

Teaching your child how to learn



“BUT I HAVE HEARD THAT YOU CAN GIVE INTERPRETATIONS AND SOLVE PROBLEMS. NOW IF YOU CAN READ THE WRITING AND MAKE KNOWN TO ME ITS INTERPRETATION, YOU SHALL BE CLOTHED WITH PURPLE AND HAVE A CHAIN OF GOLD AROUND YOUR NECK AND SHALL BE THE THIRD RULER IN THE KINGDOM” (DANIEL 5:16).

King Belshazzar had some serious reading comprehension issues. Mysterious writing appeared on his wall. He could probably decode it, but he didn't know what it meant. He called in the experts, but they were not wise enough to bring meaning to the words. God gave Daniel the power of comprehension, and Daniel gave King Belshazzar the bad news.

In the first few years of school, the focus for reading instruction is on decoding words. Somewhere around third grade, the need for thorough comprehension becomes the primary focus. From this point on, students do more reading for each subject and, with each passing year need to understand and remember more of what they read. This can present a serious stumbling block for many children and shows itself in grades that gradually slide down from year to year.

What readers need is meta-cognition: thinking about learning. This means a child is able to monitor what is being read and knows if the text makes sense. A child who does not monitor well can read an entire chapter in a social studies text and not learn

anything new. A child that does monitor well will gain the maximum information from the text. Meta-cognition is a huge part of self-regulation and is evidence of active learning.

Learning to monitor comprehension does not happen naturally. Most children learn it by trial and error, but all children can benefit from being specifically taught how to do it. Your child may be learning these techniques already at school. If you model them at home, you will help your child improve as a learner.

A technique called reciprocal teaching is the model for many comprehension activities. It is a well-researched technique and easy to use. It is most effective when you are working with a child one-on-one.

Reciprocal teaching is basically conversation between an adult and a child about what is being read. Practicing this technique helps children develop organization and memory skills. In this activity, you teach your child to (1) summarize, (2) question, (3) clarify and (4) predict. These steps help children to find important information, remember it, and

learn to use it, all while making sure they really understand what they are reading.

Let's see how this works using a Bible story example:

1. Sit down with your child and read the story of The Good Samaritan. If your child is not reading yet or is a beginner, use a good Bible-story book. If your child is older, read the story from Scripture (Luke 10:25–37).
2. Summarize the story in your own words and ask your child to do the same. Pay attention to the details your child remembers, because this gives an indication of her level of comprehension. If she doesn't get the important details or can't finish the story, suggest she go back and reread to find out "what happened next."
3. Question each other on the story. Your child will probably concentrate on details, for example "Who walked past the injured man first?" These questions are easy because learners identify details before broader concepts. You can expand your child's level of comprehension by asking tougher questions, such as "Why did the Samaritan help instead of going past the wounded man?" Allow time to respond. These answers do not come without thinking. Ask him to explain his answer to get an even better understanding of his comprehension level or to encourage further thinking.
4. Clarify any troublesome areas by asking if anything needs to be explained. If your child does not have questions, then it is good to bring up something in the form of an "I wonder" question, such as "I wonder what the priest and the Levite were thinking when they passed the wounded man." In this case, you might ask older children how the Samaritan was like Jesus. This teaches



your child to make sure that all aspects of the reading are clear. Poor students are content to live with confusion; good students look for things that need explanation.

5. Predict what will happen next. When children make predictions, they create a way to remember what happens. With a Bible story, it can be good to predict what you would have done if you had been there: "Would it have been easy to stop and help the man? Why or why not?"

It may not always seem like it, but children pay close attention to what parents model as being important. When children use these five comprehension techniques, they participate in their own learning. This will help them remember information better and find ways to use the information in other settings. Now that is real learning!

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For Discussion:

- ▶ What strategies do you use to remember and understand what you have read?
- ▶ Do you remember at what point in your life you began to understand that reading was more than figuring out the word?
- ▶ What is a reading strength your child demonstrates? How can you use that to help him or her with reading needs?
- ▶ How do you study the Bible? Are there techniques you use that you can share with your children?

For Further Study:

- ▶ Reciprocal teaching: www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/atrisk/at6lk38.htm
- ▶ More comprehension strategies: www.readingrockets.org/article/3479