be mismatched to the content encountered in school. With these children, early childhood teachers have even more work to do. From the first day, they and the children must play catch-up. (p. 56)

Teaching Strategies That Support Comprehension

To promote young children’s growing comprehension of spoken, signed, and written language, adults can use the following teaching strategies.

Engage in extended back-and-forth conversations with children

Authentic conversations help children build comprehension as well as speaking skills (see KDI 22. Speaking). “Discourse” means a true dialogue or two-way conversation is taking place. It is not monopolized by the adult, but involves real give-and-take, or reciprocity, between the speakers. Adults take time to listen to children before offering their own comments. “Extended” means the verbal interaction is not brief or perfunctory. Its purpose is not to issue a command to the child (“Put on your jacket”) or elicit simple information by asking a question (“Do you want more juice?”). Rather, the discourse is leisurely and encourages children to share their thoughts and feelings, giving adults a true window into children’s thought processes. Compare, for example, how much the child talks — and how much the adult learns about the child — in these two conversations.

**Brief adult-dominated talk:** A teacher walks up to a child who is painting at the easel.

**Teacher:** *(Points at a flower in the painting)* What color is this?

**Child:** Red.

**Teacher:** *(Points to another flower)* How about this one?

**Child:** Yellow.

**Teacher:** Tell me the names of the other colors in your painting.

**Child:** *(Stops painting)* I’m done painting. *(Takes off smock and goes to sink to wash up.)*

**Extended two-way discourse:** A teacher kneels silently beside a child who is painting at the easel.

**Child:** *(After teacher has been watching for a minute)* It’s my mommy’s garden.

**Teacher:** Your mommy has a garden.

**Child:** *(Points at painting)* Flowers.

**Teacher:** There are flowers in your mommy’s garden.

**Child:** Vegetables too. *(Points)* The yellow are daisies and the red circles are tomatoes.

**Teacher:** There are daisies and tomatoes in your mommy’s garden and also in your painting.

**Child:** Now I’m going to do the beans. I helped pick beans for supper last night.

Notice in the second example that the adult does not question or direct the child. Instead, the teacher repeats and/or clarifies and extends the child’s words. Adult acknowledgments and comments like these encourage child talk because the child retains control of the conversation. When the adult repeats and reflects back what child is saying, it also confirms to the child that the adult is truly listening.

Create stories with children

One particular type of conversation that supports children’s comprehension of stories and narratives involves partnering with them to make up stories. As children use their own experiences and imaginations to create stories with adults, their narratives become more detailed and coherent. “Active listening and co-creating with the
teacher serve as catalysts for generating ideas at the intersection of the story and children’s own experiences” (Isbell, 2002, p. 27). Researchers Mary Jane Moran and Jennifer Jarvis (2001) use the term “co-narration” to describe the shared experience of adults and children creating stories together. Adults scaffold children’s ideas with prompts, such as “I wonder what will happen next” or “Then what did they do (say)?” Children ask questions, offer observations about characters and events, or suggest directions for the story to proceed. In addition to promoting language and literacy skills, co-narration also promotes social interaction and cements the sense of community in the classroom (Epstein, 2010).

When story conversations with adults call on children’s imaginations, children move beyond “here and now” (contextualized) talk to “there and then” (decontextualized) talk. That is, stories, like pretend play, let children think about what is not physically present. The language of storytelling becomes a stand-in for actual people, objects, and events. Shared oral storytelling in preschool helps children understand how story language works, an understanding that serves them well later on as they learn to read printed text that does not provide any conversational cues (such as facial expressions) to help them interpret characters and events.

Storytelling also promotes young children’s listening comprehension, which is highly predictive of overall school performance. Summarizing the research in her book Learning to Listen, Listening to Learn: Building Essential Skills in Young Children, Mary Jalongo (2008) says listening is the communication skill that develops earliest in life and is practiced the most frequently. Over the course of a lifetime,
people may obtain as much as 80 percent of their information through listening to speech, music, and sounds of all kinds. Yet listening, particularly active listening, is a skill that is rarely promoted (other than admonishing children to “listen” when adults give directions). According to Jalongo, by the end of high school, a student has had 12 years of formal training in writing, six to eight years in reading, one to two years in speaking, and only half a year or less in listening.

