

reading for meaning

By Mary Ashby-Green*

Here are three easy and fun things you can do at home to help your child better understand the message in the text they are reading.

Your child may be reading but not taking much notice of the actual meaning behind the words. (This is known at school as 'reading comprehension'.) To truly be a good reader and to learn from what they are reading, your child needs to learn how to 'read for meaning'. So, how do we help them better understand the message in the text?

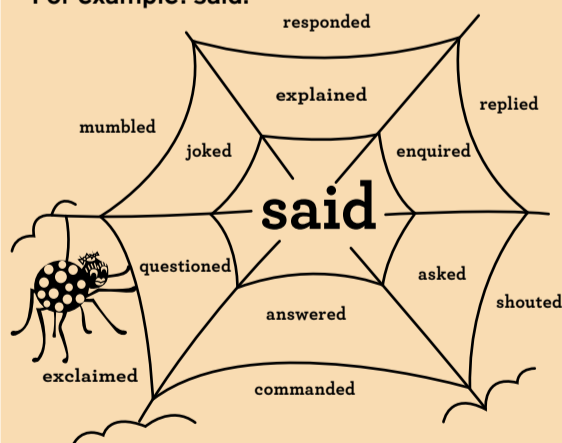
1 word web

Focusing on one aspect (e.g., vocabulary) to heighten their awareness of the meaning of words will increase their attention to other details as well.

Here's an activity that's always fun in a classroom and works even better at home. Create a Word Web and see how many words you can catch each day.

Choose one word to write in the centre and then set about finding synonyms to add.

For example: **said**.



Make your web big and keep it going for a few days. You can set up a points system to acknowledge when you hear the new words being spoken or written. When you are reading with your child, be on the lookout for the words as they appear in print.

You can also create a Family Word Web and select a word for a week. See how many words you can come up with, as a family, which are more descriptive. Set up a points system and see who can use those words in conversation.

2 make and break words, sentences, paragraphs

Here's another technique to help children be specific about reading purposefully. But keep in mind that it's better to keep it fun and stick to just one or two sentences, as the main aim is for your child to view what they are reading through a different lens.

Take one sentence from the book they are reading, write it on a sheet of paper and then cut up the words. Read out the sentence and ask your child to arrange the words in a sentence. Write punctuation marks like full stops and question marks on separate pieces of paper so your child can place them correctly. Watching your child do this highlights concepts they don't know and gives you handy incidental teaching moments. What parts were they confident doing? Where did they need your prompts? Let them self-edit and self-correct as much as possible.

With a more capable reader, cut up the sentences from a paragraph. This time, instead of getting them to put the words in the correct order, the spotlight is on making the sentences flow in the correct sequence. This helps develop inferencing skills, as they become more attentive to the unspoken information within the story.

You can use this same technique to help with spelling by cutting up each letter and putting the word back together. It puts the spotlight on where they are having difficulty and it's also useful for learning those tricky words that have irregular spelling (e.g., would). I find that when children can manipulate the letters and move them physically, they learn and retain the information faster and more effortlessly – and it's fun.

3 giving and listening to instructions game

The third way to channel their attention to detail is to play the Instructions game. As a family game, give each child a turn at giving the instructions to simple tasks, such as making toast, cleaning teeth, getting dressed. Limit the number of steps to somewhere between 3–10.

When you are playing with your little ones, pretend you don't know how to do the task and ask them to explain it to you. It is very empowering for them to have you listen to their explanations and they take it very seriously!

It's also very empowering to use this as a strategy with older children. Asking them to explain something and listening with genuine interest (without interruptions or corrections) is a wonderful way to find out about 'their world' and how they view it. Let them be in charge of the conversation for a change. That is, of course, the most powerful way to help expand your child's comprehension – having genuine discussions and conversations where both you and your child listen and learn from each other.

** Mary is a former Acting Principal, who specialised in teaching children with learning and behavioural difficulties. Today, she trains teachers in Jolly Phonics, and she works individually with children who have anxiety about learning, using her NLP training. For more information, go to www.phonics.co.nz*