

Six Ways to Improve Reading Comprehension at Home

by Lloyd Lamouria

There are some simple, yet powerful strategies that improve reading comprehension following just brief instruction and practice. We will discuss six of the strategies that can be easily applied at home. You don't need to spend a lot of time on each one, but the strategies should be introduced, modeled, and practiced one at a time.

Comprehension instruction is most effective when it is explicit. This just means that you explain the purpose of the strategy, and when and how to use it. The steps for instruction are to:

- Directly explain the strategy and why it helps comprehension.
- Model the strategy for your child so they can see you applying it and how it works.
- Have your child practice the task with your support and guidance.
- Scaffold the support by reducing the amount of support provided as your child becomes independent with the task.
- Have your child apply the new skill to progressively more difficult text with a variety of styles.

Visualizing

When we read we make a "movie" in our mind. It is why we enjoy reading a book. We get so absorbed in our personal "movie" that we may not even be conscious of what is going on around us. We translate the words into a rich visual experience. We also use visual imagery to support our understanding of abstract concepts and words.

Select a text that is somewhat easy for your child to read. Try reading a paragraph with your child, and model the task for your child by describing the "movie" the paragraph made in your mind. Make sure your description makes an accurate and detailed movie. Now have your child read a paragraph and have your child describe the "image" that they see in their mind. Make sure that the image your child describes is concrete. In other words that it is specific and detailed. If they say they see a dog, ask what kind of dog, how big is the dog, and what color? Where is the dog in your picture? Is it close or far away? You can encourage your child to make a detailed image of what is going on in the paragraph by asking compare-and-contrast questions. For example, if the child says, "I see a brown dog.", you could say, "Okay. Based on what you told me, I am visualizing a brown chihuahua sitting in a tree. Does that match the picture in your mind?"

If this task is particularly hard for your child, you may need to start with a single sentence at a time and work up to a whole paragraph. After your child gets confident at the paragraph level, try working on a few paragraphs at a time, and finally a page or two at a time.

Thinking Aloud

Read a paragraph at a time and discuss the thoughts that the text triggers. This may be puzzling over the meaning of a word, concern for the character, or that it reminds you of something that happened in another book. The purpose of the task is to encourage being engaged with the text and to self-monitor for comprehension.

Predicting

This can be fun and funny. Read a paragraph at a time and discuss the meaning of the paragraph, and what you think will happen next. Then read the next paragraph and compare your prediction to what really happens in the next paragraph. Make a new prediction and proceed to the next paragraph.

Questioning

Read several paragraphs or a whole page, and discuss potential reasons for the author's approach. The questions are endless but might be similar to: Why did the author choose this location? What do you think is the purpose in the detailed description of the character in the book? Why do you think the author put this conflict into the story? Do you think there is a specific reason for the character's name?

Clarifying

Read a paragraph and discuss with your child how they can relate the information in the story to prior knowledge. For example, when reading about a farm in the 1800's, your child may be able to connect to a modern farm that was visited last year, or a movie seen a few months ago. Discuss how your child might need to adjust their prior knowledge to make the new imagery match the book.

Summarizing

This is somewhat the opposite of the detail you look for when visualizing. In this task you ask your child to read a paragraph and then use one (or two) sentence(s) to summarize what was read. The summary will not include all the details in the paragraph, but it will capture the "gist" of the meaning.

Spending just 20 minutes a day for a month can help your child to become a better reader!

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