A book cover with a child

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**Year 7 Love of Reading**

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The Story of X was first published in 1972. It tells the story of X, a child raised as part of an experiment to keep its gender unknown to everyone but its parents and the scientists conducting the experiment. It raises many interesting questions…

Once upon a time, a Baby named X was born. It was named X so that nobody could tell whether it was a boy or girl. Its parents could tell, of course, but they couldn't tell anybody else. They couldn't even tell Baby X - at least not until much, much later. You see, X was a part of a very important Secret Scientific Xperiment known officially as Project Baby X.

Long before Baby X was born, the smartest scientists had to work out the secret details of the Xperiment and to write the Official Instruction Manual in secret code for Baby X's parents, whoever they were.

These parents had to be selected very carefully. Thousands of people volunteered to take thousands of tests with thousands of tricky questions.

Almost everybody failed because it turned out almost everybody wanted a boy or a girl and not a Baby X at all. Also, almost everybody thought a Baby X would be more trouble than a boy or girl. (They were right too!) There were families with grandparents named Henry and Doris, who wanted the baby named Henry or Doris instead of X, even if it was an X. There were aunts who wanted to knit tiny dresses and uncles who wanted to send tiny baseball mitts.

Finally, the scientists found the Joneses, who really wanted to raise an X more than any other kind of baby - no matter how much trouble it was. The Joneses promised to take turns holding X, feeding X, and singing X to sleep. And they promised never to hire any babysitters. The scientists knew that a babysitter would probably peek at X in the bathtub…

The day the Joneses brought their baby home, lots of friends and relatives came to see it. And the first thing they asked was, what kind of a baby X was. When the Joneses said, "It's an X!" nobody knew what to say. They couldn't say, "Look at her cute little dimples!" On the other hand, they couldn't say, "Look at his huge **biceps[[1]](#footnote-1)**!" And they didn't feel right about saying just plain "**kitchycoo[[2]](#footnote-2)**".

The relatives all felt embarrassed about having an X in the family. "People will think there's something wrong with it!" they whispered. "Nonsense!" the Joneses said stoutly. "What could possibly be wrong with this perfectly adorable X?" Clearly, nothing at all was wrong. Nevertheless, the cousins who had sent a tiny football helmet could not come and visit any more. And the neighbours who sent a pink-flowered romper suit pulled their shades down when the Joneses passed their house.

The Official Instruction Manual had warned the new parents that this would happen, so they didn't fret about it. Besides, they were too busy learning how to bring up Baby X. Ms. and Mr. Jones had to be Xtra careful.

If they kept bouncing it up in the air and saying how strong and active it was, they'd be treating it more like a boy than an X. But if all they did was cuddle it and kiss it and tell it how sweet and **dainty[[3]](#footnote-3)** it was, they'd be treating it more like a girl than an X.

On page 1654 of the Official Instruction Manual, the scientists prescribed: "Plenty of bouncing and plenty of cuddling, both. X ought to be strong and sweet and active. Forget about dainty altogether".

There were other problems, too. Toys, for instance. And clothes. On his first shopping trip, Mr. Jones told the store clerk, "I need some things for a new baby".

The clerk smiled and said, "Well, now, is it a boy or a girl?"

"It's an X," Mr. Jones said, smiling back.

But the clerk got all red in the face and said **huffily[[4]](#footnote-4)**, "In that case, I'm afraid I can't help you, Sir.”

Mr. Jones wandered the aisles trying to find what X needed. But everything was in sections marked BOYS or GIRLS: "Boys' Pyjamas" and "Girls' Underwear" and "Boys' Fire Engines" and "Girls' Housekeeping Sets". Mr. Jones went home without buying anything for X. That night he and Ms. Jones consulted page 2326 of the Official Instruction Manual. It said firmly: "Buy plenty of everything!" So they bought all kinds of toys. A boy doll that wet its nappy and cried "Dada" and a girl doll that talked in three languages and said, "I am the President of General Motors".

They bought a storybook about a brave princess who rescued a handsome prince from his tower, and another one about a sister and brother who grew up to be a baseball star and a ballet star and you had to guess which. The head scientists of Project Baby X checked all their purchases and told them to keep up the good work. They also reminded the Joneses to see page 4629 of the Manual where it said, "Never make Baby X feel embarrassed or ashamed about what it wants to play with.

