

What Reading is Like: Sports Analogies to Use with Parents

Clare Landrigan and Tammy Mulligan

Parent conferences are just around the corner in many schools, and families are eager to learn about their child's growth and needs as readers. We often use sports analogies to help explain our thinking around text choice in school with parents, especially those who expect their children to be reading difficult texts at all times. Here are some of our favorites.

Shots on Goal or Number of Balls Hit

As we watch our children learn how to play baseball or soccer, we hear the coaches telling the kids to "swing" or "get the ball off your foot!" Coaches know that the best way to get better at something is to do it more. The more opportunities you have to swing the bat at the ball, the better your timing, speed, and accuracy will become. The more chances you have to kick the ball into the goal, the better the chance you will score. We believe it is the same with reading.

Some parents ask why we may not encourage a child to read Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows during school independent reading time. It is not that we do not think Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows is a wonderful story (we do, and parents should read it at home with their child). Rather, to apply the reading strategies they are being taught, we believe that in school children should "take a lot of shots on goal" -- ideally in the upper elementary grades working through a book every one to two weeks. We want them to see many characters develop throughout a text; ponder many themes and author's intentions; and determine the resolution of many plots.

If a child is reading Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, she or he will only meet one set of characters; ponder one theme; and determine one resolution in several weeks or months. This puts the student at a disadvantage in terms of exposure to various text structures and genres, as well trying out the application of strategies they are learning in school. We believe that choice of text is essential for students, but we also believe that at times students need to be encouraged to read a certain type of text for a particular reason.

Training for a Race

As athletes, we can talk with parents about how preparing for a race is similar to balancing a child's reading life. When preparing for a race, we think about our training. We do not simply run the same route, same distance, and same speed every training session. We sometimes run short distances more quickly or a longer distance at a slower pace. We work on hills some days and flat courses on others. We need to work on our endurance, our speed, and our muscle development. Each type of run supports a different aspect of our training and development as a distance runner. Similarly with children, we want to balance their reading lives. Sometimes, after finishing a really long book, kids may want to read some short text or picture books. If it is late at night or during a trip in the car, they may prefer a magazine. If you are taking a trip, they may want to read about your destination. If they have never tried a mystery, it may be time to give one a try. Each type of text supports children's development and dispositions as readers.

Knowing When NOT to Ski Down a Black Diamond

When skiing we often want to stay with our friends and family. We can get pressured to ski a trail because everyone else is skiing it. We may try the trail just to be with our friends and family, but we know our technique and form (and even enjoyment) will not be at its best. We will just be trying to get down the mountain safely. This is fine to do once in awhile, but if we always skied on terrain that did not match our skill level we would not get better at skiing.

In order to practice our techniques and form we need to be on terrain we can handle. The trail is like the surface structure of reading -- there are levels of difficulty. At times we want an easier level of difficulty so we can get better at making parallel turns or skiing moguls. As teachers, we need to let kids know what type of text we need them to read so that we can teach them what they need to learn as readers.

One of the best ways to move parents from a narrow focus on text difficulty is to encourage them to talk with their child about what the child is reading. We encourage families to use these prompts to spark discussions about books and deepen conversations.

Prompts for Talking with Children About Their Reading

- What's happening in your book?
- Have you had a chance to read on yet? I am dying to know if . . .
- Wow . . . I can't believe that just happened.
- I am thinking so many things right now.
- I think I know what _____ is going to do next.
- I didn't know that.
- I didn't get that part.
- I'm confused. Who is talking?
- This book is so much like _____.
- _____ (Author's name) always has the same kinds of characters.
- What are you thinking?
- What are you wondering?
- What would you do if _____?

These prompts help parents see that books that seem simple often have complex plots and ideas. Natural discussions about the events in a book, connections to our lives, and confusion while reading keep the focus on the meaning in the text. In the end, this is more important and enduring for producing lifelong readers than any number or letter representing the difficulty or readability of the text.