

# How to help your child with comprehension

## **Comprehension is the ability to understand something.**

Research has shown that children need to be taught how to comprehend as there is a range of ways of doing this and they do not come naturally. If these comprehension strategies are taught well the reader becomes able to use them subconsciously, that is without thinking.

At Beacon Hill we teach the strategies explicitly and refer to them as Comprehension Keys. By using the keys readers are able to unlock the meaning of what they are reading.

Here are two types of comprehension that your child will need to use to learn from their reading and importantly to enjoy it.

### What is literal comprehension?

Literal comprehension is the ability to recall information that is directly written in the text. For example, read this extract from Sarah Brennan's 'The Tale of Chester Choi':

"There was a Chinese dragon  
His name was Chester Choi  
When Chester Choi grew hungry  
He'd eat a little boy  
Though sometimes in the evening  
When all was dark and quiet  
He'd eat a little girl instead  
To brighten up his diet."

Questions to check your literal comprehension could include...

What is the dragon's name? What does he do at night time? Why does he eat little girls?

### How can you help your child with literal comprehension?

- Ask lots of "What? When? Who?" type questions during and after reading.
- Encourage your child to retell. Use a prompt to help them put the events in order. (There are lots available online.)
- Ask your child to draw pictures to show what they have read.
- Encourage your child to ask you questions about what they have read. This will let you know what they have remembered from the book.

Your child may find these comprehension keys useful when trying to understand on a literal level.

**Developing vocabulary:** Good readers collect new words and explore their meanings.

**Retelling:** Good readers can recall the important parts of a text in order.

**Visualising:** Good readers can see pictures in their head while they are reading.

**Questioning:** Good readers ask questions to help them make sense of their reading.

**Determining Importance:** Good readers can find key words and the main ideas in a text.



## What is inferential comprehension?

This is a much harder type of comprehension because it involves gaining meaning from something that is not directly written in the text. It is about reading between the lines and using the information that is there **and** your own background knowledge to understand. For example, you are using inference when you answer the question, “Where is Jackie?” after reading the following:

*“Jackie lay back and rested her head on a folded towel. She buried her toes in the sand, the sun was warm and all she could hear was the lapping of the waves on the shore.”*

You most probably said at the beach, this requires you to use your own background knowledge and the clues in the text. Often inferential comprehensions have the follow up “How do you know?” You need to be able to explain why you think what you do.

Here is another example, read the text: *“Naima opened the curtains and sighed to herself. She reluctantly headed to the cupboard in the hall where her thick coat was kept. It looked like she would need an umbrella too.”*

A question that would test your ability to infer would be “What is the weather like outside?” or “How does Naima feel about it?”

### How can you help your child with inferential comprehension?

At your child’s reading level inferential comprehension is something that is being introduced, but there are many ways you can help them develop this skill.

- A great starting point for learning inference is from pictures. Use picture books with your child and cover any text. What do they think is happening? What might happen? What happened first? (Sequential pictures are good for this.) Who are the characters? What are they like?
- Always encourage your child to say how they know and ask lots of “Why?” questions.
- Look at pictures which show people’s emotions or draw faces with your child to show different feelings. Can they explain what the person is feeling? Every time we use someone’s body language or facial expression to “read” their mood we are inferring.
- Encourage your child to visualise and to make a movie in their head as they read. Audio stories are a great way of helping your child develop this skill. You could read a short part of the book and your child can sketch the picture they made in their head.
- Brainpop Jr, an online resource which can be accessed via The Beacon, has a very good movie about inference.
- Model your thinking aloud when reading with your child. Teachers do this a lot when reading with their class. For example using the text above you might say something like “I think Naima has seen that it looks cold outside as she is heading to the cupboard where her warm coat is. I think that it might look like rain because she wants an umbrella. Also Naima sighed and I do that when I am not that happy so I think she is not happy about the weather or that she doesn’t want to go outside.”

Your child may find these comprehension keys useful when trying to understand on an inferential level, alongside those listed above.

**Making inferences:** Good readers can read between the lines.

**Background knowledge:** Good readers use their own knowledge to help them understand what an author is saying.

**Making connections:** Good readers can make connections between what they read and what they have seen and done.



