



reading for meaning

By Marie Kelly *

Why is it that some children can read fluently, yet when you ask them to retell the essence of the story or you ask them a direct question, they look at you blankly? Parents often wonder what they can do to help their children understand stories. We explore the key aspects of comprehension-building.

Comprehension means understanding what we read. From the earliest of interactions with various texts (for example, story books, song charts, even computer games), children develop knowledge about how to comprehend. The teaching of comprehension or understanding the author's message is sometimes over-looked when children are young, and even into their formative school years. While some parents are very concerned about the colour level their child has reached on the school Reading Wheel, it is more important to remember that (while fluency and accurate decoding are very important for reading success), the main intent and goal of any author is to convey a message.

So, how do we teach our children to understand and remember what they have just read or listened to?

- **select a book** Firstly, find a book that appeals to your child and look at the illustrations together and check out any unfamiliar words.
- **predict what might happen** For example, I wonder what the story will be about? Do you think the dinosaur might get lost? Here you can activate prior knowledge and model, prompt, encourage, explain and guide your child to greater understanding (What do we already know about dinosaurs? Do you remember when...?). You can point out the connections between your child's prior experiences and the story, similarities between books or films etc, and any relationship between the child and their larger world.
- **clarify** At the end of each paragraph or page (depending on the age of the child and the difficulty of the text), ask the child to clarify (explain) to you what they have read and/or let you know if there is anything they are unsure of (such as tricky words or phrases). Any breakdowns in the child's comprehension can be fixed through re-reading, reading ahead, discussion or using a dictionary.
- **ask your child questions** This allows you, as the more experienced reader, to judge your child's ability to find the relevant information. Read and talk about the story, using both literal questions, such as, how

many pigs are in the story? As well as more in-depth, higher-level thinking questions such as, why did the pigs run away?

- **self-questioning** Encourage them to use the four Ws and one H (What, Why, Where, Who and How) as a guide. For example, Who is the main person in the story? Why is the baby crying? How do you think they are feeling about that?
- **summarising (story shrinking)** Rather than getting caught up in too much detail, summarising is a way of encouraging your young reader to think about the main ideas in the text. They should learn to ask themselves: what is the main idea in the paragraph? What happened in the beginning/middle/end? This is an important skill because your child should not be trying to recall every single detail in the story.

It is important that you don't turn a reading session into a test for your child. Ultimately, it is more important that you and your child enjoy reading together and that reading time is optimised. A child who thinks they are likely to be asked lots of questions may try and avoid such situations.

On a good day, reading at home should be a positive, calm and regular experience for all. Bringing in the strategies — subtly, without fuss and at an appropriate age and stage — is the way to go.

other active strategies to improve comprehension

- * Ask your child to rate the story out of 10 and give reasons for and against.
- * Play 'Stump Me' with your child. After reading non-fiction, let your child ask you some questions. Let your child show you where the answer is (you could pretend at times in this one).

Learning to read or decode is often thought of as a sequential pathway, but in reality the stages often overlap. This is a general guide to the stages that each child will go through.

- 1 Phonemic awareness:** relates to a child understanding that spoken words are made up of small units of sound or phonemes.
- 2 Alphabetic principle:** knowing that letters represent sounds.
- 3 Reading fluency:** refers to the ability to read accurately, expressively and quickly.
- 4 Developing vocabulary:** refers to learning new words (the best way to do this is to read and talk about words).
- 5 Comprehension:** is interwoven amongst all of these steps and, like most skills, emerges with other literacy skills and is affected by a child's age, stage and learning style. Comprehension should be a skill that is actively taught and practised.

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