



Caregiver Guide to Early Literacy



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Written by:
CESA 6 Literacy

Dear Caregivers,

We all want to give children the best start in life while helping them find their passions and enjoy their experiences. Whether it's the joy of starting a new book, reading to learn more about the world or interesting topics, or talking to someone about a great text you just read, reading is a truly beautiful journey and bonding experience. Because of this, we know one of the most important skills they'll ever learn is how to read. How can you foster enjoyment and also build reading skills? We are here to help!

This caregiver guide is a menu of options to focus your reading experience and continue the enjoyment and bonding that reading fosters. This could be an area your child likes to talk more about or it could be an area to promote reading growth. The possibilities are endless and should be a delight for all.

Games and reading activities are a fun way to promote reading growth. The games and activities provided in this guide are flexible and can be done anywhere! These do not take a lot of time, so they can fit in little parts of our day. Here are some places you could play these games or enjoy a book with your child:

- In the car
- Waiting for an appointment
- Before bed
- Between sporting events
- Waiting in line at the store
- A fun activity on the weekend

In this guide, we define a 'caregiver' as anyone with whom a child enjoys a book or game, whether a parent, sibling, friend, or other trusted person. The language may reference 'your child' throughout, as we recognize and appreciate the unique role you play in encouraging, mentoring, and shaping a child's reading journey.

Happy Reading,
CESA & Literacy Team

What is the Science of Reading?

How do children learn to read? What methods really work? And, you might be wondering, how will this support reading development?

This is where the Science of Reading comes in as you learn more with our Interactive Reading Pillars. The Science of Reading is a body of research that examines how children learn to read and identifies effective teaching practices. The key components of the Science of Reading are included within the 6 Pillars of Early Literacy. Click on each pillar to jump to more information and literacy activities.

6 Pillars of Early Literacy



Oral Language

Developing the skills and knowledge that are needed for listening and speaking and have a strong relationship to reading comprehension.



Vocabulary

Knowing the meaning of words and using them correctly.



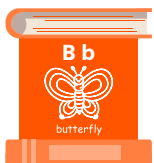
Phonemic Awareness

Understanding that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes).



Fluency

Reading smoothly and accurately with appropriate speed and expression.



Phonics

Connecting sounds to letters and understanding the relationship between them.



Comprehension

Understanding and making sense of what is read.

Oral Language



Oral language is the ability to communicate through spoken words, encompassing both speaking and listening skills. This skill is foundational as children begin to learn to read and write. Any conversation with your child will benefit their oral language. Make sure your conversation is authentic. Show interest in the child, the conversation, and/or the text. You can use the steps below as your guide.

1. Engage

Engage children in a verbal interaction around a text or just in general conversation. This may involve asking the child's opinion, asking the child to name or recall something from a text, or asking the child to make connections to personal experience.

Prompts

- What are you thinking about?
- How did you celebrate?
- What was your favorite part?
- What did you do last night?
- What do you think _____ means?

4. Return

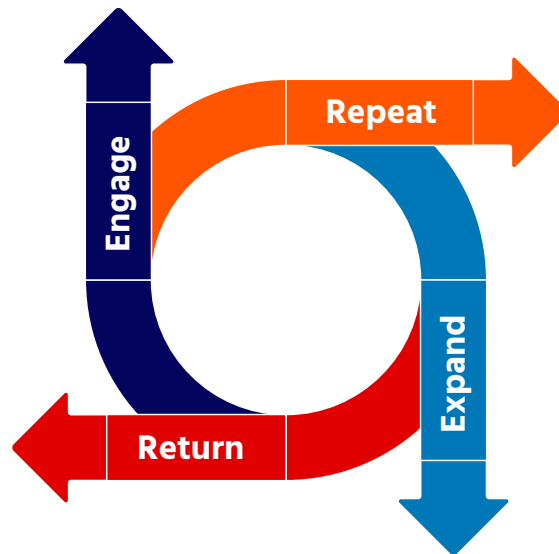
Return to number 1, engage and continue conversation.

2. Repeat

Repeat what children say, embedding this in your response in a natural way. If the student's response includes a mistake, only repeat the correct part or integrate a correction into this Step.

Prompts

- Oh, when the mouse saved the lion... That was so surprising!
- Yes, the mouse rescued the lion even though he is much smaller.



3. Expand

As you repeat, say a little more than what the child said. Expand the language to include a new word, phrase, or idea. Then begin the process again!

