

READING: WHAT PARENTS, GUARDIANS, AND OTHER CONCERNED ADULTS CAN DO TO HELP STUDENTS IMPROVE IN READING

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"All through school and for years after school, parents continue to teach their children." -- Gilbert Highet

1. Recognize that reading with understanding is an ability youngsters can be helped to develop over time, and that is important to their success across the curriculum in school, college, and also in later life. The best way to help readers improve their understanding of what they read is to have people in the home and at school get together and exchange ideas about what to do and how to do it, and then be consistent in doing it.
2. Get youngsters to read as much as possible, and as many different kinds of written materials as possible. The more youngsters know about the more different kinds of things, the better the chances that they will be able to make sense of any particular reading. Anyone is more likely to want to read what they have chosen themselves. So try to give youngsters choices, while making sure that their reading varies in level of difficulty, length, subject matter, genre, style. You might try presenting them with several options, and asking them to choose one of them. You can also recommend to youngsters readings that are related or similar to ones you know they enjoy, or that are about subjects you know they are interested in, or that shed new light on topics they deal with in class. Consider enlisting a librarian's help, or look at one of the book-lists that give a description of the books presented.
3. Expose youngsters to reading matter written by, and about, people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, both women and men. This will be easier in some circumstances than others. But if you are on the lookout for such materials and for opportunities to use them, there are many more of both than you might think. This is true in fields as varied as current events, sports, career-related information, literature, history, the arts, mathematics and science.
4. In talking with youngsters, broaden their horizons by discussing information, and giving examples, illustrative incidents or anecdotes drawn from various perspectives. Alert them to ways in which people are similar, but also different due to class, culture, gender, race, religion, nationality and so on. Challenge them to look at events and ideas from different points of view, and to consider how their experience and their attitude to it would be different if they stood, figuratively, in someone else's moccasins.
5. Put learners into situations where they have to generate, explain, elaborate on information.
 - Encourage youngsters to talk about what they have read, and listen to them with care and interest. Good opportunities for doing so are while you work together on some household chores, while taking a walk, during a drive. Ask them questions about what they tell you, but don't let it become like the cross-examination at a trial.

Comments such as "Tell me more about ..." "Could you explain how ...?" often work well.

- Go to the library together, and together chose a book you both have some interest in. Both of you should read the book during the same couple of weeks or so. As you read, talk it over. Talk about which bits that you have read were confusing or unclear, and see if you can clear them up. Try to predict what comes next, and see if your predictions are confirmed. Summarize what was read since the last time you talked. Connect what is being read about with other things you already know.
- Become the learner, and ask youngsters to teach you what they are learning in school. Try to ask about various subject areas. How do you write a computer program? How does gravity work? How did women and men, the rich and the poor, live in the Americas before Europeans arrived? It helps to pick something you can summon up some genuine interest in. Challenge the youngster to teach you well enough that you could answer a quiz. Get them to give you a quiz.
- Ask youngsters to find a book for you that they think you would enjoy reading. Have them write a brief review of its for you. Ask questions about the book based on the review. Read the book: and discuss it with them.

6. Get youngsters to participate more actively in their own learning.

- Ask youngsters to scan the daily newspaper, or a weekly newsmagazine, for some particular kind of information, and report to you about the topic. For some reluctant readers, you might start with any topic that is of interest to them, which may be sports, TV soaps or rock music. Try gradually to shift to topics more related to their schoolwork. Discuss what they found out with them.
- Have them help you with anything that comes with written directions, from a recipe to whatever needs hooking up or assembling from parts. Let them take over following the directions themselves. If you want more control, ask them to read the directions and tell you what to do next and how.
- Take a look occasionally at youngsters school books. Ask them to summarize for you what they have read since the last time you looked, and to explain diagrams, statistics, pictures. Unless forbidden by the school, encourage, and validate, underlining/highlighting and notes in margins
- Visit the library with the youngster, and encourage him or her to find books that might be interesting or supplement the school texts in a useful way.
- Give inexpensive paperback books as gifts, perhaps in recognition of consistent journal keeping, conscientiousness in keeping you informed about topics you asked for form newspapers or magazines, or having got through some challenging library book. Go to the bookstore with the youngster so he or she can help choose the gift. Try to live with whatever they choose, even if it isn't what you would have wanted for them to pick.

7. Occasionally, observe the youngsters you want to help as they read. Do so for some extended period: perhaps fifteen minutes or so.

- Look for indications of how they deal with difficult reading. Do they ever...

...backtrack?

...look ahead?

...change how fast they read?

...subvocalize?

...take notes?

