

YOUTH SUCCESS MOVEMENT • FOR PARENTS

Building Comprehension

How understanding works, what can stop it, and how to tell whether it is growing

Nothing here requires materials, money or training.

Reading the words is not the finish line

A child can say every word on a page correctly and have no idea what it said. This happens more often than most people realize, and it is usually discovered years too late — on a state test in third or fourth grade.

Understanding is not a mystery and it is not a talent. It runs on things that get built — language, knowledge, and the machinery that holds a sentence together long enough to make sense of it. And it can be blocked. A child can have everything they need and still not understand, because something is capping it. That is why this guide covers both.

One thing to be clear about

If your child is struggling, it is not because you did not talk to them enough. Conversation and stories matter enormously and they are worth doing at any age.

But plenty of children who were read to every night still struggle, because something else was in the way — and finding that something is the point of this guide.

And what this guide is

Not a test, and not a diagnosis. Nothing here has a score, and none of it can tell you that your child has anything.

The checks in it are things to try and notice, not measurements. Where something points somewhere, the next step is a conversation with someone who can look properly — and if your school has already tested your child, their information is better than anything here and worth asking for.

What is actually happening when someone understands

They are building a picture in their head of what the words describe, and updating it as they go. Four things are going on at once.

What they are doing	When it is working	When it is not
Joining the sentences together	This one connects to the last one	Each sentence is an island
Filling in what is not said	Works out why, and what must have happened between	Only answers what is written down
Connecting to what they already know	“That is like when we...”	The words mean nothing because nothing is behind them
Noticing when it stops making sense	Stops, goes back, rereads	Reads on through nonsense without pausing

Notice that none of these is about the words. All four can fail in a person who reads every word correctly.

What can stop it, even when the words are fine

Before working on the four things above, it is worth knowing what else can be in the way. Most of these are invisible — nothing looks wrong, no mistakes are made, and nobody notices.

Reading is slow and costs too much

What it looks like. Every word right, and each one takes something out of them. By the end of the sentence the beginning is gone.

What to try. Time them on a page at their level. If it is accurate but slow and they are tired afterwards, notice that — and see whether understanding improves markedly when you read the same thing to them.

What helps. Volume of easy reading, well below their level, with no timing and no pressure on speed.

They know one meaning for a word that has two

What it looks like. A child reads “The bank was steep and muddy” without a stumble, and pictures a building. No hesitation, no error, no sign at all — they simply understood a different sentence.

What to try. Ask what a word means, then ask whether it can mean anything else. Try it with several words rather than one.

What helps. Meeting words in more than one situation — the bank of a river and the bank on the corner in the same week. Read aloud above their level.

The sentence never comes together

What it looks like. “The girl that the boy pushed was crying.” Ask who was crying. A child who has lost the front of the sentence by the end will say the boy.

What to try. Say a long sentence and ask them to say it back exactly. Do several, and look at the set rather than at any one. Where a mistake falls in a sentence does not tell you what caused it — what you are collecting is a pattern.

What helps. Shorter segments, and rereading expected rather than discouraged. If the meaning comes back intact but the grammar is consistently flattened, across several sentences, ask your doctor about a speech-language evaluation.

The world behind the words is missing

What it looks like. “She looked at the sky and reached for her umbrella.” Nothing says it was raining. The reader supplies it — and a child who has not met that connection takes nothing from the sentence.

What to try. Try a familiar topic and an unfamiliar one at the same difficulty and notice whether the two go differently. A gap raises the question of knowledge. It does not settle it — two passages differ in more than what a child knows about the subject.

What helps. Knowledge, deliberately, over years. Trips, documentaries, conversation — and talking about it afterwards, which is the part that gets skipped.

They stop dead at a word they do not know

What it looks like. Every text has words a reader has not met. A child who halts at each one never gets far enough into a passage for understanding to have a chance.

What to try. Watch a page slightly above their level. Do they stop and stay stopped, work at the word until the sentence is gone, or take what the sentence gives them and carry on?

What helps. Tell them plainly that carrying on past a word they do not know is allowed. Most children have never been told that, and many have been taught by correction that it is not.

They think reading means saying the words right

What it looks like. Six years of being corrected on pronunciation teaches a child that accuracy is the task. They are doing exactly what they believe is being asked — and nothing in that task involves finding out what the story said.

What to try. Ask: “when you read, what are you trying to do?” Ten seconds, and it is the most revealing question in this guide. An answer about not making mistakes points straight here. Ask it again another day.

What helps. Change what gets asked about afterwards — what happened, what surprised you — rather than whether it was correct. More reading practice makes this one worse.

Expect more than one

Any of these can be true alongside the others, and most struggling readers have two or three.