And if X gets dirty climbing rocks, never say, "nice little Xs don't get dirty climbing rocks". Likewise, it said, "if X falls down and cries, never say, "Brave little Xs don't cry. Because, of course, nice little Xs do get dirty, and brave little Xs do cry. No matter how dirty X gets or how hard it cries, don't worry. It's all part of the Xperiment."

Whenever the Joneses pushed Baby X's pram in the park, smiling strangers would come over and coo: "Is that a boy or a girl?" The Joneses would smile back and say, "it's an X". The stringers would stop smiling then and often **snarl[[5]](#footnote-5)** something nasty - as if the Joneses had said something nasty to them. Once a little girl grabbed X's shovel in the sandbox and hit X on the head with it.

"Now, now Tracy," the mother began to scold, "little girls mustn't hit little - and she turned to ask X, "Are you a little boy or a little girl, dear?"

Mr. Jones, who was sitting near the sandbox, held his breath and crossed his fingers. X smiled politely, even though X's head had never been hit so hard in its life. "I'm a little X", said X.

"You're a what?" the lady **exclaimed[[6]](#footnote-6)** angrily. "You're a little brat, you mean!" "But little girls mustn't hit little Xs either!" said X, **retrieving[[7]](#footnote-7)** the shovel with another polite smile. "What good's hitting, anyway?" X's father finally said, uncrossed his fingers, and grinned.

At their next secret Project Baby X meeting, the scientists grinned, too. Baby X was doing fine. But then it was time for X to start school. The Joneses were really worried about this, because school was even more full of rules for boys and girls, and there were no rules for Xs. Teachers would tell boys to form a line, and girls to form another line. There would be boys' games and girls' games, and boys' secrets and girls' secrets. The school library would have a list of recommended books for girls and a different list for boys. There would even be a toilet marked BOYS and another one marked GIRLS. Pretty soon, boys and girls would hardly talk to each other. What would happen to poor little X?

The Joneses spent weeks **consulting[[8]](#footnote-8)** their Instruction Manual. There were 249 pages of advice under "First Day of School". Then they were all **summoned[[9]](#footnote-9)** to an Urgent Xtra Special Conference with the smart scientists of Project Baby X. The scientists had to make sure that X's mother had taught X how to throw and catch a ball properly, and that X's father had been sure to teach X what to serve at a doll's tea party. X had to know how to shoot marbles and jump rope and, most of all, what to say when the other children asked whether X was a boy or a girl.

Finally, X was ready. X's teacher had promised that the class could line up alphabetically, instead of forming separate lines for boys and girls. And X had permission to use the principal's toilet, because it wasn't marked anything except TOILET. But nobody could help X with the biggest problem of all - Other Children. Nobody in X's class had ever known an X. Nobody had even heard grown-ups say, "Some of my best friends are Xes". What would other children think? Would they make Xist jokes? or Would they make friends? You couldn't tell what X was by its clothes. Overalls don't even button right to left, like girls' clothes, or left to right, like boys' clothes. And did X have a girl's short haircut or a boy's long haircut?

As for the games X liked, either X played ball very well for a girl, or else played house very well for a boy. The children tried to find out by asking X **tricky[[10]](#footnote-10)** questions, like "who's your favourite sports star?" X had two favourite sports stars: a girl jockey named Robyn Smith and a boy **archery[[11]](#footnote-11)** champion named Robin Hood. Then they asked, "What's your favourite TV show?" And X said: "Lassie" which stars a girl dog played by a boy dog.

When X said its favourite toy was a doll, everyone decided that X must be a girl. But then X said the doll was really a robot and that X had computerized it and it was programmed to bake fudge and then clean up the kitchen. After X told them that, they gave up guessing what X was. All they knew was they'd like to see X's doll.

After school, X wanted to play with the other children. "How about playing basketball in the gym?" X asked the girls. But all they did was make faces and giggle behind X's back. "Boy, is he weird," whispered Jamie to Joe. "How about weaving some baskets in the arts and crafts room?" X asked the boys. But they all made faces and giggled behind X's back, too. "Boy, is she weird," whispered Emily to Hannah.

That night, Ms. and Mr. Jones asked X how things had gone at school. X tried to smile, but there were two big tears in its eyes. "The lessons are okay," X began, "but...."