...if permitted, do they underline/highlight on the average about 10-15 per cent per page, when the reading is difficult or they are studying rather than just reading? Does what they have underlined make sense if read without looking at the rest of the text?

...Write comments in margins, when allowed to?

All the above can help readers to make sense of difficult text.

- Observe overall reading rates, and help the reader if necessary to change how fast they read. Very fast reading usually limits understanding; but scanning and skimming may well be appropriate for some purposes. In scanning, readers rapidly run their eye across the page, looking to catch a particular name, date, word or phrase. An example would be checking through classified ads for a used Ford in your price-range. Scanners have a mental image of what they are looking for, such as \$5000, and discard all visual input that does not match. Scanning works best if readers first look to see how the reading is organized, so they scan in the most likely section. In the example above, it helps to determine at the start whether the car ads are arranged alphabetically, by age of car, price-range, new/used status, or domestic/foreign make. In skimming, readers generally alternate scanning and rapid reading, taking in just enough of what they read to form a general impression. Skimmers are trying to get the gist of the passage they read, so they scan to try and find main ideas, and read those, allowing their eyes to pass over what they identify as illustration, details, supportive evidence for the important points.

Good readers need to be able to vary their reading speed according to what they want to get out of the reading. The following figures give some approximate guidance to what might be looked for from individual readers. (Estimates of different researchers vary, but the ball park ranges given are consistent.)

Average reading speeds are...

...for 6th graders, about 185 words per minute

...for 9th graders, about 214 words per minute

...for 12 graders and college students, about 250 words per minute

...for scanning, 1000 words per minute or more (can locate specific information)

...for skimming, about 500-1500 words per minute (can form a general impression of main points)

...for "close reading," 100-800 words per minute (can understand most of the content read, and store it in memory for later use. Comprehension scores of about 70-89% have been recorded at the 400-800 rate.)

...for "critical reading." 50 to 300 words per minute (can form well-reasoned judgments and analyze the reading's significance as well as understand it at the 80-90% level.

*Observation allows you to judge whether the reading is too slow or too fast for its purpose. You can then suggest changes if necessary. Adults can use the information about average reading rates as a rough measure of how much can be expected from a reader in a particular time-span. This can guide adults in the home to judge the amount of homework that can get done. They can also point out that books being read for pleasure, or just to get the gist of the information in them, do not need to be read as slowly and carefully as, say, recipes, income tax forms or the physics text on which a major test is due. Moreover, different parts of the same text may not need to be read with equal care.

Some conscientious or slow readers can benefit from being given adult permission to skip the boring parts, to read the end first, to dip into the reading here and there rather than starting at page one and grimly chewing their way through every word. These youngsters also need some advice about the circumstances when it is appropriate to treat a reading with more, or less, care.

8. Try to avoid criticizing, nagging, or scolding youngsters about their reading habits, and don't use reading activities as threats or punishments. Anything that results in unpleasant associations with reading will have bad effects on both the willingness to read, and on the ability to do so successfully.

9. Help youngsters to see mistakes as bases for learning. By the way you react to their mistakes, you can play a very important role in learners' success. Youngsters often "feel dumb when they make a mistake or do not understand, and adult reactions may contribute to this. Unfortunately, when they feel dumb, they very often act dumb. As a result, improvement is slowed or blocked. A mistake should be treated as clue, not as a fault. It is a signpost that points to the learning that needs to be done. Mistakes are negative only if they go uncorrected .

Would-be critical readers need to know how to find their mistakes, and how to deal with mistakes once found. Adults can help by encouraging readers to monitor their own understanding and to use the appropriate fix-up strategies when they run into trouble. It also helps to show faith in readers' ability to find and deal with mistakes, and give them praise as they do so. Adults in and out of school can remind readers to keep a mental eye as it were on how they are doing with understanding all the time as they are reading. They can also give a reminder that readers are not helpless, but have various strategies they can use to shore up understanding if necessary.

10. When talking with youngsters about their successes or failures, stress the part played by those things they have some control over. Examples might be how carefully they allowed directions, how much time they spent, how well they concentrated, whether they used the appropriate strategies. Don't leave them with the belief often held by youngsters that their successes were due to luck, and their failures to lack of ability. If they go on believing this, there will be no reason for them to put much effort into trying to improve. After a failure, remind them that as its result they now have valuable clues about what they need to do to improve, and make sure they do it. Give them the opportunity to show themselves as well as you that what they have done did result in improvement. Encourage them, if necessary, to go back and try some other path to improvement if necessary, and reward them with approval, praise, or other means for showing the grit it took to keep going.

Author: Anne Chapman. Selection from *Making Sense: Critical Reading Across the Curriculum*, reprinted with permission from NY: The College Board, 1993.