Skills for School Success

# Reading for Meaning

*Ways Families Can Help Their Children Do Better in School*

THE PARENT INSTITUTE®

# Reading for Meaning Is a Vital Skill for School Success!

Ask education leaders about the skills students need for academic achievement, and the first skill most will mention is reading.

Experts say families should begin reading to and with their children from the time they are infants—and continue all through the school years.

Having lots of reading material around while children are growing up—books, magazines, newspapers, letters, catalogs—helps them in many ways.

Being surrounded by words makes children comfortable with language. It teaches them that words have meaning. Words stimulate the brain and lay the foundation for thinking and learning throughout life.

But just learning to read is not enough to ensure school success. Children must learn to find the *meaning* in the text. Only then can they put what they read to best use—and get the most out of school.

# You Can Help Your Child With Reading at Home

Of course, schools teach reading skills in class. But your child spends far more time at home than at school. Home is where some of the very best learning takes place!

This booklet is filled with ideas for ways you can help your child read for meaning. You'll also find fun and interesting ways to practice these skills every day.

## You Can Make a Difference

To encourage reading at home and guide your child on the road to reading success, start by eliminating these common barriers:

- **Recreational screen overload.** Mindless hours spent passively watching digital devices rob your child of time that could be spent reading. Limiting and redirecting screen use is a great way to start improving your child's reading skills. And it's not as hard as you might think.
- **Lack of access to reading material.** Put regular library visits on your family calendar. It's the least expensive way to promote reading. Your child will always have something to read, and you'll send the message that reading is a priority for the whole family.

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# Get Screen Time Under Your Control

Studies show that children who spend too much time on the wrong screen activities don't read as well as those whose families set limits. Try these ideas to manage screen time:

- **Issue tickets.** Try giving your child tickets, each good for 30 minutes of screen activities. (You can still veto certain shows, video games and websites.) When the tickets are gone, the devices are turned off for the week unless needed for schoolwork. Your child can redeem unused tickets for another reward, such as reading time with you.
- **Choose screen activities that involve reading**—then, participate with your child. Share an article and talk about what you read. Play a spelling game together. Just don't let online reading take the place of print—research shows that children understand and retain more when reading physical books and materials.
- **Keep a screen use log.** Ask your child to write down all screen activities for a week in a special notebook. When your child sees how much time is involved, it may be a shock. Planning wise screen use is easier with a log.
- **Make a weekly media plan.** Sit down with your child to make a written media plan for the coming week. Selecting specific activities and a reasonable amount of time to spend with devices *on purpose* makes sense to most children.

Remember, a great way to overcome digital "withdrawal" is to have lots of attractive and interesting books and other reading materials handy. Convenience is a big reason kids choose activities.

# Are You a Reading Role Model for Your Child?

Most families have learned that children "do as you do" far more than they "do as you say." As the old saying goes, "Actions speak louder than words."

And so it is with reading. The example you set for your child in reading is one of the most influential things you can ever do. Take the following quiz to see how well you are meeting your "reading model" responsibilities.

Answer *yes* or *no* to each statement below:

## Parent Quiz

1. **My child sees me reading** *something* every day.
2. **I explain the different reasons I'm reading:** to find information, to relax, to learn something new.
3. **I show my child how I read to learn**—by looking in an index, reading section headings, taking notes, etc.
4. **I talk with my child** about what I'm reading and why I think reading is important.
5. **My child and I often read** things aloud to each other.

## How Did You Do?

If you answered mostly *yes,* you're modeling great reading habits for your child. Mostly *no*? Try some of the ideas in the quiz.

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# Encourage Your Child's Interest in Reading

Neither schools nor families can help students learn the all-important skills of reading for meaning if children are not interested in reading in the first place.

Even if your child loves reading and reads all the time, it still helps if you can make reading more fun. Here are some effective ideas you can use right now:

- **Start a family book club.** The only thing better than a good book is talking about it with someone else. The club's first meeting could be a trip to the library. Make it an adventure, with each family member "scouting" for a book to read. Be sure everyone has their own library cards.

  After the books have been read, schedule a club meeting. Allow family members to talk about their books. Was it interesting or disappointing? Why? You'll find it's a great way to encourage thinking about reading—and to learn about your child.

- **Pounce on your child's interests!** Did your child see something fascinating online?

