

# WORLD READ ALOUD DAY 2015

## Switching the Boy Brain on to Reading by Noel Janis-Norton

(excerpt from 'Calmer, Easier, Happier Boys',  
published 2015 by Hodder & Stoughton)

### **Why boys need to become readers**

Parents and teachers need to move heaven and earth to help boys become skilled and regular readers. Here's why:

In the first few years of school, children spend a lot of time learning to read. From then onwards, the expectation is that they will be reading to learn. When boys are competent and confident readers they learn more, they enjoy learning more, they remember more, and they get better marks and better exam results. All of this leads to greater confidence and higher self-esteem. Skilled readers find reading a calming, relaxing and enjoyable activity. Research shows that reading improves mood better than almost any other activity. It's a very effective tool for boys to have in their toolkit for managing anger, aggression or anxiety.

Especially for boys, who can so easily become addicted to electronics, reading is a wholesome antidote.

The Boy Brain seems to have a harder time learning emotional literacy. Teaching boys to enjoy narrative books (as well as books that are collections of facts) helps them learn about the human condition. It teaches boys a more mature understanding of emotions, motives and cause and effect.

The following strategies will help make reading more interesting for boys:

**Establish a daily reading time for all family members who are home at that time.** Have everyone gather in one room so that they can see and copy your good example and so that you can keep tabs on whether they are really reading.

Set a timer to make the family reading time official, and be willing to start with only ten minutes at first if your son is very resistant. And, of course, if your son keeps reading for even half a minute after the timer goes ding, make sure to Descriptively Praise him. Each week increase the length of the family reading time by a few minutes. During family reading time, be generous with your Descriptive Praise for tiny steps in the right direction:

‘Everyone’s reading.’

‘It’s so quiet. No one’s making even a tiny noise.’

‘Last week you complained about having to read, but not today. You seem to be getting used to it.’

You may need to do lots of Reflective Listening at first:

‘From your annoyed face, it looks like you don’t feel like reading.’

‘You’re probably desperate for the timer to beep so that reading time will be over for today.’

‘Seems like you’re angry that Mum and I are telling you that you have to read every day.’

And for maximum impact you can combine Descriptive Praise and Reflective Listening:

‘Even though you’re feeling cross about having to read, you sat for the whole ten minutes without interrupting.’

**Arrange for your son to see you reading often (narratives, not just newspapers or instructions manuals), even if it’s only a few minutes at a time.** Talk about why you are finding your book interesting. Even if your son does not seem to be paying much attention to your words, they will sink in.

Make a point of reading the books that the school has set for your son, and make sure he sees you reading these books. Talk about them often and with enthusiasm.

**Read to your son, even after he has learned to read, even after he no longer thinks it's cool to be read to.** When they are being read to, children can understand far more complex concepts, sentence construction and vocabulary because all of their brain is free to focus on comprehension, whereas when they are doing the reading a large part of their brain is taken up with the task of decoding. And when parents read aloud with expression, that helps the child to understand even better what is happening and why.

It can be exasperating trying to read to a squirmy, restless, distracted boy. The following suggestions will help your son to calm down and pay attention. What you don't do is as important as what you do:

Don't take it personally if your son complains that the book is too long or 'boring', if he interrupts to talk about something else, if he tries to grab the book and turn the page before you have finished reading that page. Your son is not rejecting you! These annoying behaviours, which can continue up to the ages of seven or eight, are usually due to a combination of immaturity, habit and attention-seeking.

Don't give up and decide to wait until your son shows signs of being more interested, more mature, more able to focus. Reading to boys is an important way that parents can help boys of any age to be more focused and settled, more interested in books, more willing to sit and listen – in short, more mature.

Don't decide that you might as well stop reading when your son's attention drifts.

Do seize on anything your son says about the book, and elaborate on it.

Do teach and train your son to treat all books with respect. You can achieve this with Descriptive Praise and *think-thoughts* and by your example.

- Turn the pages by lifting carefully from the corner.
- Put books on a table or even on a chair, but never leave books on the floor.
- If a book is on the floor, step over it, not on it.

Don't rush to finish the story.

Don't remind him to pay attention or to sit still or to stop fidgeting.

Do Descriptively Praise whenever his body is still for a few minutes.

Do point to the relevant part of the picture as you read the accompanying words.

**Questions can improve your son's listening comprehension (and also his reading comprehension).** Children get the most enjoyment and the most learning from reading or from being read to when they are actively thinking about the story and creating mental pictures. Research has shown that answering questions is a very powerful way to help children clarify concepts, create detailed mental images, make connections, understand motivation and learn how to infer and predict.

Don't ask questions of a child who is not paying attention.

