

Guide for Parents: Helping Your Child with the Accelerated Reader Program

The Accelerated Reader Program is now commonly used in many junior and secondary schools to promote active and accurate reading. It often supplements library lesson time and reading homework.

Starting Out – the STAR Reading Test

The basis of the program is the STAR Reading Test which your child will do at school (normally on a termly basis). This test sets a series of reading comprehension and vocabulary style questions for your child. As your child correctly answers the questions, the following questions become progressively more difficult. If your child answers a question incorrectly, the following question will be less challenging. In other words the test program caters itself to the needs and abilities of your child as he /she progresses through the questions.

At the end of the test your child will receive a reading age, which indicates where they are in terms of their reading ability against measured norms. This will be a value of years and months. To gauge whether they are performing within expected ranges evaluate the reading age against their own numerical age in years and months.

Choosing Books – The ZPD

Your child will also receive a ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) rating. This will be a range of reading material in which your child will best develop their reading. The Accelerated Reader website explains the need for the ZPD as follows: "Pupils develop reading skills most effectively when they read appropriately challenging books – difficult enough to keep them engaged but not so difficult that they become frustrated. This is their 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD)"

The ZPD range will be based on the reading levels ascribed to fiction and non-fiction books by the Accelerated Reader group. Text complexity is determined by the ATOS formula, which uses the text of an entire book to inform the calculation. ATOS takes into account the most important predictors of text complexity—average sentence length, average word length, and word difficulty level.

Your child's ZPD range will look something like this: 2.6 – 3.2

It gives a range of material in which your child will read most comfortably with a level of challenge. The levels move from 0.1 through to above 10. All books within a school associated with AR (Accelerated Reader) should have levels (either on a coded label on the front page or on the spine of the book). Many libraries are opting for colour coded stickers on the spines of books so that students can easily see the level of the book they are considering.

Your child will be asked to choose books for Accelerated Reading that fall within the range of their ZPD. If they had the ZPD shown above for example, they could choose a book that fell between 2.6 and 3.2 in the ATOS levelling system. At the beginning of the term, they may be asked to specifically work from the lower ranges of their ZPD until their scores on quizzes have become successful (90% or above each time).

Personal books, gifts and public library books can be checked against the ATOS levelling by entering their title or ISBN into the AR BookFinder at www.arbookfind.co.uk. This can be a useful tool for determining if a book is suitable for your child to read independently.

The Quizzes

Once your child has chosen an appropriately levelled book they will be expected to read it independently and then take an AR Quiz on that text. It is through the quizzing of books that measureable data is collected on whether your child is accessing and understanding the material they are reading. The quizzes contain between 5 and 10 questions about the book they have read. The expectation is that quizzes will be taken within 24-48 hours of finishing a text to ensure that retention of information is high. A score of 90% or higher indicates a solid understanding of the text and your child will then be expected to choose a more difficult text (but still within their ZPD) for next time. Schools have varying rules but generally a move of .1 or .2 each time 90 – 100% is achieved is typical.

Quizzes are normally expected to take place in school time but, if acceptable, an app is available from AR that allows students to take quizzes on phones and tablets. You can access these apps by checking with your app store for Accelerated Reader from Renaissance Place.

While it is the comprehension quiz that is most often taken by students, there is a vocabulary quiz available for most books. This can be very useful for students to take as it specifically targets understanding of more difficult vocabulary and provides an extra stretching task for able pupils.

The Reports

Once students begin on the Accelerated Reader program, their progress through the system will be monitored in terms of the number of quizzes they are taking and the percentage score they receive for each one. Over time an accurate value of how much time children read each day will become available and teachers can track issues easily. If you are worried about the progress of your child, you may choose to ask to see the STAR reading test results each term. The test results sheet includes a range of ideas for how you can help your child progress through their particular needs.

A Few Tips for Helping Your Child Achieve with Accelerated Reader

- Help your child set realistic reading targets for each day. The average amount suggested by Accelerated Reader is 25 minutes per day.
- Ask your child questions as they read: what is the genre of the book they have picked, who are the key characters, what happens in the story?
- Ask your child about the book title: what might be the significance of this? You might ask before they read and then as they near the end of the story as ideas are likely to change.
- Read the same book as your child so that you can actively discuss characters and plot structure.
- Download the AR app and use the AR BookFinder to check for appropriately levelled material at the library or local bookshop.
- Ask your child whether they can empathise with the characters. Can they remember a time when they felt the same way? (This helps to anchor ideas and feelings from the text in the mind of the child).
- Ask your child to predict what might happen at different points in the text and ask them to consider how the plot might develop.
- Read with your child, reading a page each or taking on the roles of different characters is often fun. You might choose to read as a family – the Knocking Game is fun for this (Each reader can read as little as four lines or a whole page. When they have had enough, they knock on the table and say the name of the next reader. Game carries on until the chapter is complete or the reading session is over. This gives children the opportunity to stretch themselves but also stop reading when they come to a daunting section or words they are unsure of. You may begin to notice patterns of behaviour over time.)
- Offer a secure, cosy, quiet environment in which to read. Have reading hours in which the TV is switched off and everybody reads. This quiet and concentrated time is essential for training children for good reading and studying habits for later life.
- Choose more difficult texts with your child, ones they would like you to read to them. Series of books like the 'Harry Potter' series, 'The Chronicles of Narnia' or 'The Hobbit' are very good for this. Choose a time each day or week when you will read to them.
- Share some of your all-time favourite reads with your child. What did you love as a child and why did it stay with you?