"But?" said Ms. Jones.

"The Other Children hate me," X whispered.

"Hate you?" said Mr. Jones.

X nodded, which made the two big tears roll down and splash on its overalls. Once more, the Joneses reached for their Instruction Manual. Under "Other Children", it said: "What did you Xpect? Other Children have to obey silly boy-girl rules, because their parents taught them to. Lucky X - you don't have rules at all. All you have to do is be yourself. P.S. We're not saying it'll be easy. X liked being itself.

But X cried a lot that night. So X's father held X tight and cried a little too. X's mother cheered them up with an Xciting story about an enchanted prince called Sleeping Handsome, who woke up when Princess Charming kissed him. The next morning, they all felt much better, and little X went back to school with a brave smile and a clean pair of red and white checked overalls. There was a seven-letter word spelling bee in class that day. And a seven-lap boys' relay race in the gym. And a seven-layer-cake baking contest in the girls' kitchen corner. X won the spelling bee. X also won the relay race. And X almost won the baking contest Xcept it forgot to light the oven. (Remember nobody's perfect.)

One of the Other Children noticed something else, too.

He said: "X doesn't care about winning. X just thinks it's fun playing boys' stuff and girls' stuff. "Come to think of it," said another one of the Other Children. "X is having twice as much fun as we are!"

After school that day, the girl who beat X in the baking contest gave X a big slice of her winning cake. And the boy X beat in the relay race asked X to race him home. From then on, some really funny things began to happen. Emily, who sat next to X, refused to wear pink dresses to school any more. She wanted red and white checked overalls - just like X's. Overalls, she told her parents, were better for climbing **monkey bars[[12]](#footnote-12)**. Then Jamie, the class football fanatic, started wheeling his little sister's doll pram around the football field. He'd put on his entire football uniform, except for the helmet. Then he'd put the helmet in the carriage, lovingly tucked under an old set of shoulder pads. Then he'd jog around the field, pushing the carriage and singing "Rockabye Baby" to his helmet. He said X did the same thing, so it must be okay. After all, X was the team's star **quarterback[[13]](#footnote-13)**.

Emily's parents were horrified by her behaviour, and Jamie's parents were worried sick about his. But the worst came when the twins, Joe and Hannah, decided to share everything with each other. Hannah used Joe's football boots, and his microscope, and took half his newspaper delivery. Joe used Hannah’s sewing kit, and her cookbooks, and took two of her three baby-sitting jobs. Hannah ran the lawn mower, and Joe ran the vacuum cleaner. Their parents weren't one bit pleased with Hannah's science experiments, or with Joe's terrific **embroidered[[14]](#footnote-14)** pillows.

They didn't care that Hannah mowed the lawn better, and that Joe vacuumed the carpet better. In fact, they were furious. It's all that little X's fault, they agreed. X doesn't know what it is or what it's supposed to be! So X wants to mix everybody else up, too! Hannah and Joe were forbidden to play with X any more. So was Emily and then Jamie and then all the Other Children. But it was too late. The Other Children stayed mixed up and happy and free and refused to go back to the way they'd been before X.

Finally, the parents held an emergency meeting to discuss "The X Problem". They sent a report to the principal stating that X was a "bad influence" and demanding immediate action. The Joneses, they said, should be forced to tell whether X was a boy or a girl. And X should be force to behave like whichever it was. If the Joneses refused to tell, the parents said, then X must take an Xamination. An **Impartial[[15]](#footnote-15)** Team of Xperts would Xtract the secret. Then X would start obeying all the old rules. Or else. And if X turned out to be some kind of mixed-up misfit, then X must be Xpelled from school. Immediately! So that no little Xes would ever come to school again. The principal was very upset. Was X a bad influence? A mixed-up misfit? But X was an Xcellent student! X set a fine Xample! X was Xtraordinary! X was president of the student council, X had won first prize in the art show, helped organise the science fair, and **participated[[16]](#footnote-16)** in six events on sports day!

Nevertheless, insisted the parents, X is a Problem Child. X is the biggest problem child we have ever had! So the principal reluctantly **notified[[17]](#footnote-17)** X's parents and the Joneses reported this to the Project X scientists, who referred them to page 85769 of the Instruction Manual. "Sooner or later," it said, "X will have to be Xamined by an Impartial Team of Xperts. This may be the only way any of us will know for sure whether X is mixed up - or everyone else is."

