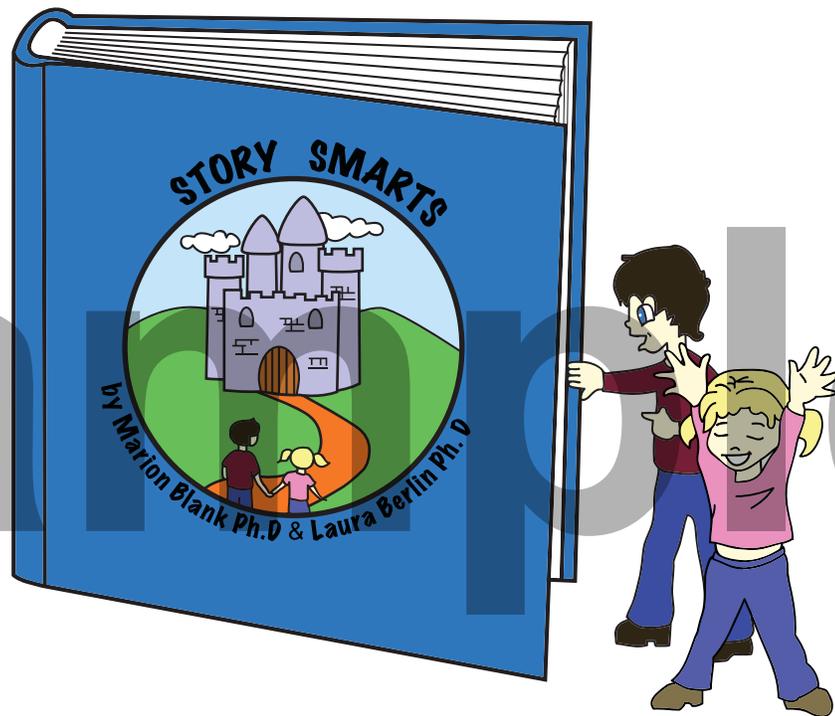


STORY SMARTS BOOKS 1-30



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STORY SMARTS

Teaching the ABC's of Reading Comprehension for Children 4 Years and Older

Introduction

“What did you do in school today?” In home after home, this is the greeting that children encounter at the end of the school day. It’s also the greeting that frequently leads to little, if anything, in the way of a response. The youngsters look as though they are totally stymied. It’s as if they had been asked to scale the Mount Everest of questions. And, as the weeks and months go by, it doesn’t get any better. They continue to be stumped by this query which is posed with the best of intentions. Yet, the question seems so simple!

But it only seems simple because it is something you mastered long ago. As with any skill that you’ve conquered, there is amnesia for the process that got you there. For example, do you remember how you learned to talk, or how you learned to read, or how you learned to play a sport? With rare exceptions, this type of knowledge is irretrievable.

Of course, you might be thinking that a single question such as “What did you do in school today?” is nowhere near as complex as systems like talking and reading. That is where you are off base. The demands of the question are far more complex than is almost ever realized.

For a start, to be answered effectively, the question requires the child to take numerous events distributed over hours of time, and then organize the myriad of details in a fashion where those that are insignificant can be deleted (e.g., getting on the bus, going to the bathroom) while those that are significant (e.g., doing an art project, learning a new song) can be selected. Then he or she has to find the single preeminent event that captures the day and put it into one or more sentences that the listener can comprehend. Further, this is taking place in conversation where there are built-in time constraints. If the interchange is not to break down, the child has to do all this in three to five seconds.

So the question is far from simple. Indeed, it’s most appropriate to think of it as “the canary in the coal mine”—a test marker for a much larger process. And it is a process that is, by no means, restricted to answering this question. Day-in and day-out, it is called upon through much of the child’s life. When? In dealing with the demands for reading comprehension. Skill in this process is one of the keys to reading success.

The connection, though, is rarely realized. The question “What did you do in school today?” starts getting asked when the child is a preschooler. Reading comprehension, on the other hand, is generally on the back burner until a child reaches third to fourth grade. The gap of several years makes it seem as if these are totally unrelated skills.

