, like musical talent, that comes more easily to some than others. Although we accept readily that people may not have what we call an *ear for music*, Dr. Denckla notes that “people can also be born with an untalented ‘ear’ for the speech sounds of language, which makes it very difficult to connect with an alphabetic system and be proficient at reading.” She suggests that children who have difficulty learning to read may have a brain that is wired a little bit differently—better thought of as an anomaly than an abnormality. She also mentions the comforting thought that while a child’s unique neurobiology could make the process of learning to read more challenging, the uniqueness of that child’s brain wiring likely has benefit in other areas.

When children struggle with decoding printed text, we should never tell them they are not trying hard enough. Maybe they are trying their hardest, or maybe they have already given up. Instead of nagging or reproaching, adults need to uncover a learning pathway that best fits a particular child’s way of interacting with the text. I vividly recall my Grade 1 teacher who taped several of us boys’ feet to our chairs to stop us from wiggling during her reading lesson. Little did she know that our fidgeting and wiggling actually helped us kinesthetic learners to focus on the lesson.

A child who is slow to read, or who feels stigmatized by being put into a low status reading group may be more concerned with protecting his sense of competence and social status than with learning to read. With such children, we can offer encouragement and loving guidance so they can proceed at their own pace.

When children reach grade 1 and are not catching on to the complex set of pre-reading skills necessary for reading, they might benefit from a one-to-one tutoring program like *Reading Recovery*. Developed in New Zealand over 30 years ago, this early intervention program now operates around the world and accelerates the development of reading skills so that students can catch up to their peers and become independent readers and learners.

Fathers & Male Mentors Have a Special Role

In his book, *Fatherneed*, Kyle Pruett emphasizes that when very young children have high father involvement in their lives, they later show an increase in their curiosity and their problem-solving capacity. According to recent research on father involvement from the University of Guelph, infants of highly involved fathers—as measured by levels of play and caregiving activity—are more cognitively competent at 6 months than those with absent fathers. By age 1 they continue to have higher cognitive functioning; as toddlers they are better problem solvers; by age 3 they have higher IQ’s.

By age 5 most young boys are already sensitive to the direct and subtle messages fathers provide them about the value and power associated with literacy and schooling. When fathers read with their sons, they model, in a practical and intimate way, that reading is a worthwhile activity.

Many fathers feel challenged by the expectations attached to parenting roles, specifically those related to reading and to school. Fathers whose own early literacy experiences held frustration or even trauma may be understandably reluctant to read with their children. Still, evidence indicates that the earlier fathers become involved with getting children involved with the pleasures of reading, the better. Even fathers who are not fluent readers, or who are not native speakers of English, can find ways to have shared language and literacy experiences with their sons, even if it something as simple as reading and talking about wordless picture books, graphic texts, maps, and diagrams. Young boys who bond with their fathers through reading begin to associate reading with positive masculinity.



What if there is no father in the picture? As a male who grew up mostly without the influence of a father, I am particularly sensitive to the assumption that boys without involved fathers are at significant disadvantage. Single mothers who read about the importance of fathering, especially if their child's father is absent or minimally involved, may feel alarm when they hear that research points to the importance of fathers in supporting young boys' literacy. However, I would stress other male mentors—grandfathers, uncles, neighbours, friends, and teachers—can also provide that critical modeling to show that reading matters to males of all ages.

All Roads Lead to Reading

Listening and speaking are a child's first introduction to language and form the foundation for learning to read. Boys who hear words, and play with the sounds in words—the rhymes and rhythms and repetitions—are more likely to become successful readers.

Early readers who hear stories learn to recite stories from memory. They learn to taste the sounds of words on their tongues before they learn the letters that represent these sounds. Knowing that early readers essentially recite stories from memory teaches us that they learn sounds before they learn the letters that represent those sounds.

Just as adults take pleasure in returning to their favourite driving routes, favourite songs and TV shows, early readers also take delight in the familiarity of their favourite rhymes and books over and over again. Children need to hear a story many times before they can *pretend* read, and pretending to read sets the stage for real reading.

