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Context Clues—Can You Figure It Out?

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What Are Context Clues?

Context clues are hints or bits of information that help us figure out the meaning of difficult or unfamiliar words we read. Context clues are the words, phrases, or even pictures that surround a word, which help explain the word's meaning. For example, "During winter, there is not enough light or water for leaves to keep their green color. As the bright green fades away, we begin to see yellow and orange colors." We can determine from the context clues that the word "fades" means "loses color."

Why Are Context Clues Important?

Understanding context clues and using them effectively contributes to children's success in school by improving vocabulary, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and even their enjoyment of reading.



- **Vocabulary** – Context clues help children build on the vocabulary they have in order to learn the meanings of words they do not know.



- **Reading Fluency** – Context clues help children decide how to pronounce words. For example, you can put a *bow* in your hair or you can *bow* to the audience.



- **Reading Comprehension** – Context clues help children see the "bigger picture" and understand what they are reading about, including new topics or subjects.



- **Enjoyment of Reading** – Children who are able to use context clues to understand what they are reading may enjoy reading more.



How Can You Teach Children To Use Context Clues?

Here are some activities you can do with your children at home to improve their ability to use context clues:



- **Read stories with your children.** Before you begin reading, look at the pictures. Pictures give children context clues about the vocabulary words they may find in a written passage. For example, if a story has a picture of a playground in it, your children might expect to see vocabulary words like "seesaw," "slide," or "sandbox."



- **Read more challenging stories with your children.** Identify words they may not know and help them find context clues that will help them figure out the meaning. For example, "Some plants have thorns, spines, and poisons which protect them from hungry animals looking for a snack." Ask your children, "Would animals want to eat plants with thorns or poisons?" "What do you think protect means?"



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- **Write a simple sentence on a piece of paper and leave out a key word.** Ask your children to fill in the blank with a word that makes sense. For example, "Sam bought a new ____." Then, add more information to the sentence and discuss how the new context clues affect your children's choice of words. For example, "Sam bought a new ____ at the bicycle store."



- **Write a sentence using a nonsense word.** For example, "Jen hung her new bindersplat on a hanger and put it away in the closet." Ask your child what the nonsense word could mean and discuss the context clues they used to figure it out.



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