SPINA BIFIDA ASSOCIATION

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Hablamos español

Reading Comprehension and Spina Bifida

September 2024

Preschool

Many skills needed to understand reading start to grow when children are very young, even before they can read words. These skills grow through talking, listening, and playing with parents, caregivers, teachers, and other children at home, school, and in the community.

During preschool, children learn language skills that later help them understand what they read. These early skills help prepare children for reading comprehension once they learn how to read words.

Important early skills include:

- Learning the meanings of new words
- Learning to ask and answer questions during conversations and story time
- Learning to guess what might happen next in a story or situation
- Learning to retell or explain a story or event to others

Preschool children can practice these skills at home and at school in many ways, such as:

- Asking “why” questions during the day to help children understand cause and effect
  - Example: “Why do we feed the dog every day?” or “Why do we need houses?”
- Helping children use clues to figure things out
  - Example: “It’s snowing outside and the fireplace is on. What season do you think it is?”
- Looking at pictures together and talking about what is happening
  - Ask questions like: “Are the children getting along? How can you tell? What are they doing?”
- Giving children simple chores and self-care tasks
  - Talk through “what if” questions like: “What should you do if it rains?” or “What should you do if you feel sick?”

Children with Spina Bifida, like all children, benefit greatly from being read to by parents and teachers. While reading, it is important to stop sometimes and talk about the story. Asking questions helps children learn how to think about what they hear and teaches them how to be active readers.

For example:

- Pause and ask the child to guess what might happen next
- Ask the child to fill in missing details

It is also important not to stop too often, since this can make the story harder to follow. Reading short parts again can help the child understand the story better.

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Kindergarten and Elementary School

Many children with Spina Bifida learn how to read words during early elementary school. However, they may have more trouble understanding what they read. Because of this, it is helpful to check listening and reading comprehension skills early, especially around second or third grade.

If a child has mild trouble understanding reading, teachers and parents should work together to support the child both at school and at home. Teachers can show parents strategies to help with reading comprehension.

Some children with Spina Bifida may need special reading support. These supports should be **evidence-based**, meaning they are strategies that research has shown to work for children with similar learning needs.

A main goal is to help the child become an **active reader**, not someone who just reads without thinking. Children should learn to slow down, think about what they are reading, and use strategies before, during, and after reading.

Before Reading

- Take a “book walk” before reading
  - Look at the cover, title, pictures, chapter names, and length of the book
  - Talk about how hard the words might be
  - Parents and teachers should show children how to do this so they can learn to do it on their own
- Look up new or hard words in a dictionary
  - Teach children to use clues from the story to figure out word meanings
- Help the child decide why they are reading
  - For fun? To learn information? To answer questions?
- If there are comprehension questions, read them first
  - Help the child figure out what kind of answers are needed (facts or ideas)
- Help the child make predictions
  - Use pictures, past experiences, and what the child already knows
  - Ask: “What do you think this book will be about?” and “What do you think you will learn?”

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During Reading

- Teach the child to highlight or mark important details
- Read aloud together and talk about the story
  - Ask questions to check understanding
  - Stop and reread if something is confusing
- Talk about predictions
  - Ask: “Is the story going how you thought it would?”
- Help the child organize ideas using tools like outlines or story maps

After Reading

- Talk about predictions
  - Ask what was correct and what changed
- Answer different kinds of questions
  - Some answers are found right in the text (who, what, where)
  - Others need clues and thinking (why, how, what if)
- Encourage rereading
  - Reading again helps children understand more, especially if reading is slow the first time

These strategies help the child stay focused and understand the story better.

Additional Ideas

- Ask teachers or schools about reading programs that help with comprehension
- Over time, help the child take more responsibility for using reading strategies
  - Use an “I do, we do, you do” approach
- If rereading feels boring, try text-to-speech programs
  - These can read the text aloud to help the child understand it better

Originally created by T. Andrew Zabel, PhD, ABPP; D. Raches, & M. B. Rogers. A special thanks to Marcia Barnes, PhD, for her assistance with this content.

Reviewed on September 2021 by Robin Peterson, PhD, ABPP

This information does not constitute medical advice. As specific cases may vary from the general information presented here, the Spina Bifida Association advises readers to consult a qualified medical or other professional on an individual basis.

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