Furthermore, while we acknowledge that reading is a complex process, we’re not as attuned to the complexities of active listening. For example, active listeners must attend to verbal and nonverbal cues, while readers attend to written text and possibly pictures and graphics. Effective readers learn to look back (review), peek ahead (preview), and skip around in the text as needed while active listeners must learn to keep up with the ongoing flow of information. Printed text is “predictable” in the sense that it is fixed on the page and retrievable at will, and the information for young readers has generally been edited down to its essentials. Oral language, on the other hand, is unpredictable and may meander, so it is only after the message is completed that the listener is able to sort out what is or is not relevant. Comprehending both speech and text depends on knowing what words mean (vocabulary knowledge) and the ability to make sense of them within a specific context.

Balancing all these factors is not easy even for adults! Imagine how much harder it is for a young child who has a shorter attention span and less experience figuring out where to focus! Engaging preschoolers in listening to and participating in the creation of stories helps them hone these important skills. (For more ideas on the benefits of storytelling with young children, including ways to use stories as the starting point for group-time activities, see Epstein, 2010.)

### Storytelling Strategies

Here are some storytelling strategies for small- and large-group times:

- **Pass around a basket of props or puppets for children to use as you tell a story or as they make up a story themselves.** Help them think about when, how, or why characters might use the props or how they fit within the story’s narrative. For example, you might say, “I wonder if there’s something in the basket she could use to escape from the gorilla.”

- **Tell stories without props so that children can rely on their imaginations to picture situations and details.** Have them act out the actions and make up the sounds the story calls for. For example, after a field trip to a farm, children might act out a story that encourages them to recall the sights, sounds, and smells of their experience.

- **Build children’s comments into the stories that you co-narrate with them.** Let the children take the lead regarding who the characters are, the adventures they have, and how the story ends. For example, “Jessica says the wind whooshed the basket high over the trees. What should we have the little girl do when her basket flies away?”

- **Expand on a favorite book, song, or chant.** Use the characters and/or events as a starting point and ask the children to imagine what happened before, what might happen next, and/or what would happen if an incident or the ending were different. For example (in reference to The Snowy Day by Ezra Jack Keats), you might say, “Suppose Peter woke up the next day and all the snow had melted. What do you think he would do then?”

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Finally, creating and telling stories with children is another way to have fun with language. You and the children can play with words, sounds and inflections, and gestures. It is a good way to incorporate folk tales, myths, and legends from the children’s cultures. Creating group stories establishes a sense of community among the tellers. And of course storytelling invites children to use their imaginations. (For ideas on how to use storytelling at small- and large-group times, see “Storytelling Strategies” on p. 33.)

**Read and discuss books with children**

Telling and reading stories with children may seem like second nature to adults. However, children’s minds are actively working during this pleasurable process, and there is a surprising amount of mental effort behind their enjoyment. In fact, “Children enjoy listening to stories so much that we may not realize how much effort it requires” (Hohmann & Adams, 2008, p. 5). To comprehend stories, children must recognize and recall characters and events and integrate them into a narrative whole to construct the story’s meaning. They have to gather information and use what they already know (drawing on prior knowledge) and what they learn from the pictures and text to make inferences about the characters, where the story takes place, the problem that drives the narrative, and how the problem gets resolved. (For more information on how children comprehend books, see box below, “How Children Develop the Ability to Think About Stories.”)

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**How Children Develop the Ability to Think About Stories**

Learning to comprehend stories is a thought process that begins in preschool and continues into adulthood as one encounters stories of increasing depth and narrative complexity. Although we cannot peer inside children’s heads, we have an idea about how narrative comprehension develops in preschool children, which is briefly summarized here:

**Children progress from a focus on the present to recalling the past and imaging the future.** Preschool children begin talking about storybooks using verbs that are typically present tense. As they develop a more coherent sense of the story, children begin to use the past- and future-tense verbs to refer to parts of the story that have already happened and to forecast upcoming episodes.

