

Dr. Paula Kluth's answers to follow-up questions from the webinar on

***"He Reads but He Doesn't Understand":
Supporting the Reading Comprehension of Students with Autism,***

based on the material in the book *"A Land We Can Share": Teaching Literacy to Students with Autism*, co-authored with Kelly Chandler-Olcott

To view a recording of the webinar, go to www.brookespublishing.com/autism/webinar

1. How do we help autistic students who are adept word callers become strategic readers in order to comprehend text?

This is probably too big a question to answer in a couple of sentences. Some of the ideas we recommend in our reading chapter, however, are:

- dialoguing about a text of interest to the student on paper, and embedding strategy use in that, so the student can have a meaningful and supportive context to consider what it means
- modeling through a think-aloud your own thinking processes while reading a text (stopping deliberately to discuss that thinking and signaling very clearly with voice and gaze to the student when you are reading the actual text and when you are sharing your thinking)
- chunking the text deliberately (maybe into sections of one or two paragraphs) then asking the student (after she has had some strategy use modeled with the think-aloud as above) to stop after each section and talk, in her own words, about what it was about
- structuring the reading experience with a graphic organizer, to help get at meaning instead of the literal words, and showing the student how to fill that out, then gradually asking her to help you with that process, then over time, to complete the organizer on her own
- using drama both in the teaching of the content and in the assessment. For some students it will be helpful to show instead of tell when it comes to key questions about the text

2. How can background knowledge be supplied/regained at the age of 20?

Good question. It depends on what kind of background knowledge you're talking about.

Is the age the crucial variable here (and therefore does the author of this question have a concern about age-appropriateness)?

I think that film clips, magazines, newspapers, television programs (especially content-rich ones such as those featured on history and science channels), interactive web sites, nonfiction books for children and young adults, and museum visits are, in general, good background knowledge builders for all ages, including us as adults, but we might recommend one of them more strongly depending on the topic.

As we shared in the webinar, you might also consider just telling about your own experiences. Bring photos in from vacations and special events and talk about situations you have dealt with that are related to the reading selection. It is especially important to share ideas and experiences with students who cannot communicate reliably and, therefore, cannot ask easily ask questions or request information.

3. How can you help a second grade child with autism write what he knows in complete sentences giving a written summary of a story?

Is it the summary part that he's struggling with, or the complete sentences? How does the autism play a part--does he have a hard time summarizing key ideas because it all seems important, because he can't control the mechanics of writing well physically, or some other reason? Did he read the story himself or hear it? These are some of the questions you would need to explore as his problem may be related to movement differences, sensory problems, or learning struggles. Our recommendations would change depending on which category his problem falls under, but in general we would suggest the following:

- changing the demands of the exercise and working your way up to multiple sentences; ask instead for a good summary and at least one sentence at first
- allow the child to use a keyboard or computer instead of having to write ideas on paper—for many students with autism labels, writing and the motor planning it requires can be incredibly challenging and can cause learners to focus more on their body (and getting it to work effectively) than on content and comprehension
- allow the student, at first, to share ideas verbally in complete sentences
- give him some sentence starters and let him finish the sentences instead of having to do the entire task independently
- let him first talk out or draw his answer so you can be sure he has the content; this way, you can determine if he is losing key information when reading or in the act of writing
- ask your occupational therapist about appropriate supports for writing for this child such as a slant board, a pencil grip, or seating change

4. My child does not like to read to me at home. How do I encourage her to do this?

There are several things to try to motivate your child and encourage her to read. You might begin by working with her to set up a comfortable spot for enjoying books. One student we know loves washing machines so his mother set up a reading corner in the family laundry room complete with a laundry basket of favorite books and a big comfy rocking chair. Your child might like a beanbag chair in her bedroom or an armchair in the family room. Stock this area with reading materials that might be of interest to the child, keeping in mind that favorites might include not only books and magazines but pamphlets, advertisements, documents, and even owner's manuals.

In addition, you can try setting a time limit for her reading so she knows the beginning and ending times for the activity. If you also read during this time, it may help her see the time as designated for literacy.

Finally, you could try videotaping your child reading at home. She may find this both funny and motivating; some children with autism like to watch themselves "perform" on video and, in some instances, they may be able to mimic the desirable behavior you capture with the camera just as they mimic some of their favorite cartoons and movies.

5. How do you improve literacy skills of very young children with autism in the pre-school setting?

The most important recommendation would be to make a lot of literacy materials available to all. This includes lots of art supplies, books, paper, writing utensils, and computers. Consider also the use of supplies that might motivate and interest students with autism who often like gadgets and machines. For these learners old typewriters, disconnected telephones, tape recorders, and label makers might be provided. Look for supplies that will appeal to all of your students including those with sensory needs (e.g. touch and feel books, squishy or spongy letters) and communication differences (e.g., talking books such as those made by Leap Frog, computer programs, assistive technology).

It is also important to encourage dramatic play and storytelling, even for students who do not have reliable communication. Even those who do not speak can have fun dancing (in whatever way they enjoy); acting out rhymes and stories, and watching peers do the same.

Finally, be sure to support students who do not sit and listen as their typical peers might. For these students use books on CD and on DVD (the Reading Rainbow television program creates many of these video books), put posters of poems and rhymes on walls and doors so quick readings can be shared throughout the day, and introduce songs that feature letters, sounds, and rhyming words.