Prompts

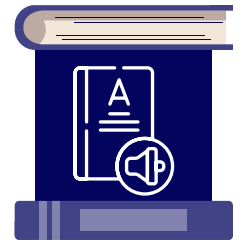
- I agree, the mouse saved the lion when he... that is surprising because...
- The mouse had courage when he rescued the lion by freeing him from the trap.
- Do you think the mouse felt brave or do you think he felt scared?

Dialogic Conversation Tips

- Adjust your responses and language based on the age of the child.
- Pair words with gestures, objects, or pictures.
- Ask closed questions – answer your own questions, using well-formed sentences.
 - » Example: Do you want to play on the swing? I would love to sit and swing.
- Ask closed questions and provide a couple of choices
 - » Example: Do you want to play on the slide or the swing?
- Ask closed questions (either/or) questions or open-ended questions.
 - » Example: Would you like to go play in the woods or the playground? What should we do there?



Phonemic Awareness



Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and play with individual sounds in words. This skill is crucial for children as they learn to read and write. Here are some fun games you can play together.



Starting with Introductory Skills

Have your child isolate the first sound they hear in the beginning of a word. (This also works for ending sounds.)

- Choose a word from a book or something they see in the illustration or outside.
 - » What is the first sound you hear in buffalo?
 - » What are other things that start with the /b/ sound?
- Use a set of picture cards or objects.
 - » Can you make a pile of, or sort, all the pictures that start with the /b/ sound?
- "I spy" with first sounds.
 - » I spy something that starts with the sound /m/ like 'monkey'.
- Move from first sounds to last sounds with similar activities.
 - » What sound do you hear at the end of the word 'mat'?
 - I spy something that ends in the sound /m/ like 'ham'.



Hearing Rhyme

- Choose a word from a book or something you see. State two words and ask your child if the words rhyme.
 - » Example: Do ball and tall rhyme? Yes. Do buffalo and bird rhyme? No.
 - » Example: Duck and truck rhyme! They both end with 'uck'. Say it with me: uck-uck-duck-truck!

Producing a Rhyme

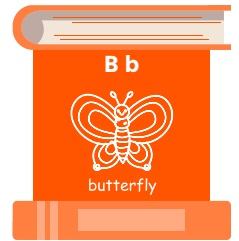
- Choose a word from a book or something you see. Model first by producing a few words that rhyme. Then have your child start to produce rhymes.
 - » Example: Here is the word dog from the story we just read. I can make words that rhyme with dog, or sound the same, just by changing the first sound. Hog, log, bog, fog. Can you think of some more with me?
- Corrective feedback: encourage, praise, and correct
 - » Example: Yes, those two words end in the same sound; they rhyme.
 - Let's listen to those words again, super carefully. When you model again, this time instead of saying, pig and wig rhyme, you can emphasize the rhyming part by saying "p/IG and w/IG rhyme (slowing down and saying the last part louder to make it stand out).
 - Can you say them with me? Can you hear the ending sounds the same? Let's try another word..."



Moving Toward Complex Skills

- Initial deletion. Take out the first sound in a word, what word do I have left?
 - » Example: If I have the word slump, and take off the /s/ (say the sound, not the letter), what word do I have left? lump. Choose a word from the book or something you see.
- Isolate the first sound and replace it with a different sound to make a new word (real or nonsense). Is this a real word or a nonsense word?
 - » Example: What sound do you hear at the beginning of the word _____? If I change the /___ / to /___ / (saying the sound) what is my new word? _____. Choose a word from a book or something you see.

Phonics



Phonics instruction helps children understand how to decode words by connecting sounds to letters or groups of letters. This ability is fundamental to developing strong reading skills and building confidence in young readers, it gives them the secret code to unlock the words they see on the page.

These tips can be used with the books your child brings home as practice from school.

When your child gets stuck, you will want to start with a nudge, and then gradually give them more support. Make sure that your child knows the meaning of the word.



Wait: Count to 5 in your head before prompting your child. See if they can get it on their own!

"Try that again."

Point to the first part of the word, this draws the child's eyes back to the beginning of the word to try it again.

"Something's not quite right, can you find the problem? What word is wrong? What should you try? What sounds or patterns do you know?"

"What sound does that letter make? What other sound could you try?" OR, "Remember, [insert letter/sound] (ex) sh says /sh/. Now let's say the sound for each letter in the word."

"Let's blend those sounds together and say it fast. What word is that? Reread that part again." If it appears like your child is not sure if the word is correct, it could be a vocabulary problem. In this case, make sure that your child knows the meaning of the word. You can say the word, followed by a phrase like, "That word means... Does that help you to understand if the word is right? Let's reread the whole sentence now and make sure!"

