

Helping Boys Become Readers Again

When I asked a group of middle school boys if they read, and why or why not they read, I didn't hear that it was boring. I heard about their lack of free time: video games, school, social media, and sports all took the place of reading. For many students, reading has become something associated with assignments rather than enjoyment, so reading for school was the first thing that came to their minds. Yet reading remains one of the most powerful tools for childhood growth. The urgency that we address this issue is growing as well. In 2025, the National Literacy Trust found that only 37.5 percent of children aged 8-18 reported enjoying reading in their free time, the lowest level recorded in 20 years. The decline was even steeper among 11-16-year-old boys. So why are so many adolescent boys reading less, and what can we do about it?

Reading has always been a part of my life. As a kid, I spent hours at the library, tearing through Percy Jackson and Harry Potter at lightning speed. I loved reading, and still do. However, I noticed my peers beginning to drift away from reading, which I loved so much. Findings from a 2024 St. Peter's College study show that boys who read regularly are significantly more empathetic, perform better academically, exhibit stronger leadership skills, and unlock greater imaginative potential.

According to the National Literacy Trust, 10% of 14- 16-year-old boys read daily for pleasure, and I wanted to find out why. I found that the decline in reading enjoyment actually started much earlier, in middle school. In the spring of 2026, I interviewed over 20 boys in grades 5 - 8 at the

Town School for Boys, an independent K - 8 school in San Francisco, about their reading habits, goals, interests, and barriers to success.

The first common struggle I found was competition. A 2021 report by Common Sense Media shows that tweens aged 8-12 spend, on average, 5 hours and 33 minutes on screen media for entertainment each day, with boys specifically averaging 6 hours and 49 minutes. Between sports, social media, and school, boys predominantly found themselves choosing other activities over reading, simply because they would “rather be doing other stuff” and sports and video games were “more entertaining.” Some boys found that they lacked time to read, and wanted “shorter pages” or felt it was “too time-consuming.”

A second issue I found was content. Through sixth grade, books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Big Nate*, and *Dog Man* are enormously popular among boys because of their illustrations, writing style, and humor. At one middle school I studied, library checkouts dropped by 56.5 percent between sixth and seventh grade, then fell another 61.2 percent between seventh and eighth grade. Many boys seem to age out of the books they love before finding books to replace them. One student explained, “I would read more if there were more pictures.” His comment points to a larger issue: few books bridge the gap between highly visual, humorous children's books and longer young adult novels. If we want boys to keep reading as they get older, we need more books that meet them in the middle.

Thirdly, boys lack role models who read. Today, boys often see masculinity associated with sports, popularity, strength, or social status, but less often with reading. Boys don't see older

teenagers or other role models reading, which may discourage them from reading and could diminish their love for it. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 11 percent of elementary school and 28 percent of middle school teachers in U.S. public schools are male. Similarly, using PIRLS data from over 57 systems of education, UNESCO and the IEA found that boys are less likely to have male reading role models both at home and in school, and they argue that the presence of mentors can increase enjoyment of reading. However, I do not aim to argue that boys only need male teachers; positive role models of all genders are important. Libraries are also a key place for kids to engage with books and reading. According to the American Library Association, the percentage of male librarians in the US is 18 percent. These numerous findings all point to one thing: boys cannot aspire to be what they rarely see modeled.

While the factors driving boys away from books and reading may be varied, they point to a common question: What can we, as a community of educators, librarians, parents, and readers, do to encourage more reading in boys? Firstly, we need to create more positive role models for boys. Older brothers, coaches, dads, and teachers all have an opportunity to model reading for the next generation. Secondly, we must meet boys where they are. Importantly, we should stop shaming manga, sports novels, and graphic novels. Limiting what is acceptable to read just limits the impact we can make, as our goal is reading, not the “right” reading. Through my high school club, Guys Read, I have seen firsthand that boys become much more open to reading when they are surrounded by peers who model it as a positive habit.

To conclude, if we want boys to read, then we must do our part. We cannot simply tell them it is important or force it upon them. We must put books in their hands, introduce them to stories,

characters, and worlds, and inspire them with the power of imagination. We must surround them with older mentors, both boys and adults, who model reading and positive character, helping them develop as readers and as people. Boys are not giving up on reading. Reading is giving up on them.