The whole thrust in early reading is on decoding; that is, recognizing letters, figuring out the sounds they represent and then coming up with the words these sounds form (c-a-t is ‘cat’). The words are simple and no one is very concerned about whether or not the children comprehend the message that the words are designed to convey. Comprehension is essentially off the radar screen. It is only when the message gets much more complex—and that occurs around fourth grade, that the focus shifts to comprehension. However, if little has been done prior to fourth grade, children can face disaster. The new demands plunge them into a morass of complexity for which they are unprepared.

Ideally, the basis for effective reading comprehension should be established early—well before the child reads. The good news is that it is easy and fun to accomplish. Young children’s spoken language is amazingly rich. Without requiring any reading on the part of the child, he or she can be taught—via spoken language—the critical abilities needed for reading comprehension. This is what Story Smarts is designed to do.

The program is ideal for children who have not yet started to read and for those who are in the early years of reading. Generally this will be children in the four to eight year age range. It can also be used with older children who have difficulties in spoken language—but who do have the ability to speak in complete sentences.

The stories and their associated activities have been carefully crafted to enable children to grasp, in a relatively short time, the essence of a story and its retelling. Depending on how frequently you use the program, your child is likely to show significant gains within three to four months. As you will see, the gains are not restricted to these stories. There will be a general enhancement that extends to almost all other stories, as well as to the recounting of events such as “What did you do in school today?”

Design of the Program

The program contains 30 stories. The stories are divided into two levels: Level One Stories (1-15) are shorter and simpler. They allow your child to develop the basics in a sure, steady manner which offers success from the very start. Level Two Stories (16-30) are longer and more advanced. Building on the basics, they take your child to more sophisticated levels of understanding and retelling.

What You Will Be Doing

You start with Story 1 and then move sequentially through each story that follows. You complete one story on any day and you aim to complete two to three stories a week. Each story takes about 15-30 minutes.

You first read the story to your child. Then you turn to this guide to take him or her through the story retelling process. As your child speaks, you write down (record) what he or she says. For ease of use, the record forms have been integrated within the guide and appear at precisely the points where they are needed.

Before starting the program with your child, it's useful to read through one or two stories. In addition, it is helpful to try out some stories with a friend, spouse or partner so that you can become familiar with the material.

The Story Activities: The Steps Used With Each Story

Step A: You Read the Story Aloud

First, you read the pages of the story much as you would any storybook. Then you put the story aside.

Step B: You Tell the Summary (with Picture Cues)

Next, you turn to the page after the story where you will find a brief summary of the story you have just read. You tell the summary to your child —while simultaneously showing mini-pictures of the story that help him or her follow what you are saying.

Step C: Your Child Fills in Parts of the Summary (with Picture Cues)

Next, you provide a summary as in Step B. This time, however, you stop at selected points and your child fills in appropriate information. In all cases, you are given the information needed to judge whether your child's responses are acceptable. When they are not, you are given steps to follow that will lead your child to improved performance.

Step D: Your Child Provides Full Summary (with Picture Cues)

Now, you ask your child to independently offer a full summary of the story while simultaneously looking at the mini-pictures that provide relevant cues.

As your child relates the story, you record what he or she says. Then, using the guidelines that are provided, you evaluate the summary to see if it is adequate. Your goal here is not to get a “score;” rather it’s to determine if your child needs additional support. For example, the response may be rambling; on the other hand, it may be lacking essential details. Whenever you find that help is needed, you follow a set of procedures that are in Step D under the title **Overcoming Problems**.

As noted above in Step B, you have already presented a summary to your child. Therefore, in being asked to retell the story, your child is not confronted with having to come up with a totally independent summary. Instead, the hope and expectation is that he or she will rely on the model that you have provided and use it as a scaffold in formulating his or her response.

One of the key features of your model is that it is phrased in the past tense. It may seem strange to raise this point since it is one that is almost never discussed. Nevertheless, it is of critical importance. Retelling, by definition, involves events that are no longer present. If these events are to be adequately captured by language, it’s essential that they be expressed in the past tense. (By the way, one reason for the difficulty children experience with the question “What did you do in school today?” stems from their not having yet grasped the way in which the past tense operates in relating events.)

