

How to Help a Child Who Struggles With Reading Comprehension

A child can read every word on a page and still have trouble explaining what the text means. Reading comprehension depends on more than accurate word reading. Vocabulary, background knowledge, attention to important ideas, and the ability to notice when meaning breaks down all matter. Start by finding the point where understanding becomes difficult. Ask your child to read a short section and tell you, in his or her own words, what it was mostly about. If the words themselves are hard to read, the difficulty may involve decoding or fluency as well as comprehension; share that observation with the teacher. If the words are read accurately but the meaning is unclear, slow the task down. Preview the topic, explain one or two unfamiliar words, and read in short sections. After each section, ask one useful question: “What is the most important thing we learned here?” or “Why did that happen?” Encourage your child to look back at the text before answering. The What Works Clearinghouse recommends building word and world knowledge, asking and answering questions, identifying the gist, and monitoring understanding.¹ For younger readers, evidence-based guidance also supports explicitly teaching comprehension strategies and helping children notice text structure.² At home, model the thinking once, then transfer the work back to the child: “I lost the meaning there, so I’m going to reread that sentence. What can you try when something stops making sense?” Reading Rockets similarly recommends monitoring understanding, discussing unknown words, summarizing, and returning to the text for evidence.³ Keep practice brief. Praise the strategy, not just the answer. If difficulty remains persistent across different kinds of reading, bring examples to the teacher and ask what the school is seeing.

Did You Know?

- ✓ The What Works Clearinghouse recommends questioning, identifying the gist, building knowledge, and monitoring understanding as comprehension-building practices.¹
- ✓ IES guidance for K-3 readers supports direct instruction in comprehension strategies and using text structure to support understanding.²
- ✓ Reading Rockets recommends helping children notice when meaning breaks down and use strategies such as rereading, questioning, and summarizing.³

Research Sources

- ¹ Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. “Providing Reading Interventions for Students in Grades 4–9.” Released March 2022.
- ² Institute of Education Sciences, What Works Clearinghouse. “Improving Reading Comprehension in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade.” Released September 2010.
- ³ Reading Rockets. “Reading 101 for Parents: Comprehension.”

Ten-Minute Comprehension Check & Coach

Use this page with one short passage. The goal is to find where meaning breaks down and help your child use one strategy independently.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

Text or book: _____ Page(s): _____

1. Read a Short Section - About 2 Minutes

Choose one manageable paragraph or short section. Have your child read it once without interruption.

Section read: _____

2. Tell the Gist - About 2 Minutes

Ask for the most important idea in the child's own words. Do not supply the answer immediately.

My child says this section is mostly about: _____

3. Find the Evidence - About 2 Minutes

Ask your child to point to one sentence or detail that supports the gist.

The clue or detail we found: _____

4. Fix One Confusing Spot - About 2 Minutes

If something did not make sense, choose one strategy and try it.

What was confusing: _____

Strategy: ☐ Reread ☐ Word meaning ☐ Make a connection ☐ Ask a question

5. Transfer the Strategy - About 2 Minutes

Name what worked, then give the strategy back to the child for the next section.

What Parents Can Say: "You figured out _____."

Next time I get stuck, I will: _____