

Make Me an Offer

This activity may provide a good use for some of the junk mail that comes to your home. Every day we receive offers for new credit cards, products, games, or prizes. Reading and understanding these offers requires locating small details and determining which facts are important.

Here's what you need:

An offer for a product, credit card, game, or prize (on a piece of junk mail or the back of a cereal box, for example)

Pen or highlighter



Here's what you do:

When you receive an offer for a product in the mail, take a moment to look at it with your child. Read and discuss the details of the offer. Where are they located? How are they presented? What does a reader have to know in order to determine what is really being offered? Have you really won a million dollars (as the envelope might claim)? Encourage your child to underline or highlight the details of the offer to help her read the fine print. Also, she will need to read and determine what is most important in order to decide what to highlight.

Have your child summarize the most important details of the offer in a few short sentences. After going over these critical details, discuss whether your family should be interested in the offer. Or, have her compare and contrast one offer with another, then explain which offer she prefers and why. You might also talk about other places offers are found: cereal boxes, the Internet, or billboards, for example. You could take this one step further by discussing what the purposes of the offers are.

Keep going...

This activity highlights the importance of paying close attention to details (especially those presented in fine print). Additionally, the activity reveals some of the common features of persuasive writing, where paying attention to details is particularly important. Continue to look closely at advertisements, offers, and any persuasive language that you and your child see. When thinking about the language, ask such questions as, "What does the ad on the side of the bus tell us? What other details would we need to find out about it?" These conversations will help your child grasp the importance of understanding the facts and details in what she reads.

Crazy Cookbook

Advertisements, brochures, recipes, telephone books, and catalogs are sources of information that we often use to help us perform specific tasks. When using these materials, we must pay careful attention to the text's organization, language, and visual features.

Here's what you need:

A recipe from a cookbook, newspaper, or magazine

Pen

Paper or index card

Here's what you do:

Ask your child to think about how he prepares his favorite foods. Discuss how a cook follows a recipe by first gathering ingredients and then putting them together in a certain order. (You might even have this conversation as you prepare a meal or snack with your child.)

Perhaps it is easy to come up with the recipe for a milkshake, but what about a recipe for a disaster? a surprise? a warm summer day? a perfect baseball game? a fun birthday party? a day at the beach?

Take a look at a recipe in a cookbook or in the food section of a newspaper or magazine. As your child writes the new "recipe," make sure that he is clear about the recipe's form (a list of ingredients followed by assembly and cooking instructions).

To create the new recipe, ask your child first to think of the "ingredients." What do we need to build this thing or event?

Next, ask him to consider the order of events, or how the ingredients should be put together. Have him write the recipe on an index card or piece of paper. Encourage him to be very descriptive in his writing. When he's finished, read it out loud together, and then hang it on the refrigerator for the next time you need a new and exciting recipe!

Keep going...

Extend this activity to include discussion about other written sources of information. Talk about the kinds of information you use every day — on websites, bus maps, signs,



Crazy Cookbook

forms, and written directions, to name just some common sources. When someone in the family needs information, ask your child to help, particularly with determining what source would be best for the information needed. As situations arise, he might help you solve such questions as, “Where would we look to find the phone number of the pizza restaurant down the street? How do we figure out the best route to get to a friend’s house across town? Where do we look for a train schedule? How do we sign up for summer camp?” Asking your child to help with these tasks will develop his ability to gather information and follow the steps in a process.



Close to Home

Our lives are full of many different characters, and these characters often aren't very different from the characters we read about in books. Real-life characters have feelings, beliefs, and traits, just like those in works of fiction and movies. Your child can probably recognize the traits, feelings, and motives of the characters she meets in books; now ask her to think in similar ways about the real people she knows. As you talk with her about fictional characters that interest her, encourage her to bring similar insights to the people she knows in the neighborhood, in your family, or at school.



Who are the people that your child finds interesting in the neighborhood? What traits and feelings has your child observed in your neighbors? What experiences with these neighbors does your child remember when she thinks about these people? Her ideas about these people can serve as the critical starting place for what will become a fully-developed story.

