

Help Struggling Readers Overcome 5 Obstacles To Reading Comprehension

(For ease of reading, your child is referred to as “he” and “him.” You may substitute “she” and “her.”)

Your goal is to help your child become a successful, independent reader. One who reads smoothly, with expression and understands what he reads. All the tips I provide will help you accomplish that goal. Over the years, I have discovered five obstacles to **reading comprehension**:

1. Trying to read text that is too difficult
2. Limited vocabulary
3. A lack of reading fluency (smoothness)
4. Inactive reading
5. Incorrect phrasing
- 6.

Helping Your Child Choose Books at the Correct Reading Level:

Most parents do not know how to help their children choose books on the correct reading level. There are actually three different reading levels for each person. You should help your child select books at both his independent and instructional levels.

- Independent level - a child can read these books easily with very few words too difficult for him to read. He can read these books on his own.
- Instructional level - a child can read most of the words, but will be challenged by some words on each page. He should read these books while a more able reader is there to help him.
- Frustration level - a child has to stop often and try to decode words. If he tries to read a book at this level, he will become frustrated.

When helping your child choose a book, use the five finger rule. Have him choose a book he thinks he would like to read and open it to any page. As he reads the page, count how many words he has trouble reading or understanding. If it reaches 5, the book is too difficult and will frustrate him. You want his reading experiences to be pleasurable. Allow him to choose some books on his independent reading level, so he can practice reading smoothly with expression. Then help him choose a book that will be a little bit of a challenge for him.

Helping Your Child Develop His Reading Vocabulary:

One thing that many parents and teachers often neglect is the building of useful vocabulary. It is very important to your child's reading comprehension to know as much about everything as possible. The brain wants to attach new information to old, so the more your child knows about common things in life, the better he will understand what he reads. To build his vocabulary and background knowledge:

- Take time to discuss things with your child during the day. Tell him what things are called and how they work. By doing this you are increasing his vocabulary.
- When he comes to a word that he is unfamiliar with, try these ideas:
 - Have him guess at what the word means by how it is used in the sentence and in the story. If he is not correct, help him see clues to the meaning in the sentence. This will help him determine the meanings of unfamiliar words on his own later.
 - Sometimes tell him what the word means, but relate the word to something he has experienced [EX: say, "A smirk is like a smile, but it shows... Like when your sister..."]. This will help him understand the word better because it is being related to his own life.
 - At times, but not often, have him look the word up in the dictionary, but be sure he chooses the definition that fits the way the word is used in the sentence.
- If your child is age 9 or above, an easy way to expand his reading vocabulary by literally thousands of words in just a few weeks is being sure he knows the meanings of the most common word parts. This will allow him to figure out an approximation of the word meaning (and many times that is all that is needed to understand what the author is saying). For a systematic approach to learning these 110 word parts see the book called [Word Analysis: The Key to Unlocking the Meaning of Words](#).

As my students read grade level books each day, I was amazed at the many things they did not know. I mean common, everyday things mentioned in assessments, books, poems, etc. I started a list of these things and the list became a book called [The New Book of Knowledge](#). It is a wonderful tool for parents and teachers seeking to build children's vocabulary and background knowledge.

Helping Your Child Develop Reading Fluency (Smoothness):

It is difficult for your child to understand what he reads if he has to keep stopping to sound out words (called decoding). All that time and attention to individual words takes away from understanding the whole story. What can be done?