Do take the anxiety and confusion out of answering questions by asking a question and then immediately answering it yourself, eg, *'Where did the boy leave his shoes? (Pause for a few seconds.) Oh, now I see his shoes. They're under the bed, but he can't see them.'* Now ask the same question, and your son will feel confident about answering.

Do start by asking questions that require simple recall of facts: who, what, where, when.

Do ask questions about the pictures, not just about the words you are reading. The words he has just heard may evaporate from his auditory memory very rapidly, but the picture is still there, right in front of him, and he can take his time examining it to find the answer to your question.

Do take turns asking each other questions from the text or from the pictures.

Do often say, *'I wonder . . . where, who, how, why . . .'* etc. As this is not a question directed at the boy, he will not feel anxious about coming up with the right answer. This can free his mind to think.

Do work your way up, gradually, to asking questions that require higher-level thinking skills: how and why questions, predicting what might happen,

imagining how someone might be feeling. (This last skill is often much harder for boys than for girls.)

Don't immediately correct an incorrect answer or statement. Give an impulsive boy five or ten seconds for his brain to catch up with his mouth. He may realise his mistake and correct himself.

**Use fiction books to help the Boy Brain mature.** Many boys are more interested in books that are full of facts, rather than in narratives. One reason is that factual books tend to have a lot of pictures, which of course sparks their interest. Often there are just a few sentences of print about each picture, so the reading process doesn't feel overwhelming to a not-yet-competent reader.

Also, a boy whose emotional literacy is relatively immature often doesn't find narratives interesting because he doesn't really understand why the characters are doing what they are doing. The narratives that are likely to interest a boy are ones with action-packed excitement, where the reason for the action is very simple to grasp, eg Good vs. Evil. Parents and teachers can help boys to become more interested in fiction and other narratives, such as autobiography and biography, if they:

Choose books with pictures.

Choose books with bright colours on the cover and in the illustrations.

Choose books that boys are likely to find funny, in fact the grosser the better. This may offend your sensibilities, so remember that this is just a tactic for connecting boys with books. Fortunately, boys do grow up and they (mostly) grow out of a fascination with bodily smells and noises.

Choose a book that has been made into a film. Before introducing the book to your son, watch the film with him, and spend plenty of time talking about the film. Before he starts reading, he will already understand most of the 'who, what, where, when, why and how', which will make the reading experience much easier and more enjoyable for him.

Choose books with lots of action, even if you think the action is pointless or over-the-top. As we know, boys are often drawn to stories where the action is all about war or other forms of aggression and violence. But there are many other kinds of action and excitement that we can expose boys to: exploring,

discovering, rescuing, creating, chasing, solving problems, training animals and of course sport. Books with themes like these can be very appealing to boys.

If your son has shown an interest in a particular historical era, such as ancient Egypt or Tudor times, find a book of historical fiction that is set in that time. Choose a book with a hero that your son can identify with.

**Listen to your son read aloud six times a week.** Until your son is a completely fluent reader, listen to him read aloud six days a week. Think of this as the most important part of your son's homework. Do it first, before the other homework. Do not leave it until bedtime because his brain needs to be fresh in order to maximise his learning. Frequent short sessions result in more rapid and more solid learning than several longer sessions.

### **The very reluctant reader**

In cases of extreme academic alienation, where a boy is convinced that he will never be a reader and is therefore very uncooperative, be willing to start with a book on any topic that interests your son, even if the subject matter and the reading level seem very immature to you. However, be true to your values; do not read to him or with him any book that goes against your values.

### **Help your son to get the most benefit from his school reading book**

If your son is having any difficulties with the reading book sent home from school, he will probably say it is 'boring' and try to get out of reading it. You can improve his experience of reading and help sharpen his reading skills at the same time:

Talk about the book before he starts reading aloud, focusing on what he already knows about the story and on what might happen next and why. Before he starts reading, skim the next few pages to identify which words your son might have difficulty sounding out or which phrases he might not understand. Point these out and talk with your son about what they mean. Improving literacy and thinking skills. This type of Preparing for Success will soon pay off in more fluent, confident reading and a greater interest in reading.

We don't want a boy to stumble through his reading aloud just to get it over with. We want him to be enjoying the experience, and we want the practising to help him learn to read better. A very effective way to do this is for you and your son to alternate reading aloud, sentence by sentence. Establish a rule that

each of you has to read your sentence perfectly before the other person starts to read the next sentence. If either of you makes even a slight mistake, that person needs to go back to the beginning of their sentence and read that whole sentence correctly. This will focus your son's attention on reading accurately, which will soon become a habit. With time and targeted practice, he will learn to monitor the accuracy of his reading as he is reading. His comprehension and his speed of reading will both improve.

Ask questions that require your son to practise using more mature thinking skills.