If your child becomes frustrated at any point during support, tell the child the word and move on. Make sure to say the word and tell the meaning. In some cases, you may want to prompt your child to reread the sentence back with the correct word, or you can do that chorally together.

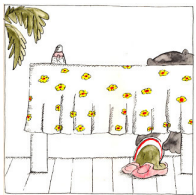
Vocabulary



Vocabulary is the cornerstone of comprehension and understanding. As we encounter new words, we learn their meanings and how to use them. Books are a treasure trove of vocabulary, offering countless opportunities for learning new vocabulary. In addition to reading, oral language is the foundation of all communication and a great way to increase your child's vocabulary.

Defining a Word as You're Reading

Choose a line from the text that has a word your child may not know and give a child-friendly definition for the vocabulary word in the sentence.



Example #1: *George and Martha*, James Marshall (1972)

Text: So, while Martha was out in the kitchen, George carefully poured the rest of his soup into his **loafers** under the table. "Now she will think I have eaten it."

Caregiver: "**Loafers** means a type of shoe, or slipper. See here in the picture how George puts the soup in his shoe? I can tell that George really cares about Martha's feelings and doesn't want her to know that he doesn't like the soup."



Example #2: *Duke's Storm*, Ted Neitzke (2024)

Text: When Duke asked the cows if they knew where his family went during the storm last night, he wasn't surprised when one of his older cousins scolded him."

Caregiver: "The cows were very crabby and they weren't very nice to Duke when he asked where his family went. His older cousin scolded him - that means she was kind of mean and yelled at him." (You can read the thought bubble now for the first time and make sure your voice is "scolding" in tone).

Building Vocabulary Through Conversations



Engage in Conversations

Talk with your child about their day, interests, and experiences.

- Ask open-ended questions to encourage them to share more.
 - » What did it look like?
 - » What did that feel like?
- Repeat back what your child said and add to it.
 - » Example:
 - Child: My car is blue.
 - Caregiver: Your race car is blue and is racing fast around the track.



Encourage Storytelling

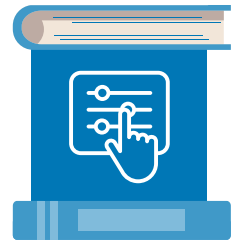
Ask your child to tell you stories or describe events. This helps them organize their thoughts and practice using language.



Model Quality Language

Use clear and varied language in your interactions. Children learn by imitating adults, so be a good language role model.

Fluency



Fluency is what makes reading feel like a natural, flowing conversation.

It's not about speed; it's about reading with the right pace, phrasing, and expression.

When children read fluently, they can better understand and enjoy the text. Fluency helps readers process text in the same way they process spoken language, making it easier to comprehend and engage with what they read.

Modeling How Reading Should Sound

When you read aloud to your child, use different voices, tones, and pacing to match the story's events. This shows them how to read with expression and feeling.

- Point out text clues: **bold words**, *italicized words*, and punctuation. Model how you read those differently.

Read with Your Child

This helps your child learn correct pronunciation, sight word identification, and reading expression as well as understand the structure of storybooks or informational texts.



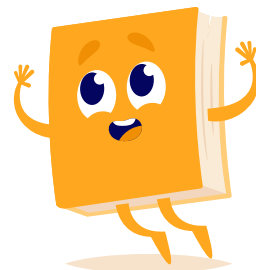
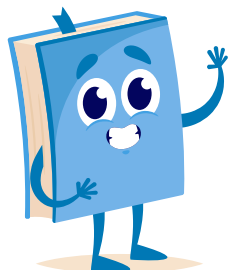
Read-Together Formats

Choral Reading

- Ask your child to read aloud along with you (reading the same text at the same time).
- Start louder and slightly faster than your child.
- When your child gains confidence, become slower and quieter.
- Read with expression and show attention to the phrasing and punctuation.
- Maintain a comfortable pace by speeding up or slowing down when needed.

Echo Reading

- Take turns reading the same text.
- Read a sentence, making your reading as fluent and expressive as possible.
- Then ask your child to read the same sentence.
- Run your finger under the text as each of you reads.
- Continue until your child starts to read with expression and fluency.