Here's what you need:

Paper

Pen or pencil or

Computer

Here's what you do:

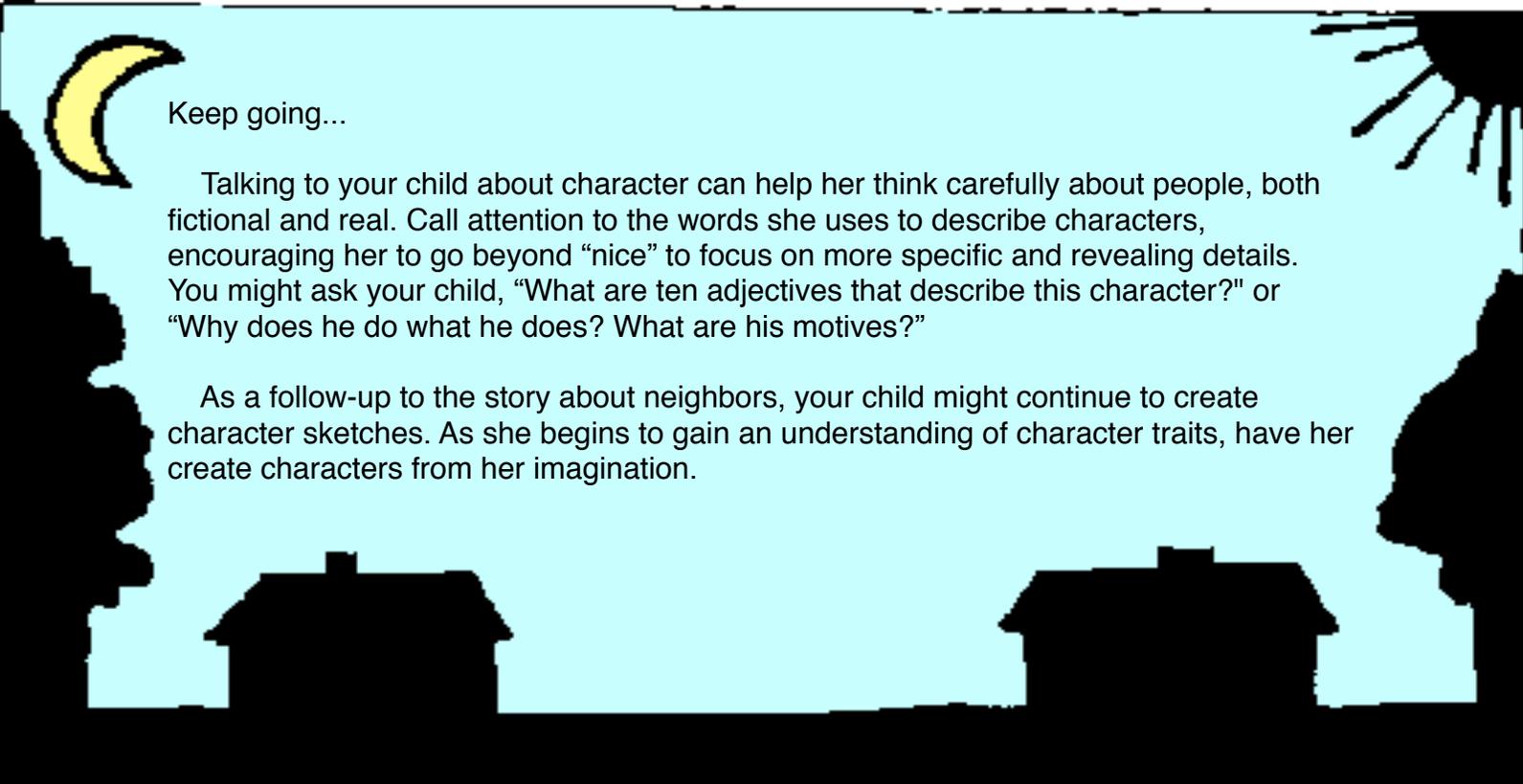
Ask your child to think of two neighbors she wants to include in a story. Get her started by first helping her choose the characters and then move on to writing character sketches. In choosing the characters, ask your child to think about someone in the neighborhood she particularly likes or is fascinated by. What specifically does she like about this person? Is there someone she is afraid of? Why? What are the qualities of this person that stand out and lead her to respond as she does?