- Perhaps your child does not read smoothly because he doesn't have a large enough sight vocabulary. These are words that a reader needs to know instantly, so that he doesn't have to keep stopping to "sound them out." You can print a list of 300 instant words from this website. Begin with the "[First Hundred Instant Words](#)" list. If your child learns these words, he will know about 50% of all written material. Go through the list with your child. Ask him each word. Work with him on groups of no more than 6 unknown words at a time. Put each unknown word on a separate index card or paper square. Tell him the word. Work with him, helping him memorize the words. There will be some words he has trouble remembering, so have him make up a sentence containing that word used correctly. You write the sentence on the back of the card and have him read his sentence. Review the words daily until he knows them. Add new words as he learns the ones on the flashcards.
- Sometimes, read to your child. Read smoothly with expression as a model of correct reading and simply for his enjoyment.
- Sometimes, read along with your child very smoothly, but at a pace slower than your normal reading speed. Run your finger under each word as you read it, so he can read along with you. Your child needs to experience the feeling of fluent reading.
- Each day, either you or your child should choose a few paragraphs (not a whole page) for him to reread until it sounds smooth. Rereading until he reads it smoothly develops fluency.
- Anytime your child struggles with a word, it is very important to have him reread the sentence that he did not read smoothly.
- There is a wonderful strategy for determining unknown words that is simply amazing. You'll have to try it to believe it! When your child comes to an unknown word, have him make the first sound in the word, (sometimes the first letter makes the sound, but sometimes it takes 2 or 3 letters to make the sound th, sh, str). After making the first sound, your child should go on and read the next few words. Many times the unknown word just occurs to the child, because it would make sense in the sentence. When this happens, tell him he is correct and have him reread the sentence to make sure the word makes sense. You can get a list and activities to help him remember each onset from this website. [Onsets - Click Here](#)
- Sometimes your child will have to sound out a word that he cannot read (called decoding the word). Many words look difficult to read only because suffixes (ing, ed, ment...) and prefixes (re, un, mis...) have been added to small words making them long and hard to read. Your child should cover up the prefixes and/or suffixes in the word, leaving only a small word, a word your child already knows how to read. You can print a list of common prefixes and suffixes from this website - [Prefixes and Suffixes - Click Here](#). After you print the list, read it over to your child and have him read the prefixes and suffixes to you. It is very important that he knows how to pronounce each one. I suggest that your child:
 1. cover the suffix and/or prefix in the word
 2. read the small word that is left
 3. uncover the prefix at the front of the word and read the word
 4. uncover the suffix and read the whole word
 5. For a complete list of the most common word parts in their most common forms see [Word Analysis: The Key to Unlocking the Meaning of Words](#)
- Another quick way to decode a word is to see if it contains a double consonant (bb, cc, dd) in the middle of it (rubbed). If it does, have your child cover the second consonant and the end of the word. Then he will probably be able to read the short word that is left. Then have him uncover the ending and read the whole word. This should only take a few seconds. Have him read the word and then reread the entire sentence.

Helping Your Child Develop the Habit of Active Reading:

Have you ever been watching television and when the commercial came on, you couldn't remember what show you were just watching? That means you were watching passively not actively. The same thing happens when we read. To be sure your child is reading actively help him think before, during and after he reads:

- Before your child reads, talk about what he already knows about the subject of the book (EX: If the book is about trains, have your child tell you everything he knows about trains. They run on tracks, they have cars...). This helps remind him about words that he might have to read in the book. This sets him up for success. Always look at the cover of the book and discuss what the book might be about. (Your child will read to see if he was right)

- During the reading session ask your child what he thinks will happen next. (When a reader predicts what he thinks will happen next, he usually reads with more interest to see if his prediction was correct, thus reading more actively.)
- Remind your child to THINK while he reads. he should continually be asking, "Does this make sense?" If what he reads doesn't make sense, he needs to reread that part, to be sure he did not read words incorrectly. At times your child might read a word incorrectly, substituting a word that does not make sense for the correct word in the sentence. If he reads on and does not realize his mistake, and go back and fix it, he is not thinking about what he is reading. You should stop him and ask, "Did that make sense?" Help him supply the correct word, then have him reread the sentence correctly.
- Every page or so, ask your child to tell you what happened in that part. If done regularly, he will think more about what he is reading since he knows you will be asking.
- While reading a story, the reader should be visualizing the people, places, and actions as they occur in the story, as if he were there or watching it on television.
- If your child is reading a story, you can help him understand it and remember it by reminding him that most stories have a structure. (At school, they call this a story map or story elements.) Stories have characters, setting, a problem or something the character wants, things that happen to try and solve the problem (events), and a resolution. During reading, point out: clues about where and when the story took place (setting); events that lead to solving the problem; did the problem get solved or not (resolution).
- Almost all stories have interesting parts. Take time to discuss these parts and things the characters in the story do. Try and relate things your child has done in the past that are similar to the story events. Ask, "What does that part make you think of?"
- Make your child think by asking "Why" questions. "Why do you think...?" "Why did...?"
- After your child reads, ask him to retell the story mentioning who was in it (characters), where it happened (setting), what the problem was or what the character wanted, what he did to solve the problem (events) and how did it end.
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Helping Your Child Develop Correct Phrasing:

Pausing at the correct times while reading, is critical to understanding what is read. I listen to children read daily and am amazed at how many children who are struggling in reading comprehension read right through periods or pause at the wrong places. Your child should read in chunks just like we talk. A reader should always pause at periods and commas. You should listen as your child reads, and be sure he is reading with correct phrasing, pausing only where he would pause when speaking. his voice should also drop in pitch while reading the last word in a statement sentence and raise at the end of a question. If he does not change the pitch of his voice or pauses at the wrong places, explain his error and have him reread the entire sentence correctly. With such immediate attention from you, your child will very quickly develop a sense of where to pause.

Also, as your child reads, listen and see if he is reading smoothly with expression. If not, have him choose a portion, not more than 1/3 page long. Have him read it over and over until it sounds very smooth and interesting. I tell kids, "Read it until it sounds like a grown-up is reading it, smooth as silk."