

Helping your child with comprehension

Comprehension is the ability to understand something.

Research has shown that children need to be taught how to comprehend as there is a range of ways of doing this and they do not come naturally. If these comprehension strategies are taught well the reader becomes able to use them subconsciously, that is without thinking.

At Beacon Hill we teach the strategies explicitly and refer to them as Comprehension Keys. By using the keys readers are able to unlock the meaning of what they are reading.

You may find that your child has been assessed as having a higher decoding age than their comprehension age. Their decoding age refers to their ability to read the words written on a page. Their comprehension age gives the level of text that they can understand, talk about and evaluate. **If your child can understand a text they can learn from it and importantly truly enjoy it.** There are several reasons why your child may not be able to understand what they are reading as well as they should, but the important thing is that by introducing them to the skills they need this problem can be solved.

The aim of this short booklet is to give you a deeper understanding of some of the comprehension skills that your child needs to be able to use. Good readers have to be able to understand on a literal level, the most simple level of understanding, but also apply what they have read, make inferences and deductions.

What is literal comprehension?

Literal comprehension is the ability to recall information that is directly written in the text. For example, read this extract from Sarah Brennan's 'The Tale of Chester Choi':

"There was a Chinese dragon
His name was Chester Choi
When Chester Choi grew hungry
He'd eat a little boy
Though sometimes in the evening
When all was dark and quiet
He'd eat a little girl instead
To brighten up his diet."

Questions to check your literal comprehension could include...

What is the dragon's name? What does he do at night time? Why does he eat little girls?

How can you help your child with literal comprehension?

- Ask lots of "What? When? Who?" type questions during and after reading.
- Encourage your child to retell.
- Ask your child to create a movie script of an extract of what they have just read.
- Encourage your child to ask you questions about what they have read, this will let you know what they have remembered from the book.

Reorganisation

What is reorganisation comprehension?

This type of comprehension involves your child using the information in the text to deduce meaning. To do this they have to use information from several places in the text and bring this together to form an answer that they can give evidence for. This is an extension of literal comprehension.

For example, in the following text you have to get information from two sentences to know what day it is.

“The girls always met at the club on a Thursday as there was an exercise class there that they both enjoyed. But three days later, Anne still hadn’t seen her friend.”

By combining the two sentences the reader knows it is Sunday.

Or, in this extract from Bruce Parry’s ‘Tribe’:

“In the morning we left the vehicles behind and set off on foot, down a wide, overgrown logging track. Despite the help, I carried my own gear: I like to be self sufficient and I enjoy the exercise once I get going. Annoyingly, I was tremendously out of shape.”

If you were asked “Why did he feel out of shape?” you have to combine the information from the last sentence with the previous two; “because he is exercising by carrying his own bags along a path”.

Reorganisation is also a necessary skill when reading a lot of nonfiction material such as timetables, charts and maps.

How can you help your child develop their ability to reorganise?

- Help your child become familiar with the way a range of texts work. Encourage them to read nonfiction, fiction, magazines and newspaper articles. The features of different types of text are explained in the ‘Writing Press’ on the Floating Island in Reading Eggspress.
- Let them read the timetables and maps when you are out and about at the weekend.
- Chop up newspaper or magazine articles into different parts. Ask your child to read the parts and put it in order.
- Help your child to understand how to use personal (he, she, it), impersonal (this, that) and possessive (my, his) pronouns correctly. Try the games on BrainPop (access this through The Beacon and search pronouns) or <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/ks1/literacy/pronouns/play/> also provides good practise.
- Give your child some post it tags and ask them to pick out all the things in a chapter of their book which describe the setting or a particular character.

Inferential comprehension

What is inferential comprehension?

This is a much harder type of comprehension because it involves gaining meaning from something that is not directly written in the text. It is about reading between the lines and using the information that is there **and** your own background knowledge to understand.

It can be quite simple, for example you are using inference in the following text when you realise that the pronoun “he” is referring to James. You are also using inference when you realise that it is most probably cold outside.

“James leaned over and opened the curtains. He sighed and headed to the cupboard where he stood balanced precariously on tip toe to find his woollen gloves, hat and rubber boots.”

You also inferred if you realised that James is probably not happy about the weather because he sighed.

However, inferential comprehension may also be quite complicated and involve you understanding a message that the author is trying to get across through their choice of vocabulary or a character’s actions. Here is another example,

“For the third night in a row, Zac cried himself to sleep. He had never been happy since he moved into Year 6 a month ago. But, now that Bruiser and his cronies had started singling Zac out, it was worse than ever.”

Questions that would require you to use inference would be:

Was Zac happier at school when he was younger? The answer being yes, he had only been unhappy since he moved into Year 6.

Or... How recently had Zac started feeling worse about school? The answer being a few days- he has been crying for three nights in a row,

How can you help your child develop their ability to infer?

- Encourage your child to make predictions and discuss what they already know about a text before and during reading. Your child’s ability to successfully infer will have a lot to do with their ability to understand vocabulary and their background knowledge.
- Ask lots of “Why?” and “How do you know?” questions.
- Use the ‘think aloud’ strategy to model to your child how you infer. Teachers do this a lot when reading with their class. As you read explain to your child why you think what you do about a text. Using the first example above, you might say something like “I think James is not that happy about the weather outside because he sighed and I do that when I am a bit sad or bored. Maybe James is a little boy or short because he had to stretch up to reach the cupboard or perhaps the gloves were on a top shelf.”
- Encourage your child to visualise and make a movie of what they are reading in their head. Use audio stories and keep reading to your child to encourage them to do this to.
- Discuss what new vocabulary might mean based on what has already been read, the context, **before** reaching for a dictionary.

Evaluation

What is evaluation?

This is probably one of the hardest types of comprehension as it involves your child using both inference and reorganisation. They have to look at the text, identify key words and draw conclusions about what they have read. They may also be asked to explain “Why do you think that?”. This type of comprehension requires your child to discuss what they have read in detail and make judgements.

The idea is that your child analyses what they have written and suggests an idea that is only hinted at. When they are answering a “Why do you think that?” they need to use the information given in the text and **not just** their personal view. They will often need to imagine that they are the author and try to decide what an author’s intention was in writing the way they did. This is sometimes called “reading like a writer’.

For example, in the extract used earlier:

“For the third night in a row, Zac cried himself to sleep. He had never been happy since he moved into Year 6 a month ago. But, now that Bruiser and his cronies had started singling Zac out, it was worse than ever.”

An evaluation question would be “What sort of person is Bruiser?”. By looking carefully at the text we can see that the author has implied that Bruiser is a bully by his choice of name, the fact he has “cronies” not friends and that he has been “singling out” Zac, another way of saying picking on.

Another example...

“The water had now moved from the mouth of the cave and they had to move their bags further in to stop them getting wet. Mum’s expression changed from one of worry to near panic. This wasn’t good, without a torch how would they know the way out?”

A question that requires you to evaluate is “Why is mum starting to panic?”

How can you help your child develop their ability to evaluate?

- Play guessing games where the thing, person or animal is not named but your child can ask questions to gain clues. Sometimes called “20 questions” this game will encourage your child to evaluate the information they are hearing.
- Talk about an event, object or topic without using it’s name. Can your child evaluate the information to identify what is being talked about?
- Ensure that your child is familiar with pronouns and does not confuse he, she and they. (Some related websites are mentioned on the reorganisation page.)
- Encourage them to pick out key words in response to “How do you know that?” questions.
- Stop at a point in a fiction text where a character has made a decision. Discuss why that decision was made and what it suggests about the character and the sort of person they are.