

Skills *for* School Success

Ways Parents Can  
Help Their Children  
Do Better in School

# READING FOR MEANING



THE  
**PARENT**  
INSTITUTE

One of a Series of Booklets for Parents

# Reading for Meaning is One of the Secrets for School Success!

**A**sk education leaders about the skills students need for school success, and the first skill most will mention is reading.

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

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

Being surrounded by words will make your child comfortable with language. It will teach him\* that words have meaning. Words will stimulate his brain. Words are the building blocks he needs for thinking and learning all through his life.

But just learning to read is not enough to ensure school success. Your child must learn to find the *meaning* in words. Only then can he put what he reads to best use. He will then be able to get the most out of school!

*\* Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun. We'll alternate using "he/him" and "she/her" throughout this booklet.*



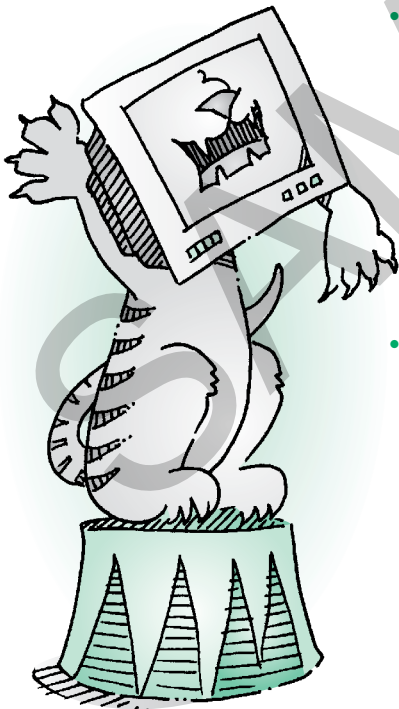
# You Can Help Your Child With Reading at Home!

**O**f course, schools teach reading skills in class. But your child spends far more time at home than she does 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 build her skills in reading for meaning. You'll also find fun and interesting ways to help her practice these skills every day.

## You Can Make a Difference

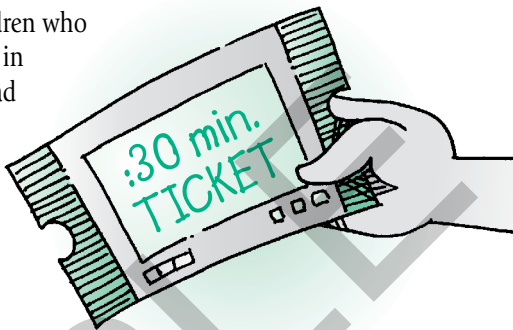
To encourage reading at home and guide your child on the road to reading success, start by eliminating these common barriers:



- **Screen time.** Mindless hours spent on entertainment media rob your child of time she could spend reading. Taming the technology monster is a great way to start improving your child's reading skills. And it's not as hard as you might think.
- **Parents who don't read.** You influence your child most by what you do, not by what you say. If your child is to become a good reader, experts say she needs to see you reading, too.

## Get Screen Time Under Your Control

Studies show that children who spend too much time in front of screens don't read as well as kids whose families set media limits. Try these ideas to control screen time:



- **Issue tickets.**

Try giving your child tickets, each good for 30 minutes of screen time. You can still veto certain programs. When the tickets are gone, the screens are turned off for the week. Your child can redeem unused tickets for money to buy books, or for another reward.

- **Put devices where they are hard to get.** Convenience is a big reason children spend so much time in front of screens. Experts say a child's room is a bad place for a TV set.
- **Keep a TV log.** Give your child a notebook where he can write down every program he watches. When your child sees how much he watches, even he may be amazed. Cutting out junk TV is easier with a TV log.
- **Make a weekly media plan.** Sit down with your child to make a written media plan for the coming week. Selecting a reasonable amount of time to spend with devices *on purpose* makes sense to most children.

Remember, the best way to overcome digital "withdrawal" is to have lots of interesting books and magazines handy.

# Are You a Good Reading Model For Your Child?

**M**ost parents 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 have a library card. My child does, too.** We make regular family trips to the library.
- 3. Reading material is easy to find in our home.** We have books, magazines or newspapers in most rooms.
- 4. Sometimes I talk with my child about what I’m reading.**
- 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.

## Encourage Your Child's Interest In Reading

Neither schools nor parents 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. Following are some great 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 each person to talk about his or her book. You’ll find it’s a great way to learn about your child. Who *knew* that your daughter wanted to be a chemist?

- **Pounce on your child’s interests!** Did your child see something on television that fascinated her?

No matter what the topic, she can find out more about it in a book or a magazine or a newspaper. The secret is to help her explore her 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 purse 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 bank, have a good book ready. 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, Valentine's day, end of the school year, start of the year, Thanksgiving, religious holidays, the day daylight savings time starts or ends—there's always a good time for giving a book!

# Help Your Child Build 'Reading for Meaning' Skills

**H**as 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 he didn't understand the words. He simply didn't absorb them.

Here are some tips to help your child understand and retain what he reads:

## Before Your Child Starts Reading:

- **Scan the story** together for difficult words.
- **Review the meaning** of these words with your child.
- **Discuss the general theme** of the story.
- **Have your child relate the theme** to his own experiences. Is it like anything he has done or seen?
- **Select a variety of reading material.** Don't limit reading to school texts. They're tied to the pressure of doing well in school.
- **Make reading a pleasurable experience.** Don't pressure your child to read.

