

Five Strategies to Increase Reading Comprehension with Your Child With Special Needs

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Many parents of children with special needs are working to increase reading comprehension with their child. It's not uncommon for children with special needs to struggle with understanding what a story (or even a paragraph) is about, who the main characters are, what the setting is, what the problem or moral is, and/or what the function of a story is. How do you help?

My Favorite Five

There are hundreds of strategies that can help your child gain a better understanding of literature. In this article I'm going to discuss the five strategies I've found to be most beneficial in increasing reading comprehension:

- breaking the material into very small chunks;
- connecting the story to a real-life situation or emotion;
- making reading multisensory through audio books, DVDs, or being read to
- connecting to literature through art; and
- the need for repetition.

Read in Small Chunks

Developing reading comprehension skills goes beyond simply reading a story at bedtime; it requires you to be much more engaged and interactive. It is best to stop reading after 1-2 pages to discuss what has happened so far, who is in the story, where the story is taking place, and what your child thinks might happen next.

- Ask your child questions to evoke responses and promote engagement in the story.
- If your son or daughter doesn't know the answer or seems confused, point to the text and/or pictures that give clues to how your question might be answered.
- As you are going through the story or chapter, stop often and ask new questions as well as questions you have already asked to check for retention.
- If the retention is poor, flip back to where you first discussed that item.



With this method, you may only get through a small section of the chapter or book, but that is okay if you are working on comprehension rather than fluency. Progress for comprehension is determined by how much children take away from the story each time they read, so this is more of a marathon than a sprint.

Connect the Story to Real Life

Helping children connect to something in the story through a real-life situation or an emotion they've felt makes it much more likely that they'll comprehend and remember the story. Many of us automatically make connections to our own life while reading; this skill

gets developed and refined over time. To help your child develop this skill, ask questions such as:

- “What does that remind you of?”
- “Do you know anyone who has done that/felt that way?”
- “What happened last week that made you feel like that?”
- “Have you ever been to (the setting)? What did you do there?”
- “How do you think (a character) feels? Why do you think (he/she/it) feels that way?”

These types of questions can help build the bridge to better understanding, because they build a *personal* connection.

Involve the Senses

Many children with special needs learn best in a multisensory format. Even if children can read the text, those who struggle with reading comprehension are better off listening to a story than reading it to themselves. For some children, listening to an audio book while they follow along is very helpful, because they’re getting the visual input from the text (including the pictures, if there are any), and they’re hearing the text.

Many children’s books are also on DVD, and seeing the text acted out may draw another form of connection for your child. Check with your local library or your school librarian to see what’s available.

If your child enjoys art—coloring, drawing, using clay or play-dough, or doing crafts—creating things along the way or as a final project can also increase reading comprehension. This is another multisensory strategy that helps many children connect the content of the visual book through the tactile senses. I have had children of all ages do tactile projects as a way to summarize text. Many children also find this much more engaging than simply discussing a book or writing about a book.

Repeat the Reading

Repetition is critical in the learning process of many children with special needs. How many of us when we are reading ourselves have to go back and reread something, because we were distracted or tired or simply needed more time to process the information? Most, if not all, people do this on occasion.

If your brain is somehow impaired by your special learning needs, this re-reading needs to happen multiple times for retention to occur. With my early learners, I reread the same book every day for an entire week to help them integrate different concepts. A few children will comment that we’ve already read this book, but most are happy to go back through it; it helps them connect to the text. For more advanced learners I always ask them to do a summary of what has already happened in the story before we move on to new content.

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