Fluency



Modeling How Reading Should Sound



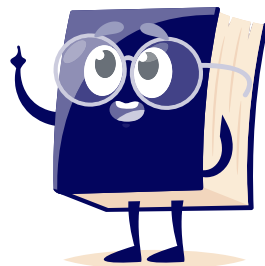
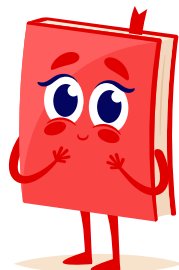
Tips While You are Reading

- Read with expression—make the story come alive! Your reading should sound like you are talking or having a conversation about something quite interesting or exciting.
- Try using different voices for different characters.
- Point out rhyming words.
- Stop and discuss new vocabulary words.
- Talk about how you might understand a new word from looking at the surrounding words or sentences or from a picture on the page.
- Stop at a certain point that you want to make sure your child understands, and say what you are thinking as the reader. (See Thinking Aloud in the Comprehension section).
- Engage in a conversation about the text. Talk about what is happening in the story and ask what might happen next. Talk about what you are learning about if it is non-fiction.
- Decide how much to read and when to invite your child to begin reading.



Tips While Your Child is Reading

- Encourage your child to mimic the way you read to gain fluency.
- Use the phonics tips to guide your child if they are stuck on reading a word.
- See if it is helpful for your child to run her finger under the words as she reads.
- Encourage your child to ask you about anything he doesn't understand.
- Stop and discuss reading at certain points to make sure your child is understanding the text.
- Praise your child's efforts. Praise often.
- Keep the reading fun. Some struggle is good. Too much frustration is not good.
- Know when to take over reading or to end the session. If you see signs of stress, such as yawning or excessive fidgeting, invite your child to listen while you read. You may want to use easier books for a while.



Comprehension



Making meaning from the text we read is what makes reading truly enjoyable! Taking the time to stop and talk about the book, just a few times, will help your child develop the skills they need to connect to the book on a deeper level. Below are some tips to help your child with comprehension

Building Background Knowledge

1. Read the book summary, typically found on the back of the book, or the table of contents.

2. Ask your child what they already know about the book. For example, the characters in a series or the subject of a nonfiction book.

4. Children have higher comprehension when they read multiple books on a topic or in a series. Consider this when choosing books to read together.

3. Connect the story to your child's own experiences. If the book is about a trip to the beach, talk about a time you visited the beach together.



Comprehension

Thinking Aloud

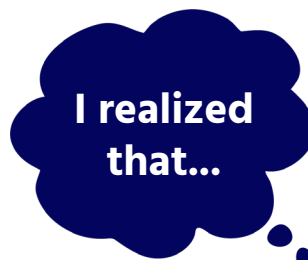
To model and demonstrate what a reader does in order to understand...

Thinking aloud is a powerful strategy for helping children understand the reading process. It allows them to hear your thoughts and see how skilled readers make sense of the text.

- ✓ **This part makes me feel ____ because ____.**
- ✓ **This part makes me think ____ because ____.**
- ✓ **This part makes me wonder ____ because ____.**

By doing this, you show your child what thinking you are doing as a reader to make sure you understand the story or information.

This helps build the idea that reading words means understanding what the words say!



To model what readers do when they make a mistake...