At Xactly 9 o'clock the next day, X reported to the school health office. The principal, along with a **committee[[18]](#footnote-18)** from the Parents' Association, X's teacher, X's classmates, and Ms. and Mr. Jones, waited in the hall outside. Inside, the Xperts had set up their famous testing machine: the Super-psycho-bio-meter.

Nobody knew Xactly how the machine worked, but everybody knew that this examination would reveal Xactly what everyone wanted to know about X, but were afraid to ask. It was terribly quiet in the hall. Almost spooky. They could hear very strange noises from the room. There were buzzes. And a beep or two. And several bells. An occasional light flashed under the door. Was it an X-ray? Through it all, you could hear the Xperts' voices, asking questions, and X's voice answering answers.

I wouldn't like to be in X's overalls right now, the children thought.

At last, the door opened. Everyone crowded around to hear the results. X didn't look any different. In fact, X was smiling. But the Impartial Team of Xperts looked terrible. They looked as if they were crying! "What happened?" everyone began shouting. "Sssh!" sshed the principal. "The Xperts are trying to speak." Wiping his eyes and clearing his throat, one Xpert began: "In our opinion," he whispered - you could tell he must be very upset - "In our opinion, young X here- "

"Yes! Yes!" shouted a parent.

"Young X," said the other Xpert, frowning, "is just about the least mixed-up child we've ever Xamined!"

Behind the closed door, the Super-psycho-medico-socio-meter made a noise like a **contented[[19]](#footnote-19)** hum.

"Hurray for X!" yelled one of the children. And then the others began yelling, too. Clapping and cheering and jumping up and down. "SSSH!" said the principal, but nobody did.

The Parents' Committee was angry and **bewildered[[20]](#footnote-20)**. How could X have passed the whole Xamination? Didn't X have an identify problem? Wasn't X messed up at all? Wasn't X any kind of a **misfit[[21]](#footnote-21)**? How could it not be, when it didn't even know what it was? "Don't you see?" asked the Xperts. "X isn't one bit mixed up! As for being a misfit - ridiculous! X knows perfectly well what it is! Don't you, X?" The Xperts winked. X winked back.

"But what is X?" shrieked Hannah and Joe's parents. "We still want to know what it is!"

"Ah, yes," said the Xperts, winking again. "Well, don't worry. You'll all know one of these days. And you won't need us to tell you."

"What? What do they mean?" Jamie's parents **grumbled** **suspiciously[[22]](#footnote-22)**.

Emily and Hannah and Joe all answered at once. "They mean that by the time it matters which sex X is, it won't be a secret anymore!" With that, the Xperts reached out to hug Ms. and Mr. Jones. "If we ever have an X of our own," they whispered, "we sure hope you'll lend us your Instruction Manual."

Of course, the Joneses were very happy. The Project Baby X scientists were rather pleased, too. So were Emily, Jamie, Hannah, Joe and all the Other Children. Even the parents promised not to make any trouble.

Later that day, all X's friends put on their red and white checked overalls and went over to see X. They found X in the backyard, playing with a very tiny baby that none of them had ever seen before. The baby was wearing very tiny red and white checked overalls. "How do you like our new baby?" X asked the Other Children proudly. "It's got cute dimples," said Jamie. "It's got huge biceps, too," said Emily. "What kind of baby is it?" asked Joe and Hannah. X frowned at them. "Can't you tell?" Then, X broke into a big, mischievous grin. "It's a Y!”

1. biceps: muscles [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. kitchycoo: noises adults make when talking to babies [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. dainty: small, delicate [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. huffily: in a bad-tempered way. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. snarl: an angry way of speaking [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. exclaimed: to say something in a loud voice [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. retrieving: getting belongings back [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. consulting: checking [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. summoned: called [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. tricky: difficult [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. archery: the sport of shooting arrows at a target [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. monkey bars: climbing frame [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Quarterback: a position in American Football [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. embroidered: sewing pattern made with coloured cotton threads [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Impartial: not belonging to any side or team [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. participated: took part in [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. notified: told, informed [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. committee: people who hold a meeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. contented: happy [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. bewildered: confused [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. misfit: someone who does not belong [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. grumbled suspiciously: complained as they do not trust or believe someone [↑](#footnote-ref-22)