**Children progress from everyday conversational language to storybook language.** Preschool children generally talk about and read storybooks in a conversational manner, pointing to objects and characters and making observations and comments about what they see on the page. They and their listeners need to see the pictures to make sense of what the child is saying. Gradually, the language they use itself carries more of the story and is less dependent on the accompanying illustration. [The] words provide enough information for you to form a mental image of the situation without referring to the illustration.

— Adapted from Hohmann & Adams (2008, pp. 6–7)
Support components of comprehension

To help preschool children develop the four components of comprehension (see p. 29) during book reading, you can use the following strategies.

**Learning new vocabulary words**

Look for unusual words in the texts you read with children, and repeat them in your own comments and observations. Use synonyms (whose meaning the children already know) and simple definitions to help children understand the new words. Add your own new words to describe the people, objects, and events depicted in the pictures. Invite the children to talk about what they see in the pictures. Use words and phrases from the book in your everyday conversations with the children.

**Making connections in a story**

Encourage children to talk about what they see on the cover and pages of the book. Preschoolers typically focus on people, animals, and objects. Wait patiently for children to look, then accept and acknowledge their ideas about the images, letters, or words they see. Ask about similar things they have seen or played with themselves. Once you begin to read the book, help children associate what is in the pictures with the characters and events in the narrative. Again, encourage them to relate what is happening in the story to comparable experiences in their own lives — not only the people and events, but also the emotions and thoughts that accompany them. Ask children to invent their own dialogue (“What do you think the mouse might be saying in this picture?”). This strategy helps them think about what is happening and draw on their own experiences to further understand the text and pictures. It helps them connect the story of their own lives to the story in the book.

**Retelling (remembering) a story**

Don’t break the flow of the story to repeatedly ask children to remember what came before. However, from time to time, help them reflect on what has already happened. Refer to the cover or a previous picture to help them remember. Ask children where they have encountered similar characters, objects, or actions earlier in the narrative. At the end of the book, encourage children to find a picture of particular interest and retell that part of the story. Encourage them to relate all or parts of the story without looking at the pictures. Provide other materials and plan activities that encourage children to recall and represent the characters and events in the books they enjoy reading.

**Making predictions in a story**

Before you begin reading, ask children to look at the cover of the book and say what they think it might be about. Invite them to anticipate who or what they might see when they open to the first page. Pause now and then to ask children to predict what a character might do next. Ask what it is about foregoing events (or their own experiences) that makes them think so. For prominent and repeating objects, characters, or events, wonder with the children where they might crop up again. Ask children for their ideas on how a story’s problem might be resolved. Look with them for clues that might point to a resolution. When you are finished with the book, solicit children’s ideas on what a character might do after the story ends. Provide materials and plan activities that encourage children to represent what they imagine happening in the continuation of the narrative.

Don’t try to implement all of the above strategies at once! It will overwhelm the children and interfere with the magical quality of the storybook itself. Instead, choose one component and one strategy to focus on each time you
engage with one or more children and a book. The main idea is to support children’s interest in looking at the pictures, listening to the text, and talking about what they see, hear, and say along the way as their understanding of the story unfurls.

Incorporate ideas from stories and books throughout the day

Provide materials that children can use to represent their ideas from stories and books. For example, they might draw or sculpt their favorite characters and events. Props and simple instruments are another way to represent stories in dramatic play or music and movement activities. Children’s dramatizations of stories also build related literacy skills, as Neuman et al. (2000) point out: “Dramatizing stories connects children’s love of pretend play to more formal storytelling. As children act out favorite stories, songs, and poetry, as well as stories they have created themselves, they develop narrative skills” (p. 74). At transitions, ask children to move to the next activity like a character in a story, book, poem, or song. Talk about the ideas and events in books and stories at times other than when they are being read or told, for example, during snacks or related field trips. Pick up on

Invite children to make predictions about a story before you begin reading by drawing their attention to the book cover. As children anticipate events and characters in the narrative, they are developing important comprehension strategies.
children’s comments that can lead naturally into a conversation about a familiar narrative. For example, a child’s mention of having had hot cereal for breakfast might lead to a discussion of the story of Goldilocks and the three bears eating porridge.

