



How do you get boys to read?

By Dan Freedman

As I travel around the country, visiting hundreds of different schools, I often ask the boys that I'm talking to one simple question: *'Why do you think people read?'*

Silence is their initial answer. Followed by a shrug of the shoulders. Then maybe one of these suggestions:

'To stop themselves being bored?' *'Cos people tell them to?'*

'To find out about stuff?'

Almost never will one of them come up with the answer *'for enjoyment.'* Too many boys simply aren't aware of the concept that reading can be for pleasure's sake alone.

It is critical that we address this issue because, not only are these boys missing out on so much, but I believe its impact on both education now and society going forward cannot be overstated.

I suspect the fact that you are reading this means that you agree too... So, how do we turn things around, then? Well, just as I advise all young writers to draw on their own experiences in their work, I'm going to use my own life as our source material in this case.

As a boy growing up, I was not a big reader. In fact I hated it (or so I thought.) How can reading be fun? I asked myself, if so many people are ordering me to do it? They never have to order me to do the really fun stuff like playing football, watching TV or eating ice-creams!... No, I'm not stupid, I know their game - If they are telling me to do something, there's no way it can be enjoyable!

So I didn't read. On principle.

It took me years to move from that standpoint. But, guess what? It can be done! Would you believe that these days I'm a children's author and I travel all over the country, encouraging kids, especially boys, to get into reading!

For me, it all started with football. I consumed every book, magazine or programme on the game. I didn't even consider it to be reading. I was just feeding my passion for the sport.

I was then lucky enough to build a career in football, ultimately working my way up to become *The Football Association's* Editor in Chief, travelling around the world with the England Football Team.

Now I write my *Jamie Johnson* series of football novels all about the game I love, drawing on those fantastic experiences that I had.

So I feel as though I can speak with confidence from both sides of the reading fence. I understand why so many boys don't read but I also know that we can change that fact. Perhaps we just need to alter our tactics slightly.

Here are some of the tips that I have picked up along the way...

Tip Number One

Don't tell boys to read. They are stubborn creatures.

My mum and I still laugh about the time when she came into my bedroom when I was twelve. She caught me reading a book – shock horror! I was mortified and immediately denied everything!

The reason? Because I had been caught doing something that her and everyone else had told me to do... I had lost face.

Don't tell boys to read; encourage them, ask them what they're interested in... but don't make it into a battle of wills.

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Tip Number Two

Let them read about what they're interested in

When I was growing up, I didn't think I read at all. I was wrong. The back pages of the newspapers and the countless footballers' autobiographies I consumed all counted as reading!

'The goalkeeper's desperate lunge for the ball was in vain as the ferocious strike rocketed beyond him, destined for the top corner...'

These are all good words. I picked up almost all of my vocabulary through reading about football.

So don't be too snobby about the boys' choices. Let them start where they're interested and take it from there.

Tip Number Three

Different formats can enhance rather than replace books

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Tip Number Four

Use Role Models

Making reading cool. That's the real secret. Nothing beats it.

Other boys in the school can be role models too. How about getting them to write a short review of a book they liked and attaching to that book in the library?

Inviting authors into schools is happening more and more. I can see the boys' attitude to reading thaw as I tell them how similar I was to them...How I started off thinking that reading was boring but now I read and write for pleasure (this is an entirely new concept for many boys!)

Getting a hand from their heroes helps too...

A 10 year-old boy at a school I recently visited summed it all up perfectly. As I was leaving the school, he sought me out to proudly tell me that he didn't read.

'Oh really,' I replied. I never preach (see Tip 1).

'Yes,' he said. *'I had never read one book. But then I saw your book in the library and I saw on the cover that Steven Gerrard said it was a good book so I decided to read it...and it was ok actually!'*

'Ok, actually!' I repeated to myself proudly on my way home. In boy-speak, that's high praise indeed!

Dan Freedman's series of Jamie Johnson novels (published by Scholastic) follow the young football prodigy as he shoots for Premier League glory...

The Kick Off

Shoot to Win

Golden Goal

Man of the Match (July '10)

www.JamieJohnson.info