## While Your Child is Reading

- **Suggest reading silently** before reading aloud.
- **Take turns reading** with your child.
- **Determine the setting** for the story—the time and place. If it's a real place, help your child locate it on a map or globe.
- **Explain any unfamiliar words.**
- **Be positive.** Don't show surprise at your child's lack of knowledge. Embarrassment does not promote learning.
- **Avoid correcting** your child—unless not doing so would affect his understanding of the story.





## After Your Child Has Finished Reading:

- **Discuss the main ideas.** What was the author trying to get across?
- **Identify the facts.** Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?
- **Follow the logical sequence of events.** What happened first?
- **Make inferences.** Why did it happen?
- **Don't ask all the questions.** Let your child come up with his own questions and answers about what he read.
- **Do ask,** "Did any part of the story confuse you?"
- **Give your child time to think.** Don't rush his answers.
- **Find someone else** your child can read to if you're feeling tense or upset.

## Help Your Child Find 'The Big Idea'

One of the best ways to help your child get to the meaning of what she reads is to have her consciously *look* for the main idea. As she reads, tell her to keep these questions in her mind: "What is the main idea of this paragraph?" "What is this page about?" "What is the point of this chapter?"

Just keeping the questions in mind will help her find the answers. It will make her think about the information and compare it to what she already knows.

## It Helps to Take Notes

Some children can read an assignment once and "ace" the test. But for most, 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, words in **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 his arguments.
- **Create flashcards.** As your child reads, have her write a question or key word on the front of each card. Then she should write the answer or definition on the back.
- **Record study notes.** Have your child record her notes or questions as she reads. Saying the ideas out loud helps fix the key points in her mind, and listening to the recording is also a good way to review.

## What If It Just Doesn't Make Sense?

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

- **Slow down.** Reading more slowly may help.
- **Keep on reading.** Perhaps he has not read far enough to get to the main point.
- **Try reading out loud.** Hearing the words sometimes helps.
- **Look at the charts,** graphs and pictures.
- **Go to another source.** Try reading about the same topic in an encyclopedia or on the Internet. After skimming that, the textbook version might make sense.



## It Often Helps to Play 'What's M-ss-ng?'

A tried-and-true way to build reading comprehension is called the Cloze method. It's also a lot of fun. Here's how it works:

All you need to do is leave out some words. Let your child use the context—what comes before and after—to figure out what the missing words should be.

Simply copy down a short paragraph from something your child is reading. Then leave \_\_\_\_\_ an occasional important \_\_\_\_\_. See if he \_\_\_\_\_ still figure out what's been \_\_\_\_\_ out by reading the words nearby. You'll be \_\_\_\_\_ at how well \_\_\_\_\_ can do. It's like being a word detective! And it's good practice in looking \_\_\_\_\_ the meaning.

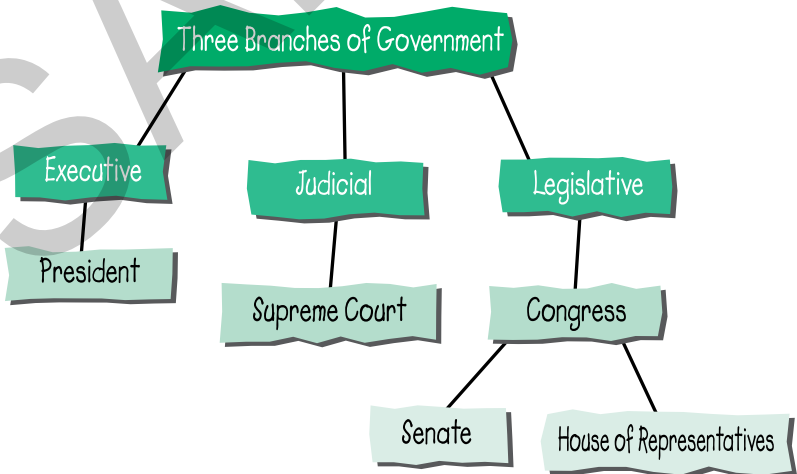
# Use a Reading 'Map' to Make The Meaning Clear

**W**hen you want to find out how to get somewhere, you probably check a map. And the same idea can help your child find her way through a reading assignment.

Suppose your child is reading about the three branches of government. She knows this material will be on a test later.

Have her:

- 1. Skim the assignment** by reading it over quickly. Have her 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 of the branches, 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. She can fill in more details as she reads. Later, this map can be a good study aid.



## Use Writing to Find Meaning in Reading

**W**riting can help your child make sense of what he reads. Have your child:

- **Pretend** to be a character in a story he is reading. Then have him 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. Have him write his own version of what might happen if, say, Stuart Little showed up in *Charlotte's Web*.
- **Write what he thinks 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

**T**ry reading a new story aloud. 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.

# Finding Key Information Builds Reading Skills

## Use the Classified Ads

Is there something your child has always wanted? Have her check the classified ads in local newspapers for a few days. Show her how prices and listings vary. Ask her which appear to be the best buys.



## Check Food Labels

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

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

## Use Do-It-Yourself Kits

Instead of ready-made toys, give kits as gifts. Your child's desire to make something herself can give her good practice in getting the meaning and following directions exactly.

## Let Your Child's Fingers Do the Walking

Your telephone directory contains a world of information. See if your child can find the answers to questions like:

- **How do you call** the local library?
- **Where do you find** information about the Chamber of Commerce?
- **What is the number** of the police station?

One of the greatest gifts parents 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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Publisher: Doris McLaughlin. Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

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Customer Service Manager: Peggy Costello. Business Manager: Cynthia Lees.

Distribution Manager: Marc Sasseville.

Graphic Design and Illustrations: Joe Mignella, Maher & Mignella, Cherry Hill, NJ.