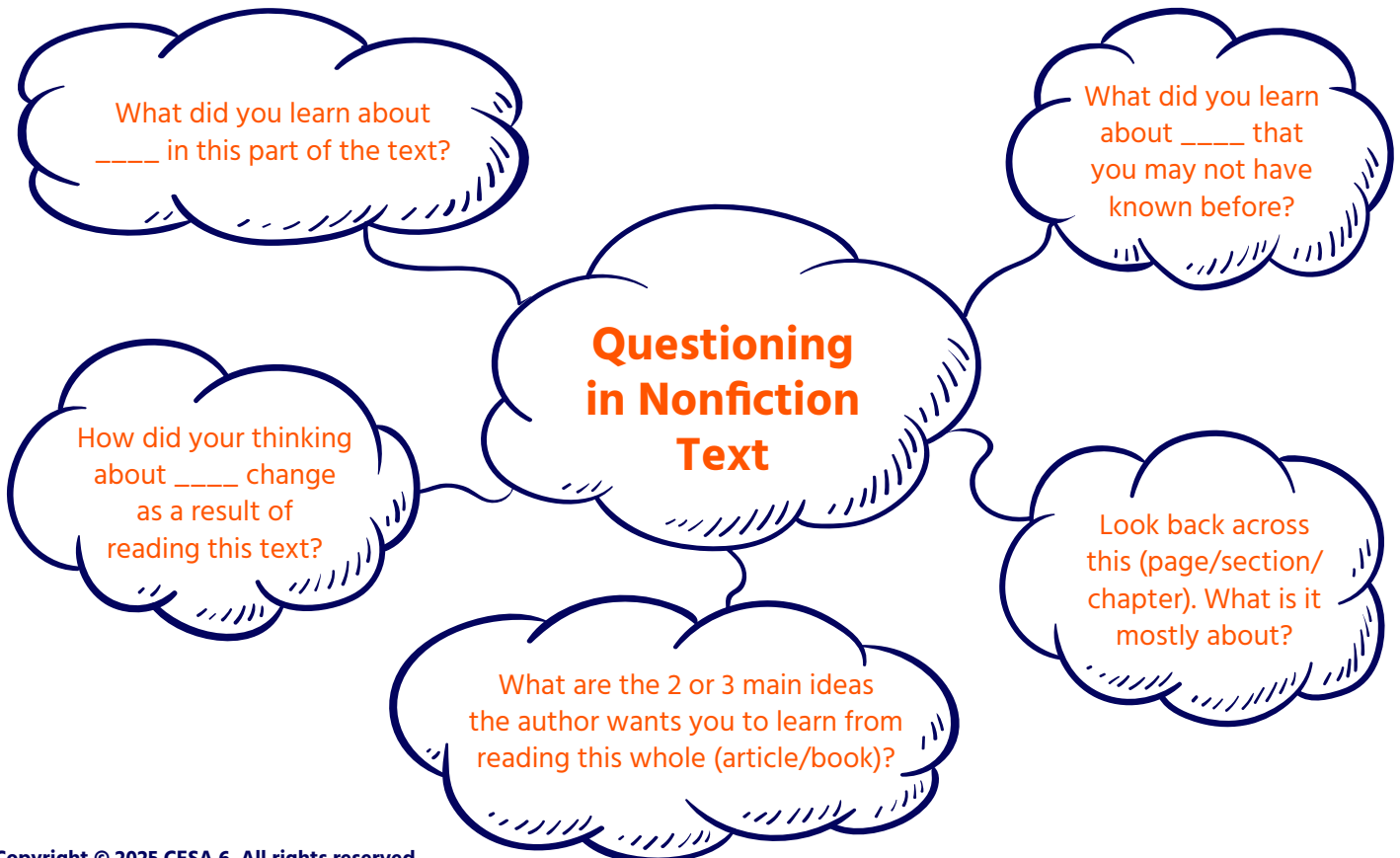
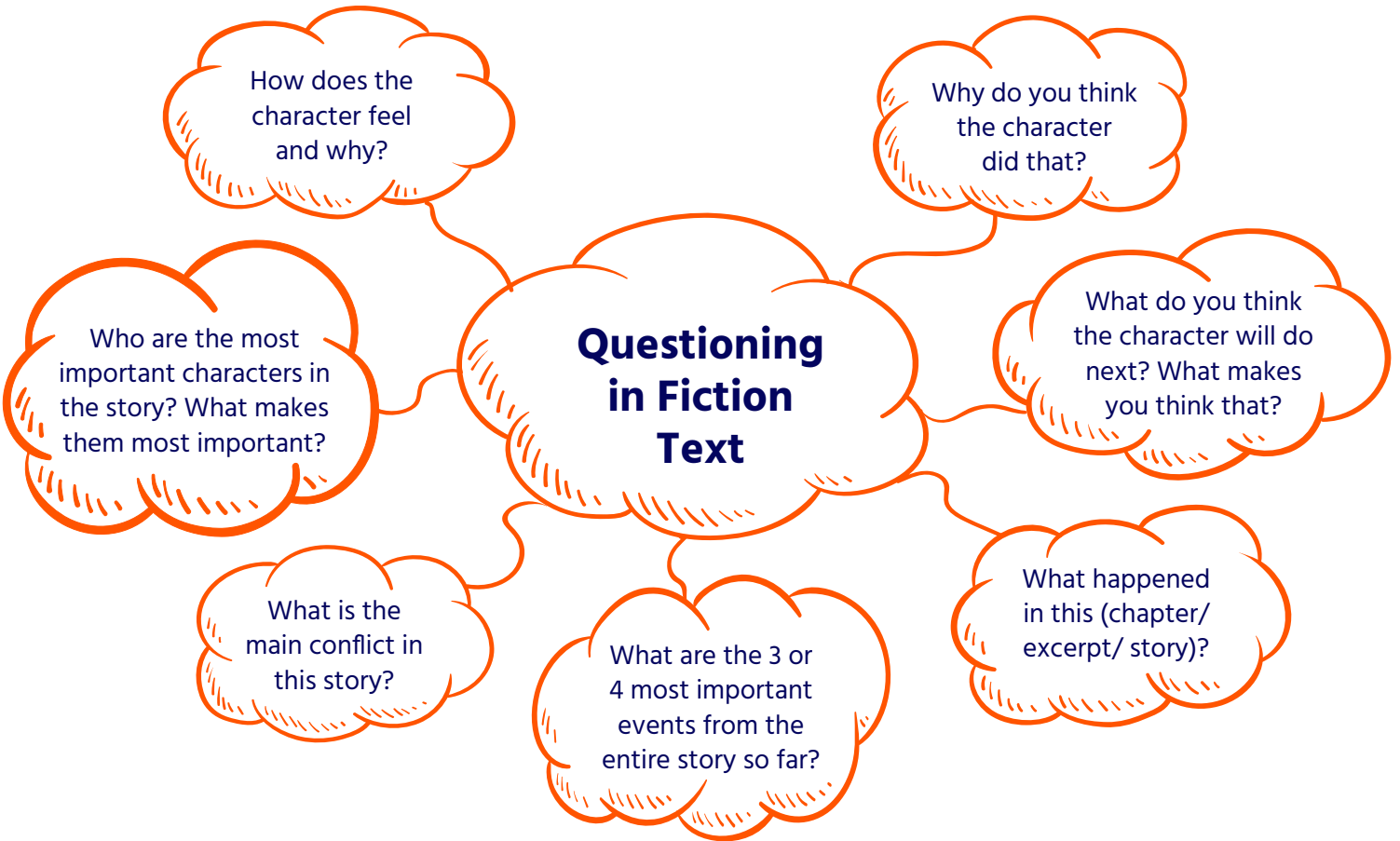
As readers, we all make mistakes from time to time, and that's perfectly okay. Sharing your own mistakes with your child and demonstrating how to fix them can be a powerful lesson.

