

Raising Boys' Achievement

Boys and Literacy in the Early Years



Every child is different, and boys and girls learn differently. These differences start as early as in the womb, research relating to brain development shows that boys and girls are different, think differently, act differently and are good at different things and have brains that develop differently both before birth and during childhood. (Featherstone, 2005)



There are however differences within the sexes as well as between the sexes so it is important not to stereotype.

Research and literature have identified that girls' early language and literacy skills are recognised as being higher than boys. Listed below are some of the reasons cited for this.

- The lack of male role models in the early years
- Different socialisation experiences in the early years leading to different interests and pastimes which provide boys and girls with different language opportunities
- Teaching style and methodology and the way in which learning is negotiated by boys and girls
- The difference in brain development between boys and girls. "In females, two regions of the brain dedicated to handling language are proportionately 20% to 30% larger than in males" (Biddulph 1997). In boys, the right side of the brain is better developed than girls, but the interconnections between the two sides of the brain are less well developed in boys than girls.
- Girls also have a small but significant lead in fine motor development
- Boys develop binocular vision later
- Boys at four receive a sudden surge of testosterone resulting in very energetic, active behaviour.
- Boys are happier learning kinaesthetically

The challenge in the early years is to make learning attractive to boys and to recognise the importance of the development of a child's self-esteem and attitudes.



The following suggestions have been shown to be successful in engaging boys in literacy learning. The outdoor environment is of particular importance to young boys.

Writing

Research and observations have shown that boys use mark-making areas for shorter periods of time and for specific purposes. For example, they stood at the table to put their name on a model or make a sign for a road layout. When writing was part of role-play, or linked to information technology, then boys and girls were equally involved.

Suggestions

- Provide clip boards with writing materials both indoors and outdoors so that writing is an integral part of the activity
- Encourage the writing of messages and provide a message board for the children at their height
- Provide post it notes and pencils in the construction area
- Ask for recording in the construction area in either drawing or written form
- Make the role play area a rich source for literacy with a range of purposes for writing. For example, ordering tyres for the garage, taking down measurements for the builder, instructions on how to get somewhere
- Map making. “Activities can move from play to maps to narrative” (Pahl 1999)
- Writing does not always have to be with a paper and pencil. Encourage writing with chalks, writing in sand, salt trays and finger paints and writing with paint brushes and water in the outdoor area
- Provide a range of items for children to write with and on – biros, envelopes, diaries, notepads, folders, forms
- Boys will often choose to take their learning outside. They can be encouraged to make driving licences, number plates for the bikes, numbers and routes for the buses and doing mock MOT tests
- Drawing and labelling plans for brick buildings can also encourage literacy

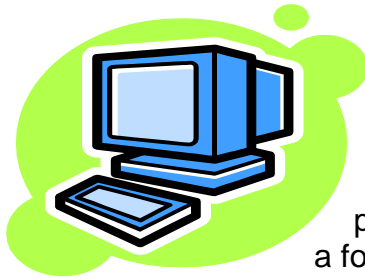


Role Play

If we want children to write imaginatively, then they need to play imaginatively in the early years. Ideas for role-play areas that appeal to boys are:

- Garage and repair shop
- Space ship
- Pirates ship
- Bob the Builder
- Café or restaurant
- Estate agents
- Post office
- Fish and chip shop
- Airport
- Travel agent
- Office area





The computer can become part of the role-play. Include fiction and non-fiction books associated with the role-play, magazines, phone books, telephones, note pads, diaries, pens and pencils. Writing tasks associated with role-play include making labels, posters, leaflets, price tickets, writing cheques, filling in a form. At this stage in the children's development practitioners need to build on experiences outside of the setting environment.

Examples of literacy from "Being Builders"

Learning can be extended in meaningful situations. Many children will have had some experience of small building projects or decorating.