Given its importance, a criterion you will regularly be using in evaluating the retelling, is “Has the summary been formulated in the past tense?” If your child has still not attained this skill, it should be taken as a sign that additional support is needed. Accordingly, you then implement the procedures outlined in **Overcoming Problems**.

Step E: Your Child Provides Full Summary (without Picture Cues)

In this final step, you ask your child to provide a full summary of the story without seeing any pictures.

At this step, just as in Step D, you record your child’s summary and evaluate it for its adequacy. All the comments offered relative to Step D apply here as well. This includes evaluating the summary for whether or not the ideas are expressed in the past tense. Anytime your evaluation indicates that your child needs additional support, you implement the procedures outlined in the section **Overcoming Problems**.

You are now ready to move to Story 1.

Story Smarts: Story 17

A WALK IN THE SNOW



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Step A – What to do

Sit with your child, next to you, at a desk or table where you can comfortably read and write. Place the page so each picture is in clear view. Read aloud the words as you would with any story.

Do not ask your child any questions. If s/he asks a question, answer it and move on. If s/he asks many questions, say, “When the story is finished, I’ll answer your questions.”



This man loves to walk. He doesn't care what the weather is like. He walks every day—even when it is snowing. He actually likes the snow. It is soft to walk on and it makes him feel good.

Story 17: A Walk In The Snow

Story 17 - Step B: You Tell the Summary (with Picture Cues)

What to do: Put aside the story pages. Say, "I am going to tell you a summary of the story we just read." Point to the 1st picture below as you read aloud the 1st sentence. Repeat for each of the next four pictures & sentences. Then go to Step C.



There was a man who liked to walk, even in the snow.



But his dog did not like to do that.



So when they went walking, the man had to pull her.



One time the snow was very deep and it covered the dog.



So the man picked up the dog and she did not have to do anymore walking.

About the Authors

Dr. Marion Blank is a developmental psychologist who has spent over forty years studying how children learn. She has lectured extensively around the world, served as a consultant to government bureaus in many countries, authored over sixty articles and seven books on language. Recently she has published *Phonics Plus Five*, a comprehensive and unique reading program. Dr. Blank is on the faculty of the Department of Child Psychiatry at Columbia University, where she is Director of the Light on Literacy Program. From 1973 to 1983, Dr. Blank was a Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Rutgers Medical School where she served as the director of a research unit in reading disabilities. From 1960 to 1973, she was on the faculty of the Department of Psychiatry at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York.

Throughout her career, Dr. Blank has been the recipient of many awards and commendations, including a U.S. Public Health Service Career Development Award, an Award of Commendation from the New Jersey Speech and Hearing Association, and the Elwyn Morey Memorial Lectureship in Australia. She has been the New Jersey nominee for the Frank R. Kleffner Clinical Career Award of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association. In addition, she is a member and fellow of the American Psychological Association, and on the board of the New Jersey Association of Children with Learning Disabilities. She has served on the editorial boards of a number of journals concerned with the issues of language and learning, such as *Child Development*, *Applied Psycholinguistics*, and *Child Development and Care*, as well as the boards of prestigious organizations, including the William T. Grant Foundation and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Dr. Laura Berlin is a psychologist with a long-standing interest in the development of language and learning. She received both her Master's degree in School Psychology and her Ph.D. in Psychology from Yeshiva University in New York. She has collaborated with Marion Blank on a number of key projects including the Preschool Language Assessment Instrument (PLAI and PLAI-2), a widely-used test that assesses the verbal communication skills of preschool age children and *The Parent's Guide to Educational Software*, a handbook to help parents choose the best educational programs for their children. She has had extensive administrative experience organizing the teaching and fellowship programs in the Department of Psychiatry at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. She has a keen interest in community affairs and in applying her knowledge and skills to fostering better education in a variety of settings. She has served on a wide range of committees aimed at improving educational and health services in Connecticut where she currently resides.