If there is a CD of the book, listen to it with your son, with the book open in front of you both, and have him follow along, with his finger moving under the words. Spend five or ten minutes doing this each day. At first your son may find it difficult to keep pace with the recorded voice, but persevere because this method improves reading comprehension, decoding and fluency. If there isn't a CD of the book, you can do the reading aloud. The advantage of your doing the reading aloud is that you can go more slowly, and you can pause and wait if your son loses his place on the page.

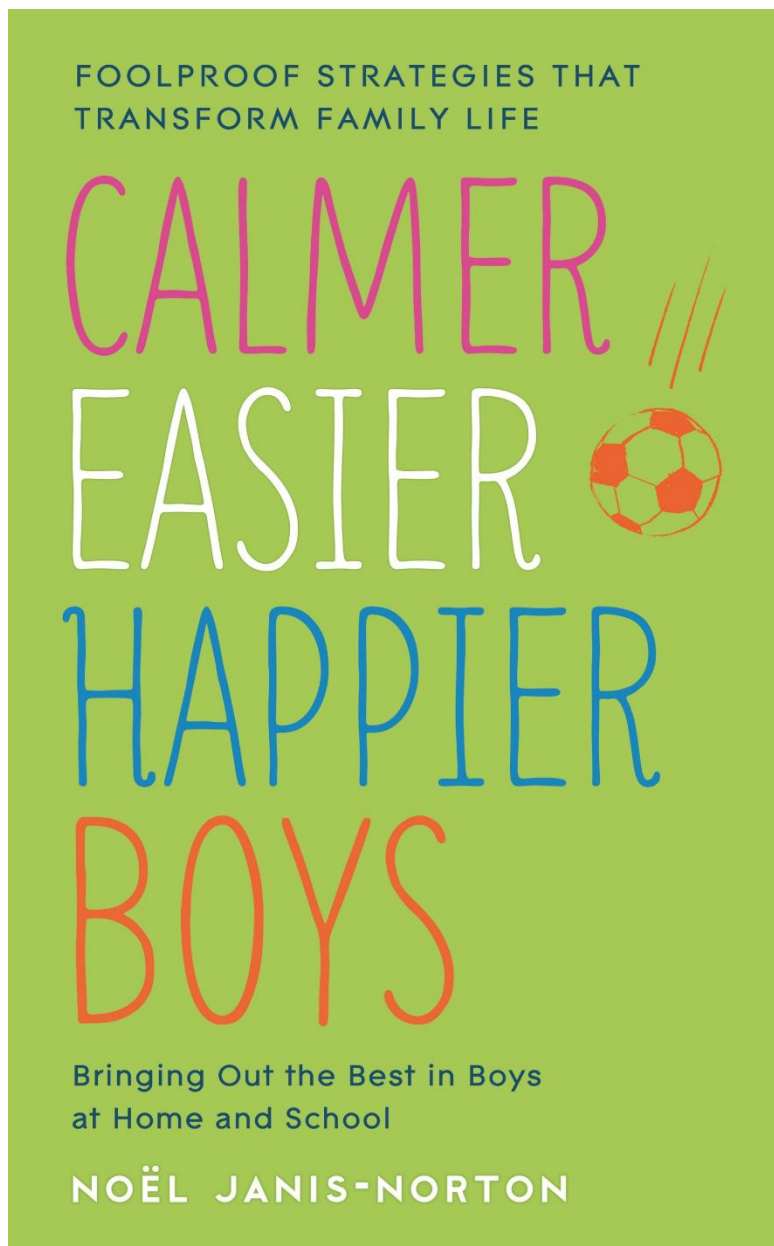
If your family has a Kindle, put your son's reading book on, and use it for the above activity. A bonus with a Kindle is that your son can make the print larger and therefore easier to read. And of course, anything electronic is likely to appeal to him.

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**'Calmer, Easier, Happier Boys'** was published by Hodder and Stoughton in February 2015. In this book Noël explains simple, effective strategies for addressing the unique challenges of raising motivated, cooperative and confident boys.

Noël is a learning and behaviour specialist with over 45 years' experience in Britain and the United States as a head teacher, special needs advisor, consultant, lecturer, parenting coach, speaker and author. She is the founder and director of *Calmer, Easier, Happier Parenting and Teaching*.

You may like Noël's suggestions, but you may not feel confident that you can transform your son's reluctance or resistance into cooperation and motivation. Would you like some advice about how to make all this happen? Visit [www.calmerparenting.co.uk](http://www.calmerparenting.co.uk) to find out how the "Calmer, Easier, Happier

Parenting” resources can help you and your family: Books, CDs, parenting courses, workshops, fortnightly free introductory talks and private consultations (at our Centre or by telephone).



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