- Building lends itself well to writing poetry because of the rhythms used in building and the sounds made
- This is a good opportunity to introduce factual and reference books, DIY catalogues and Yellow Pages with illustrations
- Make sure the builders yard is well labelled to encourage reading and writing.
- Children can phone builders merchants to order goods. Their names can be left on the order for them to contact
- The children will use the words that are displayed as a 'wall dictionary' and begin to use them in their writing. They may be writing to the customers, to the manager or to the suppliers, as well as writing out orders. They may need to write more notices. They will also be signing their name



Reading

Research has shown that boys will often choose non-fiction books in preference to fiction books. A boy will model his father's preference in reading, which tends to be non-fiction texts. Whitehead (1977) also suggests that the choice of reading materials by children, non-fiction relating to knowledge, facts and information, and fiction concerned with the lives, feelings and thoughts of other people, fits in with the early socialisation of boys and girls. It is important to provide a broad enough literacy diet from the earliest stages in settings to encourage both boys and girls to read a selection of fiction and non-fiction from choice,

Suggestions

- Reading areas need to reflect a full range of books and other resources, fiction, poetry, picture books, information and reference books and maps
- Materials written for an adult audience should also be included, such as catalogues, magazines and newspapers. These also reflect their experiences at home.

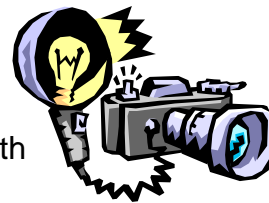
- Boys interviewed during research (Osmont 1987, in Lloyd 1999) said they read different kind of materials at home to school and particularly mentioned comics and media – related fiction bought at newsagents. The boys interviewed said they wanted this kind of material available at school. Not all comics fall short of good literacy materials and they provide another opportunity to engage boys in reading.
- Include books into activities that boys like doing. For example, in the construction area have books that show pictures of bridges and buildings, books that suggest things to build and stories such as The Three Little Pigs. In the science area have books to encourage experimentation and books about growing things. By selecting information and storybooks for each area of the setting children can make links between their play and the books in the area.



Role models

In the early years there are very few male role models. We need to change boys' perceptions of books, reading and writing to help them see that it is a suitable activity for boys

- Provide boys with more male role models of reading and writing
- Ask fathers, grandfathers and male carers to come and read with the children
- Provide visual images. For example, posters which show men reading and writing on their own and with children
- Take photographs of men reading and writing with children and display them
- Use story tapes with male voices
- Talk to parents and carers about the importance of men being involved in developing literacy skills. Encourage them to see this is just not a female activity
- Encourage fathers to write in the home/school reading book



Practitioners have a great influence over how children engage with literacy activities. Children will pick up on the adults' reading preferences and expectations. By always choosing a fiction book at story time or choosing to read one child's book in preference to another child's comic the adult is giving the children inappropriate messages. Children as young as three and four are already influenced and limited by gender stereotypes. Practitioners need to adopt positive strategies to encourage boys to become readers and writers.

Reference and future reading:

Barrs, M. & Pidgeon, S (1993). Reading the Difference, Centre for Language in Primary Education

Barrs, M. & Pidgeon, S (1998). Reading the Difference, Centre for Language in Primary Education

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Featherstone, S (2005) Making it work in Year 1, Featherstone Education Ltd

Lloyd, T (1998) reading for the future: Boys' and fathers' views on reading, Save the children.

Millard, E (1997) Differently Literate Boys, Girls and the Schooling of Literacy, Falmer Press

Pahl, K (1999) Transformations Meaning Making in Nursery Education, Trentham Books.

Hughes, P. Gender Issues in the Primary Classroom. Scholastic 1991

Levine, J. Getting Men Involved: strategies for early childhood programmes. Scholastic 1993

Suppliers of Children's Books

Community Insight. Pembroke Centre, Cheney Manor, Swindon, Wilts SN2 2PQ

Letterbox Library. Unit 2D, Leroy House, 436 Essex Road, London N1 3QP

Soma Books Ltd. 38 Kennington Lane, London SE11 4LS

Tamarind Ltd. PO Box 296, Camberley, Surrey, GU15 1QW

Suppliers of Posters

Lewisham Early Years Service. Laurence House, 1 Catford Road, SE6 4RU

National Children's Bureau. 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V

NES Arnold Ltd. Ludlow Hill Road, West Bridgford, Nottingham NG2 6HD

The B Team, 320 Commercial Way, London SE15 1QN (Set of fatherhood posters)

The Equality Learning Centre. Save the Children. 366 Holloway Road, London N7 6PA (Has an excellent resource centre that may be visited)