Target the Problem: Comprehension

Comprehension is the understanding and interpretation of what is read. To be able to accurately understand written material, children need to be able to (1) decode what they read; (2) make connections between what they read and what they already know; and (3) think deeply about what they have read.

One big part of comprehension is having a sufficient vocabulary, or knowing the meanings of enough words. Readers who have strong comprehension are able to draw conclusions about what they read – what is important, what is a fact, what caused an event to happen, which characters are funny. Thus comprehension involves combining reading with thinking and reasoning.

What the problem looks like

A kid's perspective: What this feels like to me

Children will usually express their frustration and difficulties in a general way, with statements like "I hate reading!" or "This is stupid!". But if they could, this is how kids might describe how comprehension difficulties in particular affect their reading:

- It takes me so long to read something. It's hard to follow along with everything going on.
- I didn't really get what that book was about.
- Why did that character do that? I just don't get it!
- I'm not sure what the most important parts of the book were.
- I couldn't really create an image in my head of what was going on.

A parent's perspective: What I see at home

Here are some clues for parents that a child may have problems with comprehension:

- She's not able to summarize a passage or a book.
- He might be able to tell you what happened in a story, but can't explain why events went the

way they did.

- She can't explain what a character's thoughts or feelings might have been.
- He doesn't link events in a book to similar events from another book or from real life.

A teacher's perspective: What I see in the classroom

Here are some clues for teachers that a student may have problems with comprehension:

- He seems to focus on the "wrong" aspect of a passage; for example, he concentrates so much on the details that the main idea is lost.
- She can tell the outcome of a story, but cannot explain why things turned out that way.
- He does not go behind what is presented in a book to think about what might happen next or why characters took the action they did.
- She brings up irrelevant information when trying to relate a passage to something in her own life.
- He seems to have a weak vocabulary.
- She cannot tell the clear, logical sequence of events in a story.
- He does not pick out the key facts from informational text.
- He cannot give you a "picture" of what's going on in a written passage; for example, what the characters look like or details of where the story takes place.

How to help

With the help of parents and teachers, kids can learn strategies to cope with comprehension problems that affect his or her reading. Below are some tips and specific things to do.

What kids can do to help themselves

- Use outlines, maps, and notes when you read.
- Make flash cards of key terms you might want to remember.
- Read stories or passages in short sections and make sure you know what happened before you continue reading.
- Ask yourself, "Does this make sense?" If it doesn't, reread the part that didn't make sense.
- Read with a buddy. Stop every page or so and take turns summarizing what you've read.
- Ask a parent or teacher to preview a book with you before you read it on your own.

- As you read, try to form mental pictures or images that match the story.

What parents can do to help at home

- Hold a conversation and discuss what your child has read. Ask your child probing questions about the book and connect the events to his or her own life. For example, say "I wonder why that girl did that?" or "How do you think he felt? Why?" and "So, what lesson can we learn here?".
- Help your child make connections between what he or she reads and similar experiences he has felt, saw in a movie, or read in another book.
- Help your child monitor his or her understanding. Teach her to continually ask herself whether she understands what she's reading.
- Help your child go back to the text to support his or her answers.
- Discuss the meanings of unknown words, both those he reads and those he hears.
- Read material in short sections, making sure your child understands each step of the way.
- Discuss what your child has learned from reading informational text such as a science or social studies book.

What teachers can do to help at school

- As students read, ask them open-ended questions such as "Why did things happen that way?" or "What is the author trying to do here?" and "Why is this somewhat confusing?".
- Teach students the structure of different types of reading material. For instance, narrative texts usually have a problem, a highpoint of action, and a resolution to the problem. Informational texts may describe, compare and contrast, or present a sequence of events.
- Discuss the meaning of words as you go through the text. Target a few words for deeper teaching, really probing what those words mean and how they can be used.
- Teach note-taking skills and summarizing strategies.
- Use graphic organizers that help students break information down and keep tack of what they read.
- Encourage students to use and revisit targeted vocabulary words.
- Teach students to monitor their own understanding. Show them how, for example, to ask themselves "What's unclear here?" or "What information am I missing?" and "What else should the author be telling me?".
- Teach children how to make predictions and how to summarize.

Browse our comprehension resource library

Learn more about helping children strengthen their reading comprehension and critical thinking skills through our articles, tips for parents, video, FAQs, and research briefs. Visit our Comprehension section ›