

More Than ABCs: Building the Critical Thinking Skills Your Child Needs for Literacy Success

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When sharing a book with your preschooler, one of the most important things to do is encourage her **story understanding**. The better your child understands the stories she hears now, the easier it will be for her to read and write stories on her own later.

The words and pictures in a book can only tell us so much. To truly understand a story, your child needs to go beyond what's written on the page or shown in the pictures. She needs to use her **critical thinking skills** to fully grasp the story's meaning.

What Is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking happens when a child draws on her existing knowledge and experience, as well as on her problem-solving skills, to do things like:

- Compare and contrast
- Explain why things happen
- Evaluate ideas and form opinions
- Understand the perspectives of others
- Predict what will happen in the future
- Think of creative solutions

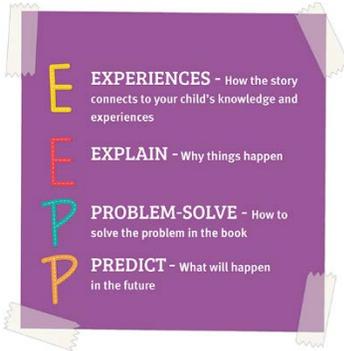
During book reading, you can help your child develop all of these skills to help her understand the story at hand, and to prepare her for literacy success.

Story Understanding – It's All Talk!

If your child just listens to a story and says very little, she won't have much opportunity to build and use the critical thinking skills she needs to understand stories. That's because this kind of thinking happens during back-and-forth conversations in which your child can draw upon her own experiences and problem-solving skills to talk about the story.

So remember to add a little conversation to every book you share with your child. Pause several times during the story to talk about what interests your child, and take a few minutes after the reading to keep the conversation going.

E's and P's – How to Get Your Child Thinking Critically



As you and your child talk about the story, keep “E’s and P’s” at the back of your mind. These are the things your child needs to think about to exercise her critical thinking skills and deepen her understanding of the story:

Experiences — Connect the story with your child's knowledge and experiences

When you relate what you’re reading to something your child already knows or has already experienced, you help her better understand the characters’ perspectives and why they think and act the way they do.

Tip to promote this skill...

Choose a book about a familiar experience – Choose a book in which the main character does something your child has experience with – for example, a book about going to the dentist or making a new friend. Start a little conversation during the reading by saying something like, “Remember your first day at school? How did you feel when you didn’t know anybody?”

Explain — Why things happen

It’s important for your child to understand not only what is happening in a story, but why it’s happening. This builds her understanding of cause-and-effect, as well as her understanding of what motivates the characters in the book.

Tip to promote this skill...

Act out the story – After you’ve read a story a few times, gather a few props and have fun acting out the story with your child. For example, collect a few bowls, spoons, a chair and a blanket to act out Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Plan who will take on each role and if there are other children around, invite them to join in. Acting out the story will help your child think about how one event leads to another and why characters act and react the way they do.

Problem-solve — How to solve the problem in the book

To understand a story, your child needs to understand the problem that must be solved. Recognizing the problem and thinking of possible solutions builds the problem-solving skills she’ll need later when analyzing texts on her own.

Tip to promote this skill...

Use a thinking-out-loud comment – Thinking-out-loud comments start with words like, “I’m thinking that...” or “I’m wondering about...” These kinds of comments show your child how you are thinking about the book and encourage her to think along the same lines.

To encourage your child to problem-solve, make a comment like, “I’m trying to figure out what the pig could do to frighten away the wolf”. This kind of comment doesn’t require your child to respond, although there’s a good chance that she will.

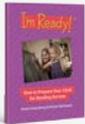
Predict — What will happen in the future

A good reader uses her knowledge and experience to predict what will happen in a story. Children who are encouraged to predict what will happen next get into the habit of searching for meaning, which is really what reading is all about.

Tip to promote this skill...

Ask a question about what might happen next – During book reading, ask a question like, “What do you think Franklin will do to make it easier for him to ride his bike?” Or, when finished reading a book, ask your child to predict what could happen in the future with a question like, “Do you think the first two little pigs will build new houses now?”

By helping your child think critically now, you’re laying the foundation for her to make judgements, solve problems, think creatively, empathize with others and communicate effectively – skills she’ll need not only for literacy, but for lifelong success.



The ideas in this article are from *I'm Ready! How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*. Based on the latest research in early literacy development, this guidebook gives parents easy-to-use interaction strategies for building the critical skills that prepare young children for school.

[Learn more](#)

References

Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (2014). *I'm Ready! How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*. Toronto: Hanen Early Language Program.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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