

Raising a Bright Reader: Playtime for Reading Comprehension

by Sonali Bhagat, M.S., CCC-SLP and Mae Carlson, M.S., CCC-SLP

In sixth grade, my class was reading *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. My friend, who was sitting with me in our reading group, began to cry softly when Billy's dog dies. Hearing sniffles, I looked up surprised and thought, "If only I understood the book as well as she does. If only I felt sad about Billy and his dog." I didn't really feel anything. Years later, it dawned on me: she grew up with dogs and I did not.

Today, children are learning to read at much younger ages than children did twenty years ago. Yet in our culture's push for achievement, well-meaning parents often do their children a disservice by focusing on fluency and decoding components of reading without enough emphasis on foundational comprehension skills. How could I have better understood *Where the Red Fern Grows*? Did I need to have a dog to understand the story? Not necessarily. I needed to have experienced some kind of loss and the ability to make the connection of loss to a new story.

The foundation of reading comprehension skills are built in the "pre-reading" years. However, indications of whether those skills have been developed or not often do not show up until fourth, fifth and sixth grade when children are expected to achieve increasingly higher levels of comprehension. How can you make sure your child builds a solid foundation for reading beyond fluency and decoding skills?

1. Understand how reading comprehension works

We often take for granted the connection between words and thoughts when we read. We assume our children will be smooth sailing readers if they can decode, read fluently and build a strong vocabulary. These skills are important, but reading comprehension, a more complex process, requires readers to elicit meaning from words. Before children can decode, they need to answer questions like, "What could have been another ending?" or "Why did Fernando run away from boarding school?" This kind of thinking in early childhood is critical to being a successful reader in later years.

Comprehension skills are tied with language and cognition. Without the thinking and wondering associated, reading only consists of pronouncing words without understanding what the words mean. Is there any value in this? From the very beginning, we can help children understand that reading is not just pronouncing words on a page. Rather, reading can be defined by gains in understanding.

Secondly, reading comprehension is improved by broadening background knowledge and having experiences from which to draw. While adults can broaden their background knowledge through work experiences and reading newspapers, young children acquire background knowledge through play. One adult might have an easy time reading the business section of a news-



Photo courtesy of Shirley Henderson

paper if she is a businessperson. Another adult might have an easy time enjoying the sports section if he is an avid sports fan. Background knowledge is like a sponge in your child's brain. Imagine pouring words into his brain. Nothing gets soaked up without that sponge.

2. Encourage language-rich, dramatic, pretend play to develop background knowledge

Play is the vehicle to develop the sponge of background knowledge for future success. According to child development specialist J.L. Hymes, "Play for young children is not recreation activity. It is not leisure-time activity. It is language time."

While play can be any activity a child enjoys and willingly engages in, not all play is equal. Language-rich, dramatic, imaginary play is particularly important in developing the foundation for reading comprehension. This type of play has a storyline, characters and problems that need to be solved. Pretending to visit the doctor, for example, requires the child to be creative, assign characters ("Eli will be the doctor and Sophie will be the patient"), think of a scenario ("Sophie broke her leg"), negotiate disagreements ("Eli and Jordan can take turns being the doctor"), engage in a dialogue, anticipate what happens next, and deal with a situation that does not go as planned ("Uh oh, Sophie's leg still hurts"). By contrast, a child who sits down with a fire truck and is asked to push a button to hear the truck make noise doesn't have to do anything with language or planning.

Play allows children to gain experiences that they may not get in their everyday life. A young boy in the Midwest can discover what it might be like to be a seafaring pirate. He can use props and pretend objects to develop his language skills and invent a story. In a study conducted in the desert region of Australia, children were unable to understand the concept of a truck getting stuck in the mud. Living in a dry climate, they had no experience with mud. But through play, they could make mud, play with trucks in the mud, and understand a foreign concept. This level of play helps children gain perspective and experience that increases their world knowledge and by turn gives them a deeper understanding of reading material.

3. Schedule unscheduled play time

While organized activities (i.e., dance class, soccer practice, and practicing flashcards) are certainly valuable ways to have children spend time, free playtime is just as important for your child's development. Free play allows children to be creative and spontaneous. Parents can support creative play by providing a variety of play materials to foster imagination, e.g., dress up clothes, domestic playthings (a kitchen, store, washer/dryer, car, tools, or doctor kit), and items that can be used creatively (recycled cereal boxes, paper towel rolls, oatmeal bins, tissue paper, rubber bands, and paper clips).

4. Encourage self-directed play and intervene only when your child seems lost

Self-directed play means you give your child plenty of room to make up his own scenarios, make critical decisions and solve problems on his own. When your child seems lost or play isn't moving forward, give a bit of direction instead of making decisions for him. For example, if you're playing doctor and you are the patient and your child doesn't know what to do next, you might say, "I fell off my bike" or "I fell off my bike and now my arm hurts." Wait for your child's response. Instead of suggesting that you have a broken arm, this kind of guidance gives your child a chance to take the next step on his own.

5. Read picture books with your child as late as third grade

Even when a child is reading chapter books fluently, more advanced picture books remain a critical component of reading comprehension as late as third grade. With picture books, children will be able to understand the full context of a story and will therefore be able to answer more complex questions that develop critical thinking skills. In fact, the illustrations in picture books will often give clues to help children grasp a more complex understanding of the story.

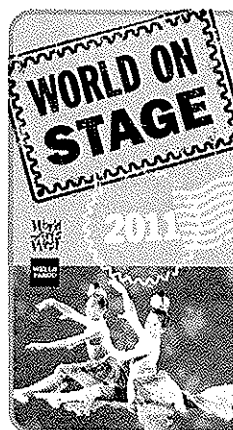
When you read a picture book aloud with your child, try the tips listed here:

- Look at the emotions depicted on a character's face. You might say, "I think she looks scared," and then wait to see how your child responds.
- Point to the picture of a pig covered in mud next to a clean basket of laundry. You might say, "I wonder what will happen next."
- Ask, "Why did the boy go back to get the sheep?" to help your child analyze emotion.

What does all this play and picture book reading add up to? Your child will develop the foundation for reading comprehension skills including: prediction skills, critical thinking skills, cause and effect relationships, sequencing, identifying character motivations, identifying multiple perspectives, identifying conflict in the plot of the story and its resolution, creating alternate endings, and answering open-ended questions.

Imagine your child in sixth grade taking a STAR (standardized) test with a question about the poem "Casey at the Bat." Will he be ready to answer, "How might Casey have felt when he stepped up to bat?" Prepare him by cutting back on a lesson or two and giving him lots of time to play.

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