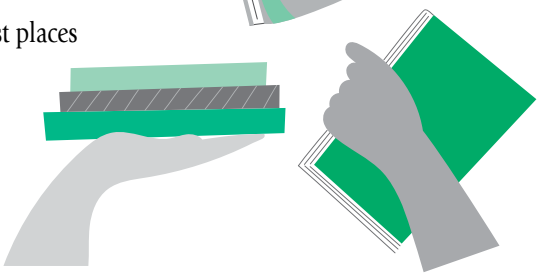
  No matter what the topic, your child can find out more about it in a book, magazine or news article. The secret is to help your child explore the interest as soon as possible.

- **Keep a book handy.** Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook,* suggests keeping a book in your car, in your bag or on the shelf. Just as you'd prepare for a natural disaster by making sure you have food and a flashlight on hand, Trelease says you should prepare for unexpected periods of time.

  When you're in a long line at the store, pull out something to read. If you have to wait to see the doctor, hand your child a book. When it's raining outside and "there's nothing to do," a book can be your secret weapon. You'll have your child reading more—and loving it.

- **Organize a neighborhood book swap.** Admission: one book to trade. Everyone can leave with a new book.

- **Start a list** of "the craziest places I've ever read." The novelty of reading in unusual places makes reading even more fun and encourages reading anytime. Your child might list the park, under the stairs, the attic, etc.



- **Give books as gifts.** There's no better way to show that books are important to you than to give books as gifts. Birthdays, the beginning or end of the school year, Thanksgiving, religious holidays, the first day of a new season—there's always a good time to give a book!

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# Help Your Child Build 'Reading for Meaning' Skills

Has your child ever read a page, gotten to the bottom and said, "I don't have a clue about what I read"?

It's probably not that your child couldn't read the words. Your child simply didn't absorb them.

Here are some tips for helping children understand and retain reading material:

## Before Your Child Starts Reading:

- **Scan the story** together for challenging words.
- **Review the meaning** of these words with your child.
- **Discuss the general theme** of the story.
- **Have your child relate** the theme to personal experiences. Is it like anything your child has done or seen?
- **Select a variety** of reading material. Don't limit reading to school texts. Choose picture books, biographies, poems, graphic novels, mysteries, science fiction and more!
- **Build background knowledge.** Visit new places, talk about new ideas. A bigger base of knowledge helps children understand more of what they read.

## While Your Child Is Reading:

- **Sound it out.** Encourage your child to decode difficult words carefully rather than guessing.
- **Identify the setting.** Talk about the "where" and "when." If it is a real place, find it on a map.
- **Check for accuracy.** Ensure your child reads the words correctly so the meaning stays clear.

## After Your Child Has Finished Reading:

- **Summarize.** Ask for the main idea. What was the author trying to say?
- **Identify the facts.** Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
- **Follow the logical sequence of events.** What happened first?
- **Make inferences.** This means "reading between the lines." Ask your child to find evidence in the text to prove a point.
- **Check for understanding.** Ask, "Did any part of the story confuse you?"
- **Wait for answers.** Give your child plenty of time to think.
- **Get an opinion.** If your child liked the book, find similar ones together.

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# Help Your Child Make Predictions and Inferences

Strong readers predict and infer as they read. Inferring means reading between the lines—figuring out what the author means but doesn't come right out and say. They also find evidence (words or sentences) in reading material to support their predictions and inferences. Encourage your child to think about questions like these:

- **"What do I predict** will happen next?" "Which details in the story make me think that?"
- **"What is the author's point?"** "Can I find evidence to support it?"
- **"How were the characters** affected by one another's actions?" "Which details make me think that?"

# It Helps to Take Notes

Some children can read an assignment once and "ace" the test. But for most, one quick reading isn't enough. Taking notes can help students find and remember the meaning of what they read. To take notes while reading, have your child:

- **Write down just** the important points. These are often found in the introduction, headings, **boldface** type, the summary and the questions at the end of the chapter.
- **Include key details.** Jot down the most important details the author gives to support arguments.
- **Create flash cards.** Write a question or key word on the front of each card and the answer or definition on the back.
- **Record study notes.** Have your child make an audio recording of notes or questions while reading. Saying the ideas out loud helps fix the key points in your child's mind, and listening to the recording is also an effective way to review.

# What If It Just Doesn't Make Sense?

Try these suggestions when your child reads and says in frustration, "I just don't understand it!"

