

Helping Adolescents Improve Their Reading: Tips for Parents



There are many ways parents/guardians can continue to support their youth's reading development and encourage them to maintain positive reading habits well beyond elementary school.

Three components of reading adolescents can improve:

Vocabulary: the words students must know to communicate and read effectively

Fluency: the capacity to read text accurately, quickly, and smoothly

Comprehension: the ability to understand and gain meaning from what has been read

Why is it important to help adolescents improve their reading skills?

- ✓ Middle school and high school students need a strong vocabulary and reading comprehension skills to perform well on state assessments, such as the MCAS.
- ✓ The SAT®, the exam colleges and universities look at to determine whether students can succeed in their post-secondary education, has reading comprehension sections, a newly added writing section, and sentence completion problems.
- ✓ Reading is an important avenue for learning new material and gathering information.
- ✓ Having strong reading skills is critical to success in college, in most careers, and in life.

What can parents/guardians do?

Help adolescents increase their vocabulary. When students have a large vocabulary, it is easier for them to understand text and to read fluently.

- ◆ Encourage youth to ask adults what new words they hear, or read, mean. (Hint: Parents should not panic if they are asked for the definitions of words they do not know. Adults and youth can find the word together in the dictionary.)
- ◆ Children, adolescents, and adults learn new words through verbal interactions with others. Find ways to increase conversation-time in the home; turn off the TV and talk about current events, what's happening in family members' lives, and other interests. Adults should make a conscious effort to use more complex language in their conversations as their children grow and mature.
- ◆ Play word games with adolescents. Games such as Scrabble, Boggle, Upwords, and Scattergories are fun and will help youth learn new vocabulary words.
- ◆ Take adolescents to a variety of places, such as museums, zoos, historical sites, and plays. Through these varied experiences, they will gain exposure to a slew of new vocabulary words.
- ◆ The more one reads, the greater his/her vocabulary will become. Provide books and magazines in the home for adolescents. Give them books, gift certificates to books stores, and magazine subscriptions. Choose topics the adolescent will enjoy, such as sports, hobbies, movies, comic books, or other topics of interest to them. Clip articles from magazines or the paper that may interest the adolescent. For suggestions on titles adolescents may enjoy, visit the Young Adult Library Association Web site at www.ala.org/yalsa. On this site, there is a list consisting of books that were recommended to teens, by teens.
- ◆ Visit the library with adolescents. Encourage them to ask the librarian for suggestions on titles that reflect their reading level and interests.

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Helping Adolescents Improve Their Reading: Tips for Parents (continued)

What can parents/guardians do?

Help adolescents improve their reading fluency. Students who struggle with reading fluency stumble over unfamiliar words, repeat words or phrases, omit or add words, disregard punctuation and blend sentences together, or get stuck mid-sentence. Consequently, the meaning of the text they are trying to read gets lost.

According to the National Center for Family Literacy, parents/guardians can help their adolescents in this area by trying the following techniques.

- ❖ **Model fluent reading.** Choose a section of a book, magazine, or newspaper then read it effortlessly and smoothly, with expression, to the adolescent.
- ❖ **Try “Repeated Reading.”** Read a passage then ask the adolescent to repeat the reading. Another option is for the adult to tape their voice as they read the passage then tape the youth’s voice reading the same material. Play back the tapes to note the difference between the two readings. The adolescent should practice the passage until s/he reads it effortlessly.
- ❖ **Engage in “Choral Reading.”** In this strategy, the adult and the adolescent read the passage at the same time, then discuss the problem areas of text.
- ❖ **Try “Echo Reading.”** Read a line or sentence from a book, then have the adolescent read the same line, trying to mimic the adult’s expression and fluency.

Support the development of reading comprehension skills. Naturally, when students increase their vocabulary, improve their reading fluency, and read often, their comprehension skills also improve. In addition, parents/guardians can try the following ideas.

- ✓ Adults often talk with others about books they are reading. Ask pre-teens and teens for their opinions about what they are reading and/or about the author. Adults should talk about what they are reading with adolescents.
- ✓ Parents/guardians can help their children by reading the books that the students are assigned for school. That way, they can discuss the books and check for comprehension.
- ✓ Listen to books on tape in the car or as a family at home. Talk about the stories.
- ✓ After clipping articles for the adolescent, follow up with questions such as, *What did you think of the article I gave you?* This will give youth practice in talking about what they read.
- ✓ Take part in community events that focus on reading, for example, “Teen Read Week” each October.

Children this age typically pull away from their parents as they assert their independence. Although adolescents may be resistant to parental intervention in their education, do not give up! Youth this age still need your loving guidance and support so that they can succeed academically. Talk to teachers and/or the school’s reading specialist for suggestions on how to help your adolescent improve his/her reading skills. ☆

Sources: “Advice for Parents: Adolescent Development” at <http://www.teachervision.fen.com>; “Improving Fluency Skills” and “Expanding Vocabulary Helps Reading Comprehension” by the National Center for Family Literacy at www.familit.org; “Helping Your Adolescent with Reading: Tips for Parents,” a section of “Family Activities and Handouts to Share,” by the Nevada Reading Excellence Act Project at <http://www.nevadarea.org/readingweek/family.htm>; “Reading Tips for Parents of Middle Schoolers,” by Jay Davidson, at www.gokid.org.

