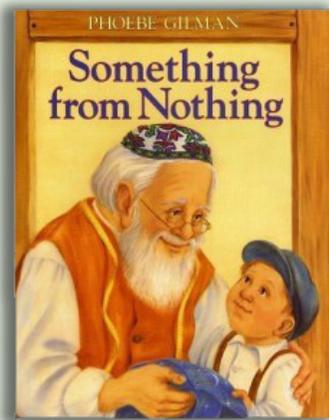


# Book Nook

This month's Book Nook topic is...

## Developing story comprehension with *Something from Nothing*



Having a large vocabulary and understanding complex language helps children learn to read and write. Listening to stories is an important contributor to a child's language skills. There are millions of children's storybooks, and while each one is different, most of them have a similar underlying structure. Just as every house has an inside frame that we can't see, every story is built around an invisible framework.

While the frame of a house includes a number of basic elements, such as the foundation, the floors, the walls, and the roof, stories generally include five key elements: the **characters** (who the story is about), the **setting** (where the story takes place), the **problem**, the **actions** that occur to solve the problem and the **resolution** (how the problem is solved and what happens in the end). To remember what these key parts of the story are, we use the acronym CSPAR.

Understanding these underlying elements will help your child make sense of the stories she hears. Your child will have to hear and talk about many, many stories to develop a sense of the CSPAR framework. Until this happens, your child may not completely understand what you're reading to her.

You can help your child learn about CSPAR by highlighting the different parts of a story with specific comments and questions during your book reading conversations.

### My chosen book:

*Something from Nothing* by Phoebe Gilman

## Why I picked it:

I was recently reminded of this story – a favourite from my own childhood – by a fellow speech-language pathologist. I think this book has remained popular because of its timeless themes of family, love, and having a prized possession.

The story centres around a young boy, Joseph, and his grandfather. When he is born, Joseph receives a wonderful blanket from his grandfather, but as he grows older, so does the blanket. Grandfather fixes the blanket by turning it into something smaller – a jacket. When the jacket gets too small, Grandfather turns it into something else. Over time, Grandfather has less and less material: the jacket becomes a vest, then a tie, then a handkerchief, and finally, a button. When Jacob loses the button, Grandfather has no material to work with. Even he cannot make “something from nothing”. Joseph is quite upset, but then he realizes he has “just enough material” to make a wonderful story about his experiences.

This story works well for highlighting CSPAR because it is well-written with a straightforward story line, a few central characters, and a clear-cut problem that many preschoolers can relate to. The idea of wearing out a favorite possession or outfit is familiar to many three and four-year-olds.

## The First Reading

Your child will particularly benefit from hearing you point out parts of CSPAR the first time you read *Something from Nothing* since this will help her understand the basic story.

You can point out different elements of CSPAR to your child before you even open the book:

- When looking at the cover, you could say: “That’s Joseph and his grandfather. They are two of the **characters** in this story. That means this story is about them.”
- You could point to the blanket they are holding and say: “That’s Joseph’s special blanket that his grandfather made him. He loves that blanket so much that he wears it out. That’s going to be a big **problem** in this story.”

By talking about these ideas before the story even starts, you are helping your child orient herself to the key elements of the story. Also, when you use the actual CSPAR names (character, problem, action, setting, and resolution), it’s helpful to stress and explain them so your child becomes familiar with those terms.

For other ways to “make new words sparkle”, [check out our Book Nook post on \*Giraffes Can’t Dance!\*](#)

As you’re reading the book, you can help your child understand the parts of CSPAR by pointing to the illustrations in the book as you comment on them:

- You could point to the setting and say, “This part of the story is taking place in Joseph’s house.”
- You could talk about what is happening in the illustrations to highlight the sequence of different actions and to help your child connect the events. For example, you could say, “Look, in this picture Grandfather is turning Joseph’s tie into something else because it’s too stained to wear.”

After you read the book, you can talk about the resolution. You could say, “Joseph solved the **problem** of not having a special item by writing a story about it.” All of these comments are helping your child pay attention and develop an understanding of story structure.

## The Second Reading

Now that your child has heard the story, you can continue to use CSPAR names, make comments and start to ask questions about what is happening in the story to see if your child is understanding the words you are reading. Don't ask too many questions, as they can make your child feel like she is being tested, but asking a few will help solidify your child's understanding of story structure.

Before starting the story, you might ask your child, "Do you remember the big **problem** in this story?" If she doesn't, that's okay. You can remind her by saying, "The **problem** in this story is that Joseph keeps wearing out the wonderful things his grandfather is making for him."

During the reading, when your child points to or comments about something happening in the book, use it as an opportunity to highlight an element of CSPAR:

- If your child points to Joseph, you could ask, "Do you remember who that is?" And when your child answers, you could say, "That's right, that's Joseph – our main **character**."
- If your child shows interest in the house or the outdoor scenery in the book, you could say, "The **setting** of the story is where the story takes place. In this part of the story, the setting is Joseph's house."
- On the page where Grandfather is cutting Joseph's vest into something smaller, you could say, "Joseph is asking his grandfather for help, and Grandfather looks like he's taking **action** by turning the vest into something else."

After the reading, or on the last page, you could ask your child, "What happened at the end of that story? What was the **resolution**?" If your child isn't sure, you can tell her what happened. You might say: "When Grandfather had no more material, and could not make Joseph anything else, Joseph decided to write a story about what had happened. That's the resolution; that means that Joseph solved his problem, and even though he doesn't have his blanket or coat or vest or tie or handkerchief or button any more, he has his story, and that is 'something from nothing'."

## The Third Reading

To fully understand a story, your child needs to go beyond the words on the page to fill in what the writer means but hasn't specifically stated. This means your child has to draw on what she already knows, as well on her problem-solving and reasoning skills. You can help your child learn to do this by encouraging her to search for meaning beyond the information provided by the illustrations and the words you read to her.

One way to encourage this type of thinking is by using thinking-out-loud comments. These are comments that start with words like:

- "I'm wondering about..."
- "I'm trying to understand..."
- "I'm trying to understand..."

Thinking-out-loud comments show your child how you are thinking about the story and trying to figure out things that are not actually stated in the book. They are not questions, so they don't require your child to respond, although she may. You can even point to your head as you make thinking-out-loud comments, to show her that you are actively thinking about the story.

## The Third Reading Con't

Here are some examples of thinking-out-loud comments that you could use while reading *Something from Nothing* to highlight parts of CSPAR:

- "I'm thinking that Grandfather's **action** of using that little bit of fabric to make a button was a great idea."
- "I'm wondering why our main **character**, Joseph, looks so upset in this picture."
- "I'm trying to figure out what I would do if I had the same **problem** as Joseph and lost my most prized possession."

These types of comments will help your child understand the story on a deeper level, and, ideally, will help your child bring this understanding to other stories that she hears.

**I hope you enjoyed this Book Nook topic. If you have a favorite book that you use to promote story comprehension, I'd love to hear about it! Please send me your feedback.**



### A little more about me

I'm a Speech-Language Pathologist working at The Hanen Centre as a Program Specialist. I combine my background in language and literacy development with my knowledge of adult learning to offer evidence-based face to face and online trainings to early childhood educators, SLPs and parents.

The Book Nook combines my passion for children's literature with my knowledge of language and literacy development. I hope you enjoy it!

**Tamara**