

Barriers to Comprehension

Strategies to use when reading with your child

Studies show that some children can read very fluently but lack basic comprehension skills. They might read their reading book confidently without any mistakes but then find it difficult to answer simple questions about the text.

This booklet gives you questions and simple activities to use with your child so that they better understand what they are reading. It is a good idea to focus on just one area at a time but as your child gains confidence, you could try combining questions and activities from more than one area.

Background Knowledge

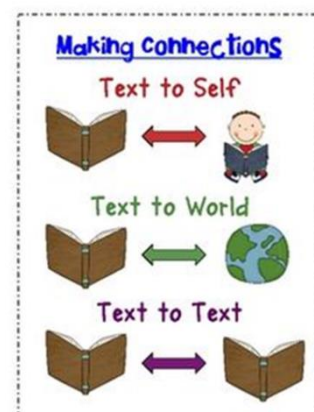
Using what we already know about the world helps us to understand what we are reading. For example, if we are reading a story where a volcano erupts, it helps our understanding if we already have some prior knowledge about volcanoes. We might know a little about why volcanic eruptions are dangerous or we might have seen images of slow-moving lava on the news. All of this helps us to understand the story.

There are three different types of connections to background knowledge that are useful:

- Connecting to our own experiences
- Connecting to other texts
- Connecting to what we know about the world

Try pausing as you are reading with your child to explore their background knowledge. For example, if you are sharing a book set at the seaside you might pause to ask:

- Do you remember what it was like when we played on the beach on holiday? What did you enjoy? What did the sand feel like? (Connecting to own experience)
- Do you remember the book we read last week about the whale? Can you remember what happened?(Connecting to other texts)
- What do you know about the sea? What lives in the sea? (Connecting to general knowledge about the world)



Vocabulary Knowledge

A reader needs to understand the meaning at least 90% of the words in a text so that they can fully comprehend the overall meaning. Even not understanding the meaning of one word can cause problems – especially if it is the main word in a sentence!

Tom looked in despair at the neglected borzoi.

The most important word in this sentence is 'borzoi'. Without knowing the meaning of this word (it is actually a breed of dog) we can't make sense of the sentence.

As you are reading with your child, pause regularly to ask:

- Are there any words you are unsure of?
- What might this word mean?
- Can the rest of the sentence help us to understand this new word?

It is worth pausing to ask your child to explain the meaning of some simple words. Quite often, we assume that children understand the meaning of everyday words in a text but this isn't always the case.

For example, in the picture book 'Peace at Last' by Jill Murphy there are lots of everyday words that younger children might be unfamiliar with:

DRIP, DRIP... went the leaky kitchen tap. HMMMMMM went the refrigerator.

Children might never have heard the word 'leaky' before. They might know what a 'fridge' is but not connect this to a 'refrigerator'.

Try making a 'word bookmark' to keep with your child's reading book – just a plain piece of card will do. You can use this to write down any new words that your child spots in their reading. You could then go back to the word list and check if your child can simply explain the meaning of the new words.



Asking questions

Children who have good comprehension skills often stop to ask questions about what they are reading. They pause to make predictions about what might happen next. They make 'I wonder' statements, for example:

I wonder if Goldilocks will eat all the porridge!

Children who struggle to understand what they are reading are often passive readers. They don't interact with the text or ask questions about it. They often don't notice if they have missed out a chunk of text or have accidentally turned over two pages instead of one as they aren't monitoring that their reading is making sense to them.

As you are reading with your child, pause to ask:

- What do you think might happen next?
- Why do you think that?
- What questions would you like to ask the main character?
- Is there anything that puzzles you?



You could also share your own thoughts and questions with your child. This shows them that, as adults, we still have questions or find things puzzling too!

Visualising

As adults, we take it for granted that all children make pictures in their imagination as they read – almost like making their own movie version! However, for some children, this doesn't come easily and they might need a little help practising visualising.

As you read with your child, pause to discuss what they are imagining. Share what you are imagining too. You could even draw some quick sketches to show what you imagine from the text.



Ability to make inferences

When we infer we are using lots of different skills. That is why inference is known as a 'higher-order' reading skill. We have to search for clues in the text and then connect these clues to our background knowledge.

Some children find inference questions very tricky. They might need help finding clues in the text and making connections to what they already know. Try focusing your questions on a character in a story. Ask questions about:

- how a character feels
- why a character feels that way
- why a character acts/behaves in a certain way
- why a character says certain things
- what a character thinks



Encourage your child to look for clues from pictures in the text too.

Breakdown Strategies

Children who struggle to understand what they are reading often don't have a 'toolkit' to help them when they are stuck. They will skip over words they are unsure of. This means they often miss out on learning the meaning of new words too as they haven't paused to try to understand them!

As your child reads to you, listen out for any errors they make. Try these strategies with your child to help them identify and make sense of words they cannot read:

- Re-read the tricky phrase/sentence(s) again
- Look back and identify key words in the sentence to help understanding
- Verbalise the text. What do you imagine is happening?
- Slow down, read back a bit and then on a bit.. .
- Use your background knowledge and think like a detective
- If it's a tricky word, ask yourself...what do I know about it? It is like a word I know already?

It is fine to help your child to read new tricky words – just make sure you check that they understand the meaning of the word before they read on!