For examples of children’s comprehension at different stages of development, and the strategies adults can use to scaffold their learning, see “Ideas for Scaffolding KDI 21. Comprehension” on page 38. Use the suggestions in the chart to support and gently extend children’s comprehension during play and other interactions during the daily routine.

Children enjoy looking at photos and drawings of familiar objects and events in their own lives. Homemade books help them connect these pictures to the illustrations and stories they encounter in printed books.
**Ideas for Scaffolding KDI 21. Comprehension**

Always support children at their current level and occasionally offer a gentle extension.

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<tr>
<th>Earlier</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Later</th>
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**Children may**
- Respond to simple statements or questions, sometimes appropriately (e.g., bring a cup when asked to do so; nod, sign, or say “Yes” or “No”; when others talk about cats, say, “I like trucks”).
- Remember (retell) one or two details in a song, story, or book; search for a page because it has something of interest to them (e.g., look for the page with the zebra on it).
- Comment on the current page; not predict what might happen next.

**Children may**
- Contribute relevant information to an ongoing conversation; connect the topic to their own experiences (e.g., in a conversation about trucks, say “We have a red truck too. It has a trailer”).
- Remember (retell) several details in a song, story, or book (e.g., remember Max wore a wolf suit and was king of the monsters in *Where The Wild Things Are*).
- Predict what might happen next in a story based on what is happening at the time (e.g., “Oops. He’s going to fall down!”).

**Children may**
- Respond to complex statements or questions (e.g., when one child says, “Yesterday at the beach, I found a stone to put in my garden,” another child says, “I found a stone too. I put it in my pocket”).
- Remember (retell) several song, story, or book events in sequence (e.g., say, “Max made his mommy mad and ran away to the monsters. He came home and his mommy made him dinner”).
- Explain a prediction based on what happened earlier or in their own experience (e.g., “The mommy will let the girl buy the bear because she really liked it”).

**To support children’s current level, adults can**
- Talk about what is currently happening using simple sentences (e.g., “We’re putting on our jackets to go outside”).
- Confirm details children remember (e.g., flip back through the book, point, and say, “Yes, that monster looks scary!”).
- Talk with children about what they see on the page.

**To support children’s current level, adults can**
- Indicate children’s contribution relates to the topic (e.g., “We’re talking about trucks and you told us a lot about yours”).
- Comment that children remember several details (e.g., “Yes, Max was wearing a wolf suit and later he had a crown”).
- Acknowledge children’s predictions and say, “Let’s turn the page and find out.”

**To support children’s current level, adults can**
- Acknowledge responses to complex statements (e.g., “You got a smock when we said we’d paint at small-group time”).
- Provide opportunities to sequence events (e.g., “Help me remember what happened after it rained but before the boat sank”).
- Predict with reasons (e.g., “The mom’s been gone a long time. She’ll come home soon and see the mess the cat has made”).

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**
- Make comments or ask questions that call children’s attention to the topic of conversation (e.g., “Jared, you also have a cat”).
- Encourage children to remember more details (e.g., “Can you remember something else the squirrel did?”).
- Encourage children to guess what they’ll see when the page is turned.

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**
- Keep conversations going; build on children’s contributions, and connect their ideas and experiences to your own.
- Encourage children to sequence events (e.g., “Was that before or after it fell?”).
- Ask why something will happen next (e.g., “What makes you think he’ll fall down?”).

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**
- Find opportunities to talk with children using increasingly complex language.
- Encourage children to retell stories to one another.
- Encourage children to verify their prediction and explain why they think it did (or did not) come true.