

## **I know this may seem overly simplistic, but...**

Your children need books that they can actually read! When considering your child's reading comprehension difficulties, the difficulty level of the text may be more than 90% of the battle. When a book is too hard, your child is using up all of his/her brain power on decoding the words, that he/she simply cannot make any sense of it. On the other hand, when your child reads books that are comfortable, he/she can have the inner conversations and attempt to make sense of the text in an enjoyable and much less agonizing way.

## **8 Magical Strategies**

When you regularly and thoughtfully work with your child on the following strategies, you will notice an impressive difference in not just the child's comprehension, but probably in several other aspects of the child's life as well. When you teach a child to comprehend, you are also teaching a child to empathize, to infer, and to become a more tolerant, understanding person who can think outside of the box. That is precisely why so many children struggle with comprehension—developmentally, it is difficult for children to get beyond literal, concrete understandings. As the child becomes older, especially around 3rd grade and up, it is essential that your child gradually become more aware of others' feelings and perspectives. That will help him/her to understand various perspectives in texts, and in life.

Practice these strategies patiently, one at a time, with some favorite books at home, which also happen to be at a comfortable reading level for your child. Remember, the more explicit you make the strategies, the better your child will comprehend. Gradually, your child will begin to implement these strategies independently, but please check in with your child consistently to see how he/she is progressing.

### **1. Make connections**

The first of the strategies also happens to be one of my personal favorites, because it's fun and straightforward. Simply encourage your child to make personal connections to the content of the book he/she is reading. You could even jot the connections on sticky notes in colorful magic markers and stick them in the book, or make a cute chart of the connections.

There are three different kinds of connections we tend to make while reading: *text-to-self*, *text-to-text*, and *text-to-world*.

*Text-to-self* connections are easiest. We merely relate concepts in the book to aspects of our own lives. For example, "I love the lake in this book. It reminds me of our summer vacations when we always visited that lake in New York."

*Text-to-text* connections are also fun and easy. Obviously, you just relate the book you're currently reading to another book you've read. Perhaps the characters in this book remind of the characters in a book you read last week. Also, don't feel constricted by the text-to-text label. I always encourage my students to think of movies and TV shows to which they can relate their books, too!

*Text-to-world* connections are trickier. With these connections, you want to relate what you've just read to a larger, worldly phenomenon, and not just something specific to your own life. This is hard for children, for obvious reasons. Children have little experience beyond their personal existence. They have yet to truly understand the world. Likewise, developmentally, it's challenging for many children to imagine that other people even have different perspectives than the ones to which they are accustomed. This is where the hard work comes in for both parents and teachers. Encourage your child to think outside the box. Show them in compelling ways that other people may think and behave differently. This will develop over time, so be patient! The more explicit you are with making text-to-world connections, the better your child will become at it.

## **2. Infer**

Making inferences is similar to the text-to-world connection strategy. In order for children to adequately understand, they must be able to make inferences, yet this is a difficult concept even for some adults to grasp! Gradually work with children on drawing conclusions based on what information they know. Likewise, show them how to make educated guesses, and to look for hints to back up their reasoning. You could make lists and pictures together to help this strategy along. As always, model inferring for your child in an explicit way, so that he/she can see how you derive conclusions. Do you openly empathize with others? Do you articulate how another may have a different perspective than you? All of these explicitly modeled behaviors will help your child with the all-too important task of inferring.

## **3. Predictions**

An uncomplicated strategy to foster comprehension is to simply ask your child to make frequent predictions. Most parents and teachers make the mistake of only asking children to make predictions at the beginning of a book. Instead, ask children to make predictions at the onset of a book, as well as at strategic points throughout the book. This stimulates their thinking in a number of ways. At the end of the book, discuss with children whether or not they liked the ending. Would they have ended it differently? If so, how?

## **4. Visualize**

One of the best parts of reading is to picture the story or the content in one's head. Ask children to describe how they picture the characters and the setting in the story. If it's non-fiction, ask them to draw their own pictures of the content. Another fun activity is to compare and contrast visualizations between book and movie versions of various stories.

## **5. Questions**

Asking children questions is the simplest and most old-fashioned way to ensure they have understood material. Don't just ask questions at the end of a given passage. I would suggest stopping at strategic points to see how they are doing throughout a passage. Furthermore, the quality of the questions themselves can also determine the quality of understanding. Most people only ask explicit, concrete questions that only pertain to memory. For example, "what color shirt was he wearing?" Instead, I encourage people to ask implicit questions, which are open-ended, and to which there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer, but by which you can still determine how well the child understood. For example, rather than asking what color shirt the character wore, in its place ask "Why was it important that the character wore a blue shirt?" This causes the child to think in a deeper manner, without having to memorize the color of the shirt, yet you still yield rich insights pertaining to how well the child is comprehending.

## **6. Determine importance**

When you were in high school or college, did you ever have a textbook that turned a fluorescent color because you couldn't figure out which passages were important, so you just used a highlighter to highlight the entire text?! This is a common scenario to which most of us can relate. Sometimes, whether it is a text, or some other aspect of life, we have a hard time determining what is important. It often has to do with the difficulty level of the content, and how familiar we are with it. When a subject is overwhelming, confusing, and foreign, it is much harder to determine what is important, than when we are dealing with familiar territory, which is at a comfortable difficulty level for us.

Practice determining importance with your child. Explicitly model how you determine what is important. Show your child how you might look in topic sentences, or at bullet points, titles, or headings to make more sense of a passage. Practice highlighting a passage together. Once children know how to extract important information, they can study better, focus better, and provide adequate retellings and/or summaries.

## **7. Synthesize**

Once children can determine importance, they can begin to synthesize. The easiest way I can think of to explain synthesis to my students is to use a weaving metaphor. When we synthesize, we have to take information from different sources, and weave it all together for ourselves. This is no easy task! Imagine a weaver who has to select the best spools of thread, based on her knowledge of thread. Then, she must weave the threads together into one coherent, beautiful piece. That is precisely what successful readers do when they comprehend. They weave the information, or synthesize it. I would suggest putting important facts from a book onto long strips of paper, which could represent threads. Then, think through how you would weave those important facts together, and you could even physically manipulate the papers until you have your own quilt. This activity helps a lot when children have to write research papers, or other written responses to text.

## **8. Fix-Up Strategies**

Last but not least, simply equip your child to have fix-up strategies at his/her fingertips upon which he/she can rely when information breaks down. When you are reading, won't you stop and re-read something when you know it's no longer making sense? Well, lots of children won't do that. They won't stop! They just keep going! Together with your child, brainstorm and make a list of fix-up strategies. The list could be as simple as "stop, go back, re-read, use a highlighter, predict, ask questions, etc." It doesn't have to be anything fancy. The two keys are that your child first recognizes when his/her comprehension breaks down, and second, knows a few things he/she can do to help mend that comprehension.

### **Having explicit strategies at our fingertips is the secret to success when it comes to comprehension!**

For more information, I would highly recommend the book *Strategies that Work* by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis. It is the best book on the market about comprehension, and it is the source of much of the information I condensed for you into this brief article.