

Book Nook

This month's Book Nook topic is...



Helping your child understand why things happen with *The Gruffalo*

When sharing a book with your preschooler, one of the most important things to do is encourage his story understanding. Reading comprehension is much more than just recognizing the words on a page – it's about understanding what the words are communicating as a whole.

The better your child understands the stories he hears, the easier it will be for him to read and write stories on his own later. Fully understanding a book is not always easy for children since they may need to go beyond the words on the page to fill in what the author means but has not specifically stated. One way to help your child understand what you read is to talk about why certain things happen in the book, or why characters do certain things.

My chosen book:

The Gruffalo by Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Axel Scheffler

Why I picked it:

This book is well loved because it rhymes, has interesting characters, and features a funny story line. In the book, a variety of animals try to get a mouse over to their homes so they can eat him. The mouse avoids their invitations by saying he's planning on meeting up with a gruffalo – a scary sounding creature that he describes in great detail. The mouse thinks he's inventing the gruffalo and is in for a surprise when he meets a real gruffalo!

There is also a lot going on in the book that is not specifically written in the text or shown in the illustrations. For example, the author does not explicitly state that the mouse is trying to trick all the other animals into believing that a gruffalo really exists. There are many opportunities to go deeper into the story with your child to help him understand why the characters act the way they do.

Helping your child understand the story when you read the book the first time:

Children tend to have more to say about a book once they are more familiar with it. That's because after they hear it a few times, they tend to understand more of what is happening, and are able to think about the story in different ways. It's much easier to follow the plot and see details you didn't notice before when you reread a book.

The first time you read *The Gruffalo*, your child should grasp [the basic elements of the story](#). Keep the story moving and have short conversations that help him remember the main characters, their actions, and also help him understand the main problem in the story.

For example, in *The Gruffalo*, Julia Donaldson never explicitly states that the mouse has a big problem – all the other animals in the forest want to eat him! In your first reading, you might make a comment like “This mouse has a big problem - everyone wants to eat him!” and wait to see how your child responds. You could also ask a question like “Why is the snake inviting the mouse over for a feast?” These kinds of comments and questions will reinforce your child's basic understanding of the plot.

(By the way, “feast” might be a new word for your child. You can help explain it using the [Shoot for the SSTaRS strategy](#).)

Helping your child understand the story when you read the book again:

Once your child has a basic understanding of the story, start to have longer conversations and talk more deeply about the story. Encourage your child to use his reasoning skills in two ways:

1. By making “thinking-out-loud” comments
2. By asking questions that build understanding

Make “thinking-out-loud” comments

“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.

“Thinking-out-loud” comments start with words like:

- “I’m thinking that...”
- “I’m wondering about...”
- “I’m trying to figure out...”

Unlike questions, comments don't require a response. If you make a comment based on the part of the book your child is interested in, and then wait, chances are your child will want to add his two cents!

Some examples of “thinking-out-loud” comments you could use to highlight the characters' motivations in *The Gruffalo* are:

- “I’m thinking that the mouse doesn't believe there is such a thing as a gruffalo.”
- “I’m wondering if the fox really wants to have the mouse over for lunch.”
- “I’m trying to figure out why the gruffalo is scared of the mouse.”

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How your child responds to these comments will give you an idea of how much he understands. You can elaborate on these comments and use the pictures and text to support your child's understanding. For example, if you say, "I'm wondering if the fox really wants to have the mouse over for lunch," and your child does not respond, you could then provide further information by pointing to the picture of the fox and saying, "Look at that smirk and his squinty eyes - he looks pretty suspicious to me. I think he's trying to trick the mouse so he can eat him for lunch." (There are some more interesting words here! You can help explain them to your child using the [Shoot for the SSTaRS strategy](#).)

By making these types of comments, you are modelling a way for your child to express his inner thoughts and ideas. You are also demonstrating different ways that your child can think about what's happening in the book, and that he can look for meaning beyond the written words of a story.

Ask questions that build understanding

Once your child is familiar with the basic elements of *The Gruffalo* (for example, who the main characters are, where the story takes place, and the actions the different characters take), you can ask questions that go beyond what is written on the page and shown in the illustrations, such as:

- "Why is the mouse so surprised when the gruffalo appears?"
- "How do you know the mouse's plan is working?"
- "How do you know the mouse is lying to the other animals?"

If your child has difficulty answering questions like this, you could provide the answer yourself and continue with the book.

These kinds of questions encourage children to think beyond what is written and illustrated in the book and draw on their knowledge and reasoning skills.

The more times you read the story, the more you will be able to make "thinking-out-loud" comments and ask questions that deepen your child's understanding of the story. As you engage your child in conversations that encourage him to think more deeply about a book, you are helping to develop the comprehension skills he will need to read successfully on his own.

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!

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