

As any parent of boys knows, getting the blighters to read can be an arduous task. And since not reading has an immediate knock-on effect on writing — reading being the single best thing you can do if you're interested in writing sentences that make sense — you have the root of a serious and well documented problem with literacy. Figures from the education department show that one in 11 boys leaves primary school unable to read properly.

Assuming you do manage to get young boys reading — it's quite a big assumption — you can congratulate yourself for only a limited amount of time. Once they're too old for Harry Potter and have exhausted the possibilities of early-teen fiction — Darren Shan, Anthony Horowitz, Charlie Higson's Young Bond books and the like — they fall into a non-reading slump again, the useful trinity of *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* notwithstanding.

Once they are too old for those, but not yet patient enough for Dickens, there's yet another worrying gap to be filled — and it's often filled by the internet, not by novels. There are no statistics available, but I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out that (except for dedicated students) the majority of young adult males didn't read again for pleasure until they were well into their thirties (sports biographies and suchlike excepted).

Certainly, adult men who don't read fiction and who regard it as somehow nerdy and uninteresting seem thick on the ground and completely unashamed about it, unlike women of all backgrounds, who read like the clappers. Having said that, I note that the bestselling titles for Amazon's ereader device, the Kindle, are uncompromisingly butch and I wonder whether the combination of techy, dinky gadget and words may finally be turning more men on to the joys of reading.

Of course, all this assumes you've got your boys to the Harry Potter stage in the first place. An alarming number of primary school boys don't even make it that far.

Fair Society, *Healthy Lives*, a government-commissioned review of health inequalities in England, was followed up last week by a report showing that almost half of five-year-old boys are failing in their development by the first year of primary school. The report's authors voiced concern about cuts and said parents could help their children by reading to them before they started school. Successive governments have thrown millions at the problem of boys and literacy and have started endless schemes designed to get them to engage with words — both the reading and the writing of them — with few demonstrable, concrete results.

It turns out the solution may lie online. One enterprising school, Heathfield primary in Bolton, Lancashire, started hosting online lessons during last year's heavy snowfalls, when the children couldn't get to school. A blogging platform was set up on the school's website so that, for instance, the pupils were asked to go into their back gardens and report back on the depth of the snow. They loved it.

"Blogging was cool and fulfilling," David Mitchell, the school's deputy head, said last week. "After that, there was no going back." Blogging was officially introduced into the curriculum, even for five-year-olds. Older children are encouraged to write short stories; incredibly, these often run to 5,000 words — nearly five times the length of this column. More to the point, boys especially love it: "It's now cool to be writing," Mitchell said, "especially for the boys. It's the boys who were coming up with the 5,000-word articles first."

This would be a sweet little story if it didn't also have dramatic results in the form of an extraordinary rise in pupils' test scores. The percentage of pupils getting a higher than average score (level 5) in the national curriculum writing tests for 11-year-olds has rocketed from 9% to 63% and Heathfield school is now being used as a role model to encourage others to try out its methods.

This is pleasing on so many fronts. First, it's emotionally intelligent: children who are too young for Facebook and the like may see parents or older siblings doing what looks like exciting stuff online and will be itching to join in. Now they can. Second, nobody likes writing in a vacuum for the teacher's eyes only: by blogging, children are assured of a larger audience and so raise their game. Third, children don't ordinarily have any opportunity to write at length any more: aside from thank-you letters and homework, there is no occasion where putting pen to paper is called for. Fourth, what is a shame for handwriting is a victory for touch-typing, which all children should learn as a matter of course.

I know some people see blogs — and vast swathes of the internet itself — as the manifestation of an incontinent, narcissistic desire to over-share, but in my view this is to misunderstand the delights available (I'm particularly amused by people who say things such as "Twitter, urgh" and then tell you things they could know only by being glued to your Twitter stream).

People's lives are interesting — even if they are pedestrian and ploddy — and the sense that you are operating as part of one gigantic, broadly benign community can be thrilling.

So while you could argue that encouraging children to blog is just adding to the unstoppable me-me-me tsunami, I'd say that blogging before they reach double figures is instead a vast and exciting positive. All children want to be heard and what better way of being heard is there? And such results! It is also extremely pleasing to see the thing that is widely viewed as the malevolent enemy of innocent childhood being used entirely for the good.

Getting kids to blog is like getting overweight children to exercise by holding Strictly Come Dancing competitions: an intelligent and overdue harnessing of the pop culture that we can diss all we like but that remains the backbone of most people's non-working lives. Some stories make me really love the modern world and this is one of them. David Mitchell deserves a medal at the very least.