Go Beyond Grades

Questions to Ask Your Child's Teacher About Reading

FOR
K-8

Being a strong reader is key to success in school and beyond. Here are questions to ask your child's teacher as well as tips and resources to support reading at home.

Is my child reading at grade level?

- Beyond your child's classroom grades, it's important to ask if they are reading at grade level (meeting learning expectations for the year for text difficulty).
- If they aren't, find out why. Ask how they are doing with foundational skills, including phonological awareness (oral sounds), phonics (how letters make sounds), and fluency (reading accurately, smoothly, and with expression). Ask about their vocabulary and overall comprehension. With this information you can find the right support.

Does my child need support with foundational skills?

- If your child is having trouble, find out which specific skills they need more help with, including asking about phonics or sound-spelling patterns (e.g., short vowels). Let tutors or after school program leaders know so they can provide additional practice. There are online video resources and games to help with these skills too.
- Help your child to use what they know about letters and sounds when reading. They can tackle new words by breaking them down into smaller parts (this is called 'chunking words' or 'sounding them out'). Especially in the early grades, if you cannot get a list of sound-spelling patterns your child was taught *or* your child is being encouraged to guess or identify words by using pictures or what's happening in the book, this is a flag about the quality of reading instruction.

How can I help my child with vocabulary and comprehension?

- Words become meaningful when kids can practice vocabulary through reading, writing, and talking about new topics and issues they care about (not just memorizing word lists).
- Building background knowledge and vocabulary supports comprehension and makes stronger readers. Your child should be learning about specific topics in each grade (example 3rd grade topics include: insects; weather; historical figures; habitats; folktales from around the world). Ask your child's teacher which topics have been covered so that you can help your child build on that knowledge. It's also important for children to read, write about, and discuss what they are learning and understanding from informational text (social studies, science, art, music, etc.).

What do I need to know about choosing books?

- The most crucial thing is that your child is reading a wide range of things over time and gets access to grade-level books. Some widely used reading programs use a "reading level" (usually a number or letter) to match students to books. Make sure your child isn't limited to reading books at any particular level – especially if they are books below grade level. Research shows that once your child is past the "learning to read" stage (2nd grade), they benefit from choosing their books and stretching their ability with more challenging texts. This builds reading skill as well as confidence and motivation.
- Early readers should also practice the sound-spelling patterns they are learning in decodable texts (texts that contain lots of words with the sound-spelling patterns they were taught). Ask if you can get access to decodable texts that match what your child is working on this year.

Can you tell me how our school teaches reading? Does our school use an evidence-based curriculum?

- For K-3 or older readers who need support with decoding, you want to find out if your school is using a foundational skills reading program that is "systematic and explicit." For example, if the school says phonics is weaved in throughout but it's not a main focus, that's a sign to get more information.
- All students should also be learning about topics through reading grade-level texts (or through books read aloud in the early grades), and building literacy skills by writing about and discussing what they are learning.
- Unfortunately, many schools are still using curriculum or approaches that aren't backed by the science of how kids learn to read. If you want to learn more, check out this helpful advocacy guide: Is my child's school getting reading right: What to ask. What to look for and this helpful article: What to do if your child's school isn't teaching reading right.

LEARNING HEROES

How You Can Support Your Child in Everyday Ways

1 Read, Read, Read...and Write Too!

Your child should **read** for at least 20 minutes every day. You can read to them, have them read to you, talk about what they are reading on their own, have siblings read to each other, and read in native home languages. Encourage them to write daily too! For example: writing about what they read but also journaling, lyrics, short stories, grocery lists, and notes. In K-2nd grade, they can use "inventive spelling"-- using what they know about letters and sounds to spell out words, even if it's not the correct spelling.

2 Play, Sing, Talk!

Have fun building language with your child. For early readers, play **sound and word games** like listening for the first/middle/last sound of words, clapping out syllables, or playing rhyming games. For example: ask your child to think of words that rhyme with cat to make up a silly sentence: "The cat sat on my hat instead of the mat!" For older students, you might try **word challenges** like brainstorming words that have similar or opposite meanings, identifying words with multiple meanings, or coming up with as many words as you can that contain common word parts (e.g., un-, re-, pre- at the beginning of a word or -ful, -ly, or -less at the end).

3 Support the Building Blocks of Reading.

To help with reading the words on the page, use chunking it out (no guessing based on pictures or just the first letter). Breaking down words into smaller chunks of natural sound patterns is a good strategy. For example: reading "family" can be chunked as fam- i- ly. At any age, work on smooth, **fluent reading** by selecting a poem, song lyrics, newspaper article, or short story to reread several times before performing for your family or neighbors.

4 Boost Vocabulary.

Encourage your child to use new words learned **from reading** and conversation as part of your everyday life. Words take on their meaning in stories, nonfiction books, and in full sentences as we talk about our lives and the world around us.

5 Follow Interests to Grow Knowledge.

Explore topics that interest your child and learn about them through reading, talking, and doing. Visit **museums**, cultural centers, and libraries. Listen to **podcasts** or watch informative videos online. Pick a new activity to try or a neighborhood location to explore. This will help them feel the joy of reading by learning about issues, events, and hobbies that matter to them and help them find their passions and purpose.

LEARNING HEROES

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