

Why reading to your child is so important

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Reading and talking about stories with your child can be really enjoyable and a lovely bonding activity. Stories also introduce children to a wide variety of words; many more than they will hear in their day to day life and researchers have found that children who are read to more often have a wider vocabulary. Therefore reading books with your child is an excellent way to develop and nurture their language skills.

As well as reading the story to your child, talking about it together and asking them questions can really help your child's understanding. Asking questions about what their favourite bits were and why helps them think about the story, and asking them to suggest different story endings helps them to think creatively. On the other hand, discussing the meaning of new and unfamiliar words will enhance your child's vocabulary.

Researchers studying children's ability to understand what they have read often distinguish between different types of comprehension questions: literal, inference and evaluative questions. Asking these different types of questions while you read with your child can be a great way to encourage their language skills and story comprehension.

Literal questions:

These are simple questions where children are asked a fact from within the story (i.e., the information is literally within the text). For example: "What was the pirate's name?" "Can you remember who was on the boat?" "What happened after they got off the boat?" These 'recall' type questions are great for younger readers, but you can also ask more complex literal questions. For example, asking your child to summarise the main idea/events in the story requires them to rephrase the story in their own words. Or asking them to recall comparisons between characters/events/places in the story (e.g., talking about differences between the greedy and generous pirate) allows opportunities for further discussion. Literal questions are a good way of assessing your children's memory and understanding of the story, but for slightly older readers, also introduce inference and evaluative type questions.

Inference questions:

Inference questions need children to look beyond the text and give information that was not specifically provided, but which was implied (i.e., children need to 'read between the lines'). For example, "What do you think happened next?" "Why do you think he did that?" "How do you think the pirate felt when he was left behind?" These questions typically require a greater level of cognitive and language skill than

literal questions (both to know the answer and explain the answer). However, it is a skill that even young children are able to do, if the inference question is appropriate for their age and level of language/cognitive ability.

Evaluative Questions:

Finally, evaluative questions require children to read behind and beyond the lines; that is, evaluate information within the story based on their own personal knowledge and experience. In these types of questions, children should be encouraged to give (and support) their opinion about an aspect of the story (i.e., character, action, event). For example "Do you think he should have done that?" "Do you think the Pirates were very different from each other?"

As a parent or grown-up reading with a child, you are best placed to assess their ability to answer these types of questions. Often this ability is not related to their age, but rather to their language skill and past experience of reading, sharing and discussing books. Take time to think about the questions and discussions that you have with your child as you read with them, but most importantly, enjoy sharing these stories together.

Happy reading!

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