

Boys and Reading

School-aged girls have outperformed boys in reading for as long as testing has existed in virtually every jurisdiction in the world. This lag has been called “the most pressing gender-gap issue facing our schools” and impacts high school and postsecondary completion rates (just 40% of university graduates in Canada are men), as well as men’s future quality of life. Career opportunities for men (and women) who cannot read have shrunk over the past four decades as the information economy has prevailed; the greater dependence on reading, writing, and language skills means we will have an employment crisis if boys and men continue to fall behind.

“Something we are doing as a society is making boys likely to fail in reading.” – Gavin Barker, UK MP

The research offers a number of reasons for why boys aren’t readers:

- i. **Boys develop slower verbally** than girls do and can fall behind or lose interest in the early grades. A focus on the underperformance of girls in math and science has been successfully addressed since the 1970s and 1980s, but may have come at the expense of boys and literacy.
- ii. **Parents are not supporting boys in reading to the same extent as they support girls.** For example, boys are less likely to receive books as presents.
- iii. **Schools have fewer dedicated librarians** and are losing the expertise to support boys’ reading.

Motivating boys to read for pleasure takes a combination of factors, including:

- i. **Providing interesting books, comics, graphic novels, magazines, and websites on topics of interest to boys.** While girls often read fiction for pleasure, boys are more likely to read for a purpose or as a means to an end. Parents and teachers should respect and encourage the reading choices of boys.
- ii. **Fathers and male role models who model reading.** Boys who do not see other men reading or discussing books or who have been encouraged to read primarily by the maternal influences in their lives and predominantly female teachers will associate reading as a “female” activity.
- iii. **Creating a balance between digital devices and books.** Technology and other competitors for boys’ attention can lower motivation to read. The emergence of video games more than two decades ago corresponds with a marked reduction in reading and writing achievement in boys. Modern video games are more sophisticated and combine an immersive experience with the narrative weight found in books, so parents need to set limits on screen time.

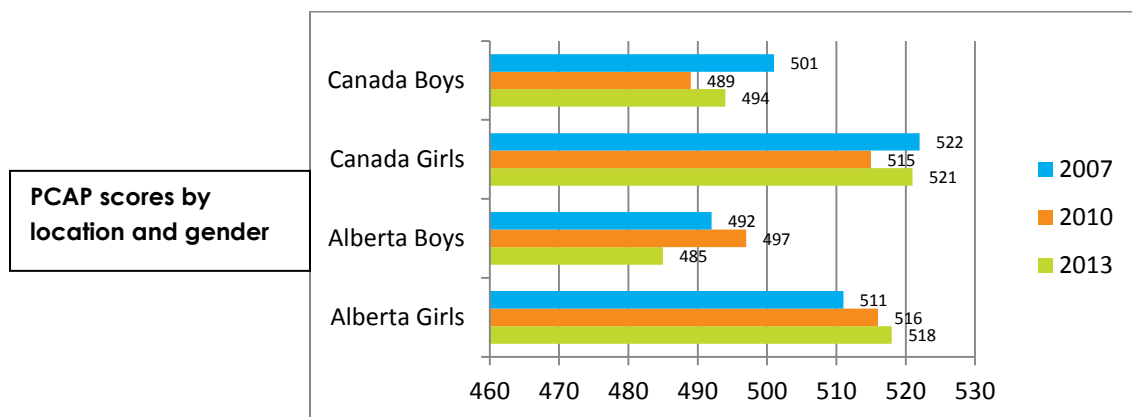
While there are a number of interventions we can make to reverse the downward trend, the research is clear: **Action is needed in schools, homes, and communities to help boys read confidently and with joy.**¹

[Pan-Canadian Assessment Program 2013 Highlights](#), Oct. 7, 2014

Girls perform significantly better than boys in reading in all provinces in Canada according to the third PCAP, a triennial assessment of Grade 8 students in reading, math, and science. The gender gap is nonexistent in math and science but in reading favours girls by 31 points in Alberta, the highest gap in the country. Alberta girls (scoring 518 points) are statistically equal to the Canadian mean of 521; while Alberta boys score nine points

¹ Article adapted from [Why Boys Don’t Read](#) (Great! Schools, 2012) and [Boys’ Reading Skills “Must Be Tackled”](#) (BBC, 2012)

below their Canadian counterparts' score of 494. Overall, reading achievement has stayed constant between 2007 and 2013, recovering from a dip in 2010; however, as the table below shows, Alberta boys' scores are falling.



This pattern for reading achievement may be reflected in reading levels later in life as, in another study, a significantly higher proportion of adult women reported reading books frequently. Data from some studies suggests the gender gap is smaller for digital reading than for print reading, which may provide insight into teaching and learning strategies to improve outcomes for boys.

[Boys and Reading: Is There Any Hope?](#)

New York Times, Aug. 19, 2011

Suggests the quality of literature for boys may not be as high as it is for girls. "We need more good works of realistic fiction, nonfiction, graphic novels, on- or offline, that invite boys to reflect on what kinds of men they want to become. In a commercially driven publishing environment, the emphasis is currently on young women."

[How to Raise Boys Who Read: Hint: Not with Gross-out Books and Video-Game Bribes](#)

The Wall Street Journal, Sep. 24, 2010

"The appearance of the boy-girl literacy gap happens to coincide with the proliferation of video games and other electronic forms of entertainment over the last decade or two. Boys spend far more time "plugged in" than girls do. Could the reading gap have more to do with competition for boys' attention than with their supposed inability to focus on anything other than outhouse humor?"

[Are Boys Not Reading Because of All Those Women in Publishing?](#)

Publishing Perspectives, Apr. 20, 2014

Argues that boys are being deterred from reading because the "gatekeepers" to children's literature are mostly women; not just the majority of publishers, editors, librarians, contest judges, and reviewers of children's books, but also the "mums and grans" who drive the consumer market.

[Boys Don't Read, Except When They Do](#)

Huffington Post, May 14, 2011

Actually, the boys are reading. "Boys today are consuming more text than at any time in human history. Adults simply are not valuing the reading that boys are doing. Teachers, librarians, writers, and even boys themselves, have privileged the literary novel above all other forms of literacy. Just like girls, boys are hungry for stories that speak to them, that excite their imaginations and reflect their experiences. They are hungry for information to help them make sense of the world."