

How Parents Can Improve Their Child's Comprehension

In order to read competently, one must be able to decode (sound out or recognize) words and comprehend the meaning of the material being read. It is the purpose of this handout to provide strategies that will assist the student in these areas. Since comprehension depends on the ability to recognize words, some decoding activities have been included, as well as compensatory activities geared toward increasing comprehension for the youngster with decoding weaknesses. Other activities focus on improving comprehension in the more formal reading that begins to predominate school work as the grade levels progress.

It is important to keep in mind that not every strategy will work for every child. Success will depend upon the child's individual learning style and needs, motivation and willingness to accept parental guidance. At all times, your relationship with your child is of primary importance. It should be relaxed and stress free. Offer praise and encouragement frequently. If implementation of any of these strategies creates anxiety or resentment (on the part of either parent or child), it is advisable to discontinue immediately.

When you have decided which strategies might be beneficial, introduce one at a time as a helpful hint or in a game format. Some of these activities will be used on a trial and error basis. Be flexible in following each strategy. If it works, that's great! If not, abandon it. Perhaps you can expand an idea that works for you or find a better way to use it.

Although many of the following suggestions may be applicable, this handout is not intended as a solution for children who have severe learning problems.

IMPROVING WORD RECOGNITION

FORM A WORD BANK

A technique that has been very successful with many youngsters who have difficulty reading certain words (used in directions, textbooks, workbooks, as vocabulary words etc.) is to enlarge each word on a 3 x 5 index card in dark pen or marker. Show the child the word while saying it, sound it out and say the word again. Then have the child do it, providing help as necessary. After several tries, put the cards away in an envelope or small box. Mark them "WORDS TO BE LEARNED ". You can now construct a game format for your youngster. Every day, show him/her each card. If he/she knows the word, a check is earned. (It can be placed right the card.) If not, repeat the introductory steps again. When three checks have been earned on different days, the card is placed in a different group, marked "MASTERED WORDS ". Set up a reward system for every set number of mastered words (i.e. baseball cards, gum etc. for every ten new words). A larger reward may be set for every group of 25 or 50 words, at which time the mastered words would be reviewed. (Don't be disappointed if a few have been forgotten. Just place the word back in the original group.) Of course, the real reward for your youngster will be the satisfaction he/she feels when the number of cards representing mastered words grows larger and larger.

Do not introduce more than several new words at a time. There should not be more than 10 new words in the learning pack at any one time. Be patient and offer praise and encouragement.

HINT: For longer or multi-syllabic words, use dots to separate syllables.

rev • o • lu • tion

This will allow the child to view each syllable as a smaller unit and make learning the word easier.

USE CONTEXT CLUES

Use the context to encourage word recognition. When a child comes across a word he/she can't read, encourage him/her to read the entire sentence or paragraph and to look at available pictures. Often, the meaning or the context of the written material and/or the pictures, plus the initial sound of the word, will help the child identify the word.

PREVIEW NEW WORDS

Prior to reading a passage, you can preview new or difficult words that appear on a worksheet or in a story. In textbooks these words usually appear in heavy print. If indicated, discussing the meaning of the words may also be helpful. Be careful not to overload the child with too many words. (If considerable word recognition problems exist, proceed to next section.)

ALTERNATE STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING COMPREHENSION

(When word recognition difficulties exist.)

If word recognition presents a real problem for your child but his/her listening comprehension is good, you may wish to consider the following strategies:

READ ALOUD TOGETHER: Choral Reading

Read aloud orally with your child. This usually removes stress. If the child doesn't know the word, you will provide it and reduce embarrassment and/or frustration. He/she will hear it correctly and possibly recognize it after several repetitions. You will also set a model for good oral expression and you are there to discuss the material or answer any questions that the child may have.

ALTERNATE READING PARAGRAPHS

When an assignment is lengthy and word recognition problems exist, you may choose to alternate reading paragraphs. When it is the child's turn to read, tell him any unknown words. This will reduce the stress created when the child has to struggle with the words and free energy for comprehension.

USE A TAPE RECORDER

Pre-tape a reading assignment. Encourage the child to read the text while listening to the tape. This may be particularly useful if the parent is not available during homework sessions or if working together produces anxiety. If your child is an auditory learner (learns more easily by listening), he/she can use the tape again prior to a test, to review material.

GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING COMPREHENSION

“SET THE SCENE” (A Pre-reading Activity)

Before a child reads a story or factual passage, discuss any information or experiences related to the content of the material. In this manner, you can heighten awareness and interest levels. You will also establish “associative hook-ups” (i.e. forms a basis or foundation for assimilation of new knowledge). The child will find the material more meaningful and easier to understand and retain.

PREVIEW NEW VOCABULARY

After you have "set the scene", preview difficult words or new vocabulary terms. If the child cannot read the word or does not understand what a word means, this will interfere with comprehension. Try to keep the number of words limited to four or five. If there are too many words, reduce the reading assignment to smaller segments. When one segment has been completed, you can introduce the words for the next part.

BE AWARE OF SEQUENCE

When working with questions following a reading selection, it may be helpful for the child to be aware that the order of the questions usually follows the sequence of the material in the story. This is particularly true of reading comprehension worksheets used in earlier grades (3-4).

For example, the answer to the first question will often be located at the beginning of the passage, the second after that, and so on.

UNDERSTAND KEY QUESTION WORDS

In order to comprehend material and to be able to answer questions competently, your child must understand exactly what is being asked. Focusing on the key word in a question will help him / her to do this.

Example: **"WHO"** asks for a person or a group of people?

"WHEN" refers to a time (hour, day, date, era, before or after another event etc.)

Other key words are **WHERE, WHAT, HOW, and WHY.**

Familiarity with these words can be reinforced in every day situations. You can use these words when discussing a television program, movie or any personal, family or newsworthy event. Experience in talking about "WHY" something happened establishes an understanding of cause and effect. Similarly explaining "HOW" something is done emphasizes the importance of sequencing statements and explaining things clearly. These experiences establish a basis for responding appropriately to school related tasks.

HIGHLIGHT IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Highlighting is an effective technique for increasing comprehension since the child must focus on the text and decide what is important.

He/She must learn to look for topic sentences and important details. The idea of using a highlighter appeals to many youngsters. Additionally, when reviewing material or looking for answers to questions, the highlighted words or sentences make for easy skimming.

The first few assignments should be done with you, since many children tend to highlight too much, thus defeating the purpose. Highlighters can generally be purchased anywhere that school supplies are sold. Of course, they can only be used on worksheets, consumable workbooks or copies of textbook pages...never in the textbook directly unless it belongs to the child.

In conclusion, comprehension skills are a very necessary part of a child's academic "tools". Both the ability to decode and accurately comprehend material is requirements for successful reading. If you plan to work on these skills with your child please be patient and include as much positive reinforcement as possible.

For more information visit The National Association of Parents with Children in Special Education
www.napcse.org