Here are a few ways for you to gently explore with your son the sounds of language:

- + sing songs, recite nursery rhymes, and play rhyming games that encourage your son to join in
- + talk aloud about things you are doing and thinking, whether you are looking at a map, grocery shopping, cooking, or even making a "to-do" list
- + tell stories, especially family stories, that provide insight or humour. Look at family photos of vacations and special times together and talk about the pictures.
- + ask "what", "where," and "why" questions to encourage young children to use more diverse vocabulary
- + listen and show enthusiasm in the activities and games that your son shows you
- + most important of all, have fun with language!

Learning to Read is Like Driving a Car



Successful reading draws on many abilities, including abilities to concentrate in a highly specific way (mental attention); to focus on letters and distinguish the subtle differences between them (visual discrimination); to hear the subtle differences between letters and the sounds they make (auditory discrimination); to say the sounds (articulation); to sequence the sounds and read them with an inner voice or out loud (short term auditory and visual sequential memory); and to remember the connection between letters and sounds so reading becomes fluent (long term memory).

Dr. Marilyn Adams, an internationally recognized researcher and co-author of *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*, believes that reading is similar to learning how to drive a car in that it requires simultaneous attention to many things at once. She believes reading troubles begin when the foundational skills to decode words, or to recognize that certain sounds in words are linked to certain letters and letter patterns, are absent.

You can help your son develop his letter pattern recognition by playing with oral rhymes, having fun with clapping out the number of syllables in a word, and taking the time to identify sounds within words, such as the same initial sounds in 'happy' and 'happen'. Dr. Adams strongly believes that letter awareness is one of the best predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first two years of school instruction.

BOYS CAN WRITE!



12 GREAT STRATEGIES TO GET BOYS WRITING

- A growing body of evidence says that Canadian boys are lacking the single most important tool for success in school—the ability to read and write.
- How can teachers ignite boys' enthusiasm to WRITE?

Surrey, BC
PD day October 19, 2012
Details on website

Boys Need the Right Gear

We must pull out all the stops to foster a love of reading when boys are tentative or undecided about reading. The key to motivating reluctant readers is to find the kinds of books that will pique their interest. In *Speaking My Mind: Don't Blame the Boys: We're Giving Them Girly Books*, Kevin R. St. Jarre argues that love of reading may have less to do with gender than with the kinds of books and literacy experiences we provide.

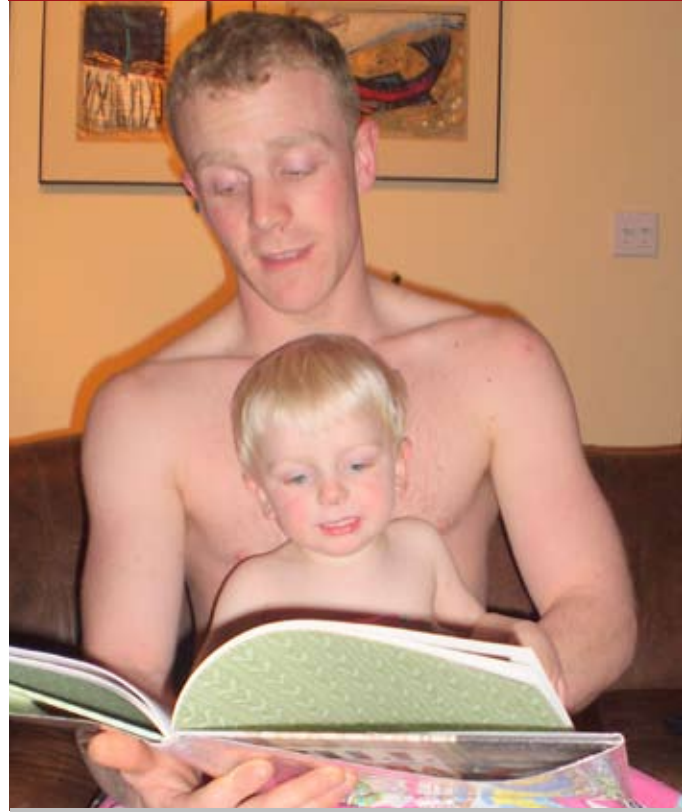
Ensure that boys have the equipment to engage them in literacy and that 'their' books are easy to access within your home. Having books more available than the computer or the remote will encourage both of you to turn a page rather than turn on the TV.