- **Check the decoding.** Ask your child to read a paragraph aloud. If your child is stumbling over lots of words, switch to shared reading: You read a sentence, and then your child reads a sentence.
- **Bridge the knowledge gap.** Confusion often stems from a lack of background information. Briefly explain the topic or watch a short video together to build understanding.
- **Reread for fluency.** Encourage your child to read the same page twice.
- **Use visual aids.** Look at diagrams and captions.

# Build Vocabulary

A strong vocabulary can help your child comprehend reading material because many of the words will be familiar. To build vocabulary before, during and after reading, your child can:

- **Look up boldface words** before reading a chapter. Knowing the definitions will make the material easier to understand.
- **Keep a list of new words** encountered in the reading. Encourage your child to use the words in conversation to help their meanings stick.
- **Analyze word parts,** such as roots, prefixes and suffixes. Knowing common word parts can help students figure out the meanings of longer words.
- **Read other materials** on the same topic. Seeing the same words in different contexts can cement them in the brain. Plus, these materials may introduce additional new words related to the topic.

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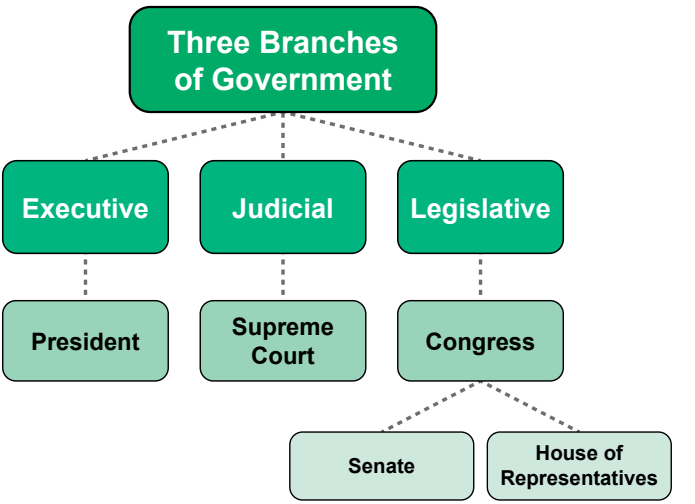
# Use a Reading 'Map' to Make the Meaning Clear

When you want to find a store in another town or a trail in the park, you probably use a map. That same approach can help your child navigate through a reading assignment.

Suppose your child is reading about the three branches of government while studying for a test.

Have your child:

1. **Skim the assignment** by reading it over quickly. Look at the pictures and read the captions and headlines. Check the summary at the end.
2. **Tell you about all the information** that is included. Did it describe the responsibilities of each branch, the number of members and how the members are selected?
3. **Make a map of the information.** The map should show both the main ideas and important supporting details. Your child can fill in more details while reading. Later, this map can be a helpful study aid.



# Use Writing to Find Meaning in Reading

Writing can help your child make sense of reading material. Have your child:

- **Pretend to be a character** in the story and write a letter the character might send.
- **Write a different ending** for the story.
- **Imagine a favorite character** from another book suddenly appears in this story. Your child might write about what might happen if, say, Stuart Little showed up in *Charlotte's Web.*
- **Write what might happen** after the story has ended.

Just thinking about a reading assignment in a different way can help make the meaning clearer.

# Reading Aloud Helps With Comprehension

Try reading a new story aloud to your child. Stop at an exciting point. Then, ask questions: "What do you think will happen next?" "How do you think the main character feels right now?" "Are you surprised at what has happened so far?" "What would you do if you were in the story?"

All these questions teach your child to look for the important points in the story and to make predictions based upon them. Both are important skills in reading for meaning.

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# Finding Key Information Builds Reading Skills

## Use Advertising

Is there something your child has always wanted? Suggest checking ads in circulars, catalogs or online for a few days. Point out how prices and listings vary. Ask which appear to be the best buys.

## Check Food Labels

Practice in interpreting food and beverage labels will do more than improve reading. It might improve your child's eating habits as well. Ask questions like:

- **How big** is a serving?
- **How many calories** per serving?
- **What foods** have the highest sugar content?

## Use Do-It-Yourself Kits

Instead of ready-made toys, give kits as gifts. The desire to make something can give your child practice in reading for meaning and following directions exactly.

One of the greatest gifts families can give children is the love of reading and the ability to find the meaning in what they read.

Yes, students do learn a lot in school, but there is no substitute for what they can learn from you at home.

**"Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body."**

—Sir Richard Steele, 1672–1729

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