Start with whichever is furthest upstream — clearing it sometimes makes the others disappear on their own.

The ladder

Marion Blank, a developmental psychologist, described four levels of question, from the concrete to the abstract. It is the most useful single tool a parent has, because it tells you what to ask and what to ask next.

Blank, Rose and Berlin, *The Language of Learning: The Preschool Years* (1978). The ages are the published averages and they are rough guides, not deadlines.

Level	What it asks for	Questions that live here	Roughly
1 • What is right in front of me	Naming and matching what can be seen	What is that? • Find one like this • What is he doing?	~3
2 • Looking more closely	Describing, comparing, grouping	What color is it? • What happened? • How are these different?	~4
3 • Going beyond what is there	Predicting, defining, taking another view	What will happen next? • What is a ___? • What could she say?	~4½
4 • Reasoning about it	Explaining, justifying, problem-solving	Why did he do that? • What would happen if...? • How can we tell?	~5

How to use it

- Ask at the level they can manage, then one rung higher. That is where the growth is.
- Wait ten seconds. Most adults fill a silence in about one second, and most of the good answers arrive at around six.
- If a Level 4 question stalls, break it into Level 2 pieces and see whether they get there. Note that you had to.
- **Most adults ask almost only Level 1 and 2 questions**, because those get quick answers. Moving your own questions up a rung is the simplest change on this page.

- **It does not have to be a book.** A paused film works as well — and better, if reading has become a fight. Understanding does not know whether it came from a page.

How to tell whether it is growing

The questions that build understanding are the same questions that show it. You do not need a test. You need to notice what they can answer.

Three questions you can run any time

Ask	What a good answer sounds like	What it shows you
1 • “Tell me what happened.”	The gist, in their own words, roughly in order	Whether they took anything in at all
2 • “Why do you think she did that?”	A reason, and ideally evidence — “because earlier he said...”	Whether they can fill in what was not stated
3 • “What would you have done?”	Something that fits the situation, not a random answer	Whether they built a picture they can reason inside

Listen for these, not for right answers

Sign it is working	Sign it is not
Says it back in different words	Repeats the exact wording, or nothing
Gives a reason without being asked	Answers “I don’t know” or “because”
Connects it to something else	No connections offered
Notices when something does not add up	Reads or listens straight past nonsense
Asks their own questions	Waits to be asked

Two more worth knowing

Say it a different way. “Say that back to me another way.” Understanding shows up as transformation. Repeating the same words back is not understanding.

Does that make sense? Slip in something that contradicts what came before and see whether they catch it. Do this several times, across different days — everybody reads past things, and one miss on one afternoon means nothing. What is worth noticing is whether anything ever stops them, in anything they read.

Keeping track without a test

Once a month, on something new, run the three questions and write down what happened. Not a score — just which level they could handle and whether they gave reasons.

Over a few months you will see the ladder move. That is the measure. It works before a child can read, and it works for an adult who will never sit a state test.

What matters most, by age

Age	The highest-value thing you can do
Before five	Talk, and let them do most of it. Picture books where they tell you the story. Questions up the ladder. Take them places and talk about what they saw — knowledge is the fuel understanding runs on. This is where the evidence for what parents can do is strongest.
Five to eight	Read to them above their own reading level — that is where words and sentence structures arrive that never come up in conversation. Keep asking Level 3 and 4 questions. Build knowledge on purpose: one subject at a time, over weeks, from several directions.
Nine and up	Discussion is the thing. Not quizzing — real argument about what a text or film meant, where they have to justify what they think. Keep building knowledge; by now it is the main constraint. And go back through what can stop it, because at this age something is often in the way.
Adults	The same three questions, adult material. Read something aloud to them and ask; then have them read something comparable and ask again. The gap between the two tells you whether the trouble is in the reading or in the language.

What not to bother with

Common practice	Why
Long courses of comprehension strategies	A few sessions of teaching someone to summarize or predict helps. Many more sessions do not help much more than a few. The time is better spent on knowledge and conversation.
Quizzing for right answers	A right answer to a Level 1 question tells you almost nothing. The question has to require them to go beyond what was said.

Common practice	Why
Guessing words from pictures or context	This is a word-reading habit that gets in the way, and it weakens the decoding that understanding depends on. Carrying on past an unknown word is a different thing, and that one is worth teaching.
Waiting for the school to find it	The state test arrives in third or fourth grade. Everything in this guide can start years before that, at no cost.

None of this requires materials, money or training. It requires asking better questions, one rung higher than the last — and waiting for the answer.

Nothing in this guide is a diagnosis or a test. It points; the people you take it to make findings.
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