Make a habit of going to the library, and getting out different kinds of books to see what whets his interest. Try reading him classic and contemporary story books, information books on how things work in the real world, fantasy and poetry, scary books, joke books and comics. Series books such as *Arthur*, *Fly Guy*, or *Beast Quest* books are very popular among younger boys. Soon *Dairy of a Wimpy Kid*, *Goosebumps*, or *Harry Potter* books will be keeping your son coming back for more.

What is your son passionate about? If he shows enthusiasm when play fighting with his miniature dinosaurs, perhaps he might like a picture book about them. If he's sports crazy, get him his own subscription to *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. If he is interested in science and nature, get him a subscription to Canadian magazines *Chirp* (ages 3-6), *ChickaDEE* (ages 6-9) or *Owl* magazine for those between 9 and 13.

Whether your son shows a love of nature, or wants to understand how something works, or likes mysteries and puzzles, follow his lead. With your encouragement, he will find that reading is the pathway to uncovering the mysteries of the world.

Lead by Example



As you are your son's most significant role model, let him see you reading—for information, for work, and especially for pleasure. We have all learned—sometimes to our chagrin—how much children love to imitate us. When he sees that you enjoy reading in your leisure time, or turning to books on a regular basis, he will be more likely to do the same. He will internalize the idea that reading is fun. What you read matters much less than the fact that you read. **Look for opportunities to discuss your varied daily reading activities with him in ways such as the following:**

- + read schedules, maps, instructions, and recipes aloud
- + read traffic signs and signs in stores and restaurants
- + take time to look up information in manuals, phone books, atlases, dictionaries, and cookbooks
- + read e-mail messages out loud to and from relatives and friends

Hang Loose and Get Silly!



As young children learn best through their play, make reading time a playful bonding time for you both. You do not want to create any tension around reading by teaching, correcting, or trying too hard. Loosen up and let

spontaneity rip. Laughter reduces tension, and increases the courage to experiment with language. Be loud. Use your body, your eyes, and your voice. Make up stories together. Have fun trying on different voices for different characters in the story. Switch the story up by using your son's name instead of a character's name. You will know you are on track when there is a certain light in his eye, or he pleads with you to retell a certain story with a particular voice.

A few tips for incorporating humorous play:

- + select rhymes and stories that have laugh-out-loud repetitive parts and encourage your son to join in
- + select books your son may find funny such as *Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich* by Adem Rex, or books from the *Captain Underpants* or *Amelia Bedelia* series
- + if your son seems to be getting carried away with bathroom humour, don't worry. Instead consider capitalizing on this delight by getting books that may leave you both howling such as *I Have to Go* by beloved Canadian author Robert Munsch (check out his website, and listen to his brilliant rendering of this story), or *Walter the Farting Dog* (you can even download a fart ap to enhance the reading of this story)

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Make Reading a Daily Habit

Recognize that children find comfort in familiar reading routines and rituals. Set aside a special time each day when you can give your full attention to reading with your son, and consider starting reading routines that are not obvious. Take time to read aloud a funny newspaper comic over breakfast, a special email before supper, or the signs in the grocery or hardware store. If your work takes you out of town, obtain two copies of a favourite book and read to him over the telephone, or via **Skype**, as he turns the pages with assistance at home. Remember that reading even 10 minutes a day with your son will help him to form a reading habit.

Although boys may perceive that summer vacation is a break from reading, resist the urge to break your reading routine. Reading regularly over the summer vacation will ensure that all your hard work during his previous year won't go to waste. Jumpstart your son's imagination with a good book and show him how he can travel to exciting places without ever leaving home. **Here are a few additional ways that you can read daily with your son:**