Have your child write character sketches (descriptions) for each of these neighbors. How would your child describe these neighbors so that anyone listening would be able to picture them? She might start these sketches by making a list of the essential traits of each person. Then she will need to build rich descriptive paragraphs that clearly present these traits.

Next, to help your child begin her story and to get her thinking about developing a plot, you might talk about a situation in the neighborhood that many people are concerned about. Ask your child to imagine a story in which these two neighbors solve this particular problem together. Based on what you know about these people, how would each of them react to this situation? As she writes the story, help her develop the

Close to Home

plot and show each character's traits as he or she responds to events that happen. Also, have your child show how the two characters work together to resolve the neighborhood problem.



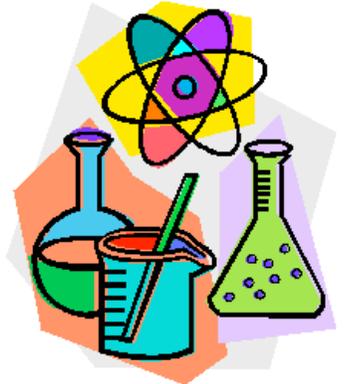
Keep going...

Talking to your child about character can help her think carefully about people, both fictional and real. Call attention to the words she uses to describe characters, encouraging her to go beyond "nice" to focus on more specific and revealing details. You might ask your child, "What are ten adjectives that describe this character?" or "Why does he do what he does? What are his motives?"

As a follow-up to the story about neighbors, your child might continue to create character sketches. As she begins to gain an understanding of character traits, have her create characters from her imagination.

Drawing on History and Science

When we read nonfiction, we discover ideas and opinions that are based on facts and real-life events. Often we read nonfiction to learn about history and science and to develop our ability to reason from factual knowledge or evidence. As you talk with your child about history, science, or other subjects, encourage her to elaborate on the ideas and facts that most interest her. Why did dinosaurs disappear? Where do stars come from? What is the path of butterfly migration? As your child explores the world of facts, encourage her to question them and draw conclusions based on the information given and from her own prior knowledge. Encourage your child not to accept facts uncritically. When exploring the world of a particular character, ask your child to describe how the character's actions and experiences reveal the character's feelings.



Here's what you need:

A good dictionary and a set of encyclopedias (available in the public library, along with many other reference materials)

Paper

Pen or pencil

Here's what you do:



Help your child identify the important facts in a nonfiction piece (an article in the newspaper, part of a biography, a book about the physical world, a book on an historical era). It can sometimes be those stories that contain disputed facts that most challenge a reader to infer her own opinions or ideas. If she is reading a book about airplanes, for example, encourage her to read about the stories of famous pilots that contain disputed facts. Amelia Earhart and Richard Byrd are two examples of such figures. If she is reading a book about icebergs, encourage her to inquire about the history of icebergs. What is mysterious about them? What big events have taken place with boats and icebergs? What are some stories about icebergs that contain disputed facts?

As you talk with your child about such areas as history and science, encourage her to elaborate on the ideas and facts that most interest her. Who are the characters in history who are most compelling to your child? What are the words or actions of a favorite character that challenge your child to determine the character's traits? Encourage her to think about how often facts begin as opinions, and, as they are proven, become facts. A good dictionary and encyclopedia will help her answer her questions. Also, she might start with the encyclopedia, read about her topic, and then come up with questions she wants to pursue.

Keep going...