- ✓ **Oops! I just read the word ____ but I realized that the word is ____ so I am going to go back and reread that so I read it correctly.**
- ✓ **I need to go back and reread that because it didn't make sense to me the first time.**
- ✓ **I just realized that the character is scared. I'm going to reread this part and make my voice sound scared.**

By doing this, you show your child that it's normal to make mistakes and that the key is to go back and fix them.

This helps build resilience and encourages the process of self-monitoring in young readers.

Comprehension



Extending Your Reading Experience

Reading opens up new opportunities for you to explore alongside your child. Curiosity is a powerful tool for learning and growth, and sharing this curiosity is a wonderful way to foster it in your child. Here are some ideas to spark and nurture that curiosity together!

1. Visit your local library

- Explore sections of the library, story hour opportunities, and other events the library has to offer.
- Explore summer reading opportunities offered by your local library.



2. Exploring more research on a topic

- Explore books, articles, websites or videos together to learn more about the topic.
- Explore new information about another topic that interests you that was inspired from the reading experience.



3. Drawing



- Capture a favorite scene from the book.
- Capture the feelings in a character

drawing - you can add words to the drawing to describe how the character is feeling and why.

- Capture an idea of new learning if the book was non-fiction.

4. Making books

- Write your own book.
- Write a book with a different ending.
- Write about one character.
- Write a graphic novel.
- Write a book about something you know a lot about.



5. Writing

- Share writing that comes home from school.
- Write lists (grocery lists, to do lists, summer list).
- Write a summary of a part of the book or a retelling of a part of the book.
- Write new information learned from a non-fiction experience.



6. Acting out your book

- Play pretend as the characters.
- Act out a retell of the book or part of the book.



7. Cook together using a recipe

- Read and discuss how to follow a recipe.
- Cook the recipe and talk about the experience.
- Explore connections with family traditions.



9. Virtual field trips

- Many places have free videos or virtual tours.
- Local/National museums
 - » [EAA Museum-Virtual Field Trip](#)
 - » [Milwaukee Museum 360 Virtual Exhibit Tours](#)
 - » [World Virtual Tours](#)
- Explore YouTube videos observing bald eagles, other animals, or events.



8. Playing together

- Build oral language through board games, card games, road games, etc.
- Playing outside and exploring at a local park.
- Collect treasures from a walk and talk about them or make something out of them.





Remember, the main focus is to enjoy the book together, and make lasting memories.

Happy Reading!



Literacy