

# How to Discuss Books with Your Kids (Even When You Haven't Read Them!)

By Dr. Elissa F. Brown and Michele Joerg

Many gifted children are voracious readers who may pick up books you haven't had time to read yourself. Parents often struggle with ways to support learning at home that is aligned with their child's schooling, and impediments such as cost, scheduling, and time can further impact a parent's involvement. The questioning model sidesteps these challenges, allowing you to support your child's comprehension and critical thinking skills in your car, at home, on the subway, at the dinner table, or even just on your couch.

Strategic questioning strategies are a powerful tool for developing creative and critical thinkers. Strategic questioning is not the low-level factual, recall, or "read it and repeat it" questions that many children encounter as part of their daily classroom routines.<sup>1</sup> Questions that focus on inferencing, generalizing, distinguishing relevant information, or defending a principle or thesis are necessary to stimulate

gifted learners' imaginations and foster growth. Moreover, with the advent of Common Core State Standards, the need for questioning that can support metacognition and deepen a student's understanding of a text is imperative.

Parents can leverage this need for higher level questioning as a way to have meaningful conversations with their children and examine basic assumptions. Questioning can be the conduit between home and school, and it can create an environment that values the process of learning over the "right" answers.

One questioning model that parents can easily use in the home was developed by Art Costa.<sup>2</sup> Costa's model incorporates everything from the factual to the creative, and its three levels of questions move children from concrete to conceptual thinking. While there seems to be a natural hierarchy, questions can be mixed and matched to work on literal skills or abstract reasoning and problem-solving—all using literature as the stimulus.

We've included some fun questions to start helping your reader think about books in new ways. You can mix and match the level of questions, decide that you want to do a different level each night, or have your child pick from each section. It's completely flexible, allowing you to determine how you want to use it in the home to facilitate learning, have fun, and support a growing mind.



## Using Costa's Questioning Model

### Level 1: Support your child's comprehension of the content.

- Who is the author? Have you read other books by this author before?
- Summarize what you've read so far.
- Retell the important events in the story in order.
- Where is the story set?
- When does the story take place?
- Who are the main characters?
- What are some of the character's personal traits?

### Level 2: Help your child analyze the story.

#### The Problems

- What are the problems in the story? Who or what is causing them? How do you think the problems will be solved?
- Name and describe a big idea or concept from this story.
- Describe the setting in your story. Is there a setting in real life that it reminds you of?
- What is the most memorable event in the story so far?
- Could this story have really happened? Why or why not?

#### The Characters

- What can you infer about the main character based on his actions?
- How and why do the main character's feelings change?
- What factors most influenced the character's choices?
- If you could talk to the main character, what advice would you give him?
- Do the "good guy" and the "bad guy" share any similarities? How are they different?
- What do you wish the main character would have done differently? How would that change the story?
- Are all the characters likeable? Why or why not?
- Did the main character act in a way that was fair?

#### Personal Connections

- How would you have solved the problem if it happened to you?
- Which of the characters remind you of yourself or someone you know? Why?
- If you could be friends with one of the characters in your book, who would it be and why?
- Describe a time when you felt like the character.
- Is the main character someone you would want to be friends with? Why or why not?
- Would you want to live in this story? Why or why not?
- Why did you pick this book to read? What interested you about this book?
- How is this book similar to another book you have read?



### Level 3: Foster your child's conceptual understanding.

- Does a story need to have characters?
- Does a story need to have a big idea or concept?
- Can you read a fiction book without learning anything?
- Pretend you are the book's editor. Create a new ending for the story.
- If you could give the main character a gift or talent, what would you give her? How would that change the story?
- To whom would you recommend this book and why?
- Which ideas do you like most in this book? Which ideas do you like least?
- If you could change one part of the story, what would you change and why? How would that change the story?
- What do you think would be a good alternate title for this book? Why?
- How would you illustrate the book cover? Why?
- How have you changed as a reader because of this story?

Questioning is one of the easiest ways to provide differentiated learning experiences and access to your child's thinking. Many teachers and schools emphasize higher order thinking but may not always implement effective questioning as a way to promote critical thinking in high-ability learners. This is where you, as the parent, play such an important role as a partner in learning. By incorporating Costa's questioning model, you can guide your child effortlessly into more sophisticated ways of thinking—not only about literature, but about all kinds of things. ☺

#### Authors' Note

Dr. Elissa F. Brown is a distinguished lecturer and director of the Hunter College Gifted Center and coordinates and teaches the Advanced Certificate Program in Gifted and Talented at Hunter College. She has served as an adjunct professor at several universities, including Rutgers and Duke University, and has served as a state director of gifted education, a federal grant manager, a district gifted program coordinator, principal of a specialized high school, and a teacher of gifted students. She is a published author in the field of

gifted education and presents widely. She lives in East Harlem, New York.

After 10 years as a stay-at-home mother, Michele Joerg is now pursuing her certification in Gifted and Talented Education at Hunter College. She is a founding board member of DREAM Charter School in East Harlem and serves on the board of DREAM, an after-school and summer program that uses team-based methods to provide a comprehensive, enriching experience for over 2,200 inner-city youth. Michele is a former New York City classroom teacher and teacher trainer.

#### Resources

The Foundation for Critical Thinking  
[www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org)

*Jacob's Ladder Reading Comprehension Program* by Joyce VanTassel-Baska and Tamra Stambaugh

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Shaunnessy, E. (2000). Questioning techniques in the gifted classroom. *Gifted Child Today*, 23(5), 14–22.

<sup>2</sup> Costa, A. L. (2001). *Developing minds: A resource book for teaching thinking* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