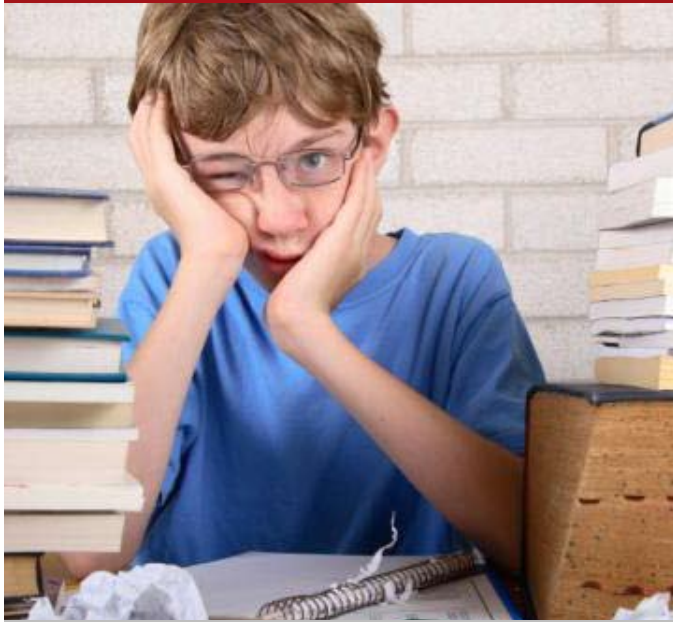
- + find a comfortable place where you can curl up and read together
- + let yourself imagine the pictures that the word evoke, so that your inflections naturally convey your own engagement in the story or the material in the text
- + Do not rush through the reading. Be aware that you might need to read slowly so that your son can form a mental picture of what is happening in the story.
- + encourage your son's participation, questions, and ideas
- + when travelling, bring along books, magazines, and books-on-tape

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Talk About Books



Talking about books is just as important as reading them. Pause to ask questions about something that is happening in a story. What does your son think might happen next? Discussing an idea inspired by a story will help your son connect what is being read to his own experiences in life. It will also help enrich his vocabulary with new words and phrases. Here are some more ideas to help your son develop and expand his thinking about reading:

- + ask him about the kinds of books he would like to read together
- + encourage your son to comment or ask questions about illustrations or stories that interest him
- + play a light-hearted guessing game by looking at a book cover or reading a book title to encourage your son to predict what might happen in a story
- + encourage critical and creative thinking by asking what a character could have done differently, or what alternative ending he can imagine to a story
- + reveal your own curiosity and critical thinking by pausing to interject questions or comments as you read the story

Take a Road Trip Adventure

For most boys, there's nothing like a good adventure. Many boys learn by touching, moving, climbing on, and building things. Make a blanket fort together as you read a tale about a secret passageway, perhaps a rabbit hole. If you are going camping, read a book about camping, or about the forest and relate the book to your anticipated experiences. Turn a trip to your library or local bookstore into an anticipated event that you both look forward to.

Just as getting a driver's license is a rite of passage, let the getting of a library card be a minor ceremony. Not only will your son feel more grown up with his own card, but he will also attach more importance to the activity of reading. Honour his literary picks, whether or not you think the book will be a winner. Over the years I have witnessed many a reluctant reader grab a totally unsuitable book and then proceed to walk around the library, noticing its hefty weight, the cover, or the contents of a page or two, and then suddenly return the book to its shelf and select another. After encouraging your son to find a special book that holds promise for him, let him come with you as you select a book or two for yourself.



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To Read is to Fly

As you set aside time to read with your son take care to be gently curious about what arouses his interest, knowing that, “**To read is to fly: it is to soar to a point of vantage which gives a view over wide terrains of history, human variety, ideas, shared experience and the fruits of many inquiries**” (Anthony Grayling).

These reading rituals that you share with your son will scaffold his developing literacy.

Savour the rhythms of language, and the pleasures of discovery, in these special times.

A few years down the road, these luminous memories of reading together will help sustain his motivation—and your connection. • • •

Barry MacDonald

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P.S.

Have a question? Please email your questions about encouraging boys to read to info@mentoringboys.com and I will do my best to briefly answer as many as possible in the July Boy Smarts Newsletter.

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Is your parent community interested in hosting a **Boy Smarts Action Talk Saturday workshop?**



We are currently setting up workshops for the following school year and welcome your invitation to provide a venue, AV equipment, day of event operational support, and assistance with promoting a Saturday workshop.

**BOYS
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