

K15

Reading Comprehension — Research Informs Us

The goals of reading are to understand written text, integrate new ideas, and generalize from what is read. As a parent, what should you know about reading comprehension to help your child improve his skills and achieve those goals?

Develop Decoding Skills

Your child can't understand what he's read unless he has a way to figure the words out. Research has shown that poor readers "guess," an inefficient way to approach new text. Good readers, however, use decoding skills.

Phonemic awareness precedes learning to read print. Your young child needs to be able to hear speech sounds of the language and tell them apart, isolate sounds, and break words up into separate sounds.

In order to build decoding skills, your child needs to be able to match those sounds to letters of the alphabet and blend the sounds to make words. This is phonics instruction.

Increase Fluency

If your child struggles as he sounds out each word, he'll have trouble remembering what he's read by the time he comes to the end of the sentence or paragraph. So once he's learned how to decode words, he needs to read quickly and fluently to remember and understand what he's read.

In order to achieve this goal, he requires many opportunities to read out loud. Research has shown that practice in oral reading, not silent reading, makes the process of reading effortless. So take time to listen to him read aloud and help him through the difficult words.

Expand Oral Language

For most kids, listening comprehension develops at a faster speed and remains at a higher level than reading comprehension. Your child can't understand what he's read unless he understands the material when it's read aloud to him. In order to decide whether reading makes sense, your child needs well-developed oral language skills, including:

- **Learning the meaning of new words.** The larger his vocabulary becomes, the easier it will be for him to relate words to the context of the sentence, paragraph, or story. His vocabulary continually increases in complexity as he converses and reads. You can help by introducing new words and explaining the words he doesn't know.
- **Studying word parts and changes in the inflection of words.** If your child knows the meaning of a root word ("kind"), then he'll know what the new word means when the prefix ("un"/not) or suffix ("ness"/state of being) is added. He also needs to see that meaning changes when word pronunciation changes, e.g., "I took a birthday present to the party, and I will present it before the cake is served."
- **Understanding meanings and relationships between words.** Synonyms are words with the same or similar meanings ("bucket/pail"), and antonyms are opposites ("good/bad"). Your child may need help learning figures of speech, such as, "It's raining cats and dogs," in order

to understand what he's reading.

- **Knowing the rules for putting words into meaningful sentences.** Different languages follow different rules. For example, in English, the adjective precedes the noun (blue water), whereas in Spanish the adjective follows the noun (water blue). In a sentence, subject and verb need to agree. Making a statement into a question requires changing the order of the subject and verb, such as, "That was a good story." "Was that a good story?"
- **Having background knowledge.** Your child needs some idea of the subject he's talking or reading about, or he won't be able to gain meaning from it. For example, if you're talking about the beach, has he been there? Seen pictures of one? Watched a program about it on TV?

Promote Strategies for Comprehension

Your child requires lots of options to talk and write about what he reads to make sure he understands it. As you and he discuss books, newspaper articles, or school reading assignments, try using some of these prompts to broaden reading comprehension skills. (Choose the strategies best suited to his level of development.)

- What was the main idea? Tell me 3 to 5 important details from the story.
- Did you like the story? Why or why not? Who was your favorite character and why?
- Retell the story in your own words, and draw a picture illustrating the story.
- What do you think might happen in the next section or chapter?
- Make up 5 "wh-" questions about the story — "Who? What? When? Where? Why?"
- Make a graphic organizer to tell about the story.
- Write a short paragraph to summarize the story.
- Was any part of the story confusing to you?
- Did this remind you of any other story you've read? Which one and why?
- What did you learn from the story that you didn't know before?

If your child doesn't respond to your request, explain what you're asking and give an example. Help him decide when and why each strategy might be helpful, depending on whether he's reading specific subject matter for a class, information about a favorite topic or person, fiction, poetry, or step-by-step procedures for fixing his bike. He'll need to stay motivated to apply these strategies as he reads new material.

Balance Skill Building

Reading comprehension depends on several interrelated skills: understanding oral language, decoding the printed word, reading fluently, and using strategies to increase comprehension. No matter what your child's age, it's important his skills develop in all areas because significant difficulty in any one of them can cause a breakdown in the whole process of reading.

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Learning. Today she is a consultant to local school districts and university field supervisor for student teachers.

Other Resources

Websites

Southwest Educational Developmental Laboratory
The Phive Phones of Reading
www.sedl.org/reading/topics/phon.html

Reading Online
Comprehension Instruction: What Makes Sense Now, What Might Make Sense Soon
www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=/articles/handbook/pressley/index.html

Sebastian Wren, Ph.D.
Decoding and the Jabberwocky's Song
www.sedl.org/reading/topics/whatisreading.html

Sebastian Wren, Ph.D.
Regular and Exception Words
www.sedl.org/reading/topics/exception.html

Sebastian Wren, Ph.D.
Reading by Sight
www.sedl.org/reading/topics/sight.html

Sebastian Wren, Ph.D.
Phonics Rules
www.sedl.org/reading/topics/phonicsrules.html

Russell Gersten, Ph.D. and Scott Baker, Ph.D.
Reading Comprehension Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities
www.ld.org/Research/nclb_reading_comp.cfm

The Partnership for Reading
Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read (html)
www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/reading_first1.html

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Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read (pdf)
www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading/publications/Cierra.pdf