Drawing on History and Science

This activity highlights the importance of two things: figuring out the difference between facts and opinions, and using facts to draw inferences. As your child develops her interest in nonfiction, she will learn about how one must base opinions and ideas on reliable facts and how an idea must be supported with evidence to be factual. She will quickly discover that facts don't always start as facts, and so there are often interesting stories behind facts and their development — stories of how others made both reliable and unreliable inferences. Your child will see that there's an important relationship between facts and opinions. We support opinions with facts, and some opinions become facts when they are supported with evidence. Talk with your child about her opinions. Get her to think about what facts would support them. Also, encourage her to consider why her opinions are not factual.

How-To Guides

Your child probably loves to talk about her favorite things, such as sports, foods, or games. How did your child learn to play baseball or to make a sandwich? Most likely, someone showed her the necessary steps and explained the process, step-by-step. How-to guides do the same thing. In writing her own how-to guide, your child will need to focus on presenting facts and ordering them logically. These skills are critical for understanding anything that she reads.



Here's what you need:

Writing and drawing materials (pens, pencils, markers, crayons)
Paper

Here's what you do:

You might begin by deciding on the subject of the guide. Will your child teach a friend to play her favorite game or to make a sandwich? How would she explain this activity to someone who has never tried it before? What materials or equipment are needed for this task? What is the first step? What comes next? What is the last step? It might be helpful to call attention to words that show the reader how to move from one step to another, for example then, next, or finally.



You might encourage your child to make a list of the steps (an outline) before she begins to write out each one. Once she has a rough draft, go over it with her and point out places where she can work in sequence words (particularly if she has a lot of and then... and then... and then...). Once the guide is finished, help your child find someone who can use it!

Keep going...

To take this activity a step further, put your child in charge of the how-to guides for family chores and daily tasks. For example, ask your child to state all the information that a family member who hasn't done this chore before will need for taking out the garbage. Other examples include how-to information for cleaning up the kitchen or doing homework. Continuing these conversations about processes will raise your child's awareness of sequence and stated information and develop her understanding about the many informational texts we use every day.



What's in a Name?

The study of word history, etymology, can help us establish important connections among words. When we understand that a word's origin can affect its spelling or pronunciation, we gain a better understanding of why English is so varied and unpredictable. Also, knowing word parts can help us puzzle out other words.

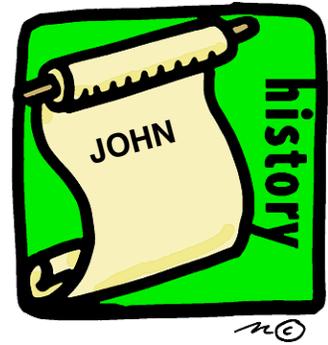
Here's what you need:

- Crayons or markers
- Paper to make a chart

Here's what you do:

One way to spark interest in word history and root words is to ask your child to consider the history of her own name. Help her gather facts such as the original meaning of the name, a family story that inspired it, or a famous person who had the same name. You might find that going to the library and using the reference materials there are helpful. Also, the librarian might be able to show you where to find key information.

To introduce the idea of root words, have your child think about the history of nicknames. Is a nickname often a variation on a name, such as Michael/Mike or Lucille/Lu? What other words are variations of each other (such as exam/examination, child/children, or term/terminology)?



Keep going...

If your child is curious about words and follows up on her ideas about words and word parts, she will grow by leaps and bounds as a reader. You might extend this activity by using the dictionary for foreign words and phrases that English speakers have borrowed from other languages (such as *déjà vu*).

Show your child how to use the dictionary to explore the history of both familiar and new words. After reading dictionary entries about English words that have French, Spanish, or other origins, you might explore those languages further. Look in the library for books about other languages or cultures that your child has discovered in her search for the etymologies of English words.

Encourage your child to look at root words and think about the many different combinations she can build. For example, what prefixes, such as re-, dis-, or pre- does she know? What suffixes, such as -ing, -ed, or -ion, does she use? How does her knowledge of these word parts help her as a reader and a writer?