Clever decoding strategies

What goes through your child’s head when he’s reading and comes to a word he doesn’t know? Encourage him to think like a detective by asking himself these questions that will help him “decode” unfamiliar words.

― Does it remind me of a word I know?‖

Once your youngster learns to read a word, he can use it to read other words. For practice, take turns picking a word and saying words it makes you think of. See a stop sign? Your youngster might say stop starts like step or rhymes with top. Now have him use this strategy when he reads. Example: “S-t-o-m-p looks like stop. But there’s an m in it. Stomp!”

― Is there a part I recognize?‖

Even if your child doesn’t know a long word, chances are there are small words inside it that he can read. Choose a long word in a book, and see who can find the most words in it. In window, your youngster may see win and wind. Or maybe he’ll notice that macaroni contains car and on. Putting together the familiar parts can help him read the whole word.

― Does it have a pattern?‖

What do cake, lime, and note have in common? They all follow the pattern consonant / long vowel / consonant / silent e. When you read with your child, encourage him to look for words that fit patterns he is learning in school. Spotting the pattern might help him correctly read mine instead of saying min, for instance.

Trace the groundhog’s shadow

Will the groundhog see his shadow this Groundhog Day? The groundhog in this activity will—and by tracing the shadow, your youngster will give her “writing muscles” a workout.

● Sculpt. Let your child use clay or play dough to make a groundhog. She’ll strengthen her fingers as she rolls and shapes the dough.

● Trace. Have your youngster trace her groundhog’s shadow to work on hand coordination. Lay a sheet of paper under a lamp. She can position the groundhog so the light casts a shadow on the paper. Then, she could use a crayon to trace around the shadow’s outline.
Write to learn

As your child learns to write, she can also use writing to learn. Here are a few ideas.

“What I know” journal. Encourage your youngster to start a notebook about what she’s studying in school. After a science experiment with magnets, she might list things that she discovered are magnetic, then test household objects and add to her list. Or if she’s learning to solve story problems in math, she could make up her own problems and illustrate them.

“Read to learn” journal. What would your child ask a famous person or a fictional character? She can use her imagination by writing pretend interview questions and making up answers. Maybe she’d ask, “What’s the hardest thing about being a dragon?” and reply: “Hiding under the bed!”

Reading log. Suggest that your youngster keep track of books she reads. She could practice summarizing by writing a sentence or two about each title. She may even rate each book with 1–5 stars—she’ll practice critical thinking as she compares books and decides which ones she liked more or less than others.

Q&A Silent reading

Q. My daughter has started reading silently. What is my role now?

A. The ability to read silently shows that your child is becoming more independent as a reader. Still, she’ll benefit from the same kinds of things you did when she was just beginning to read.

For example, make sure she has plenty of reading material. Take regular trips to the library and encourage your daughter to choose a variety of books. Also, set aside time to read. You might snuggle up and read your own book alongside her—you’ll show her that reading is a lifelong pleasure.

Finally, talk about books with your youngster. Ask her about what she reads in school and at home, and tell her what you’re reading. The two of you might even read the same book and discuss it when you’re finished.

Play with plurals

What do s and es have in common?

They turn singular words into plural ones! Play this game to help your youngster discover guidelines for choosing the correct ending when he writes.

1. Have your child label two sheets of paper, one with s and the other with es. You take one sheet, and he gets the other.

2. Set a timer for three minutes. Each of you should look through a book and write plural words you find with the ending on your sheet. For s, your youngster might list arms, birds, and cups. For es, you could write dishes, couches, and boxes.

3. When time’s up, have your child count the words on each sheet. Which ending “wins” (is most common)? He’ll see that most plural words end with s.

4. Ask your child what he notices about the es words. He may realize that many have ch, sh, s, o, x, or z before the es, while other words take an s. Then, suggest that he keep the lists handy when he writes so he can refer to the examples.

Parent to Parent

Be a reading volunteer

I wanted to support the reading program at my son Ricky’s school. Since I stay at home with my infant twins, I emailed the teacher to ask if she had take-home projects I could do.

I found out that there are many ways I can help. Sometimes the teacher sends home instructions and materials for me to make classroom games like spelling bingo and vocabulary tic-tac-toe. Other times, she has asked me to write poems or sentences on poster board. The projects are fun, and Ricky is always interested in what I’m doing.

I’ve also volunteered in the classroom a couple of times while my mom watched the twins. One morning, I read with small groups, and another day, I helped students turn their stories into books. Ricky likes seeing me in his classroom, and I like that I’m making a difference at his school.