



# Promote a Love of Reading Through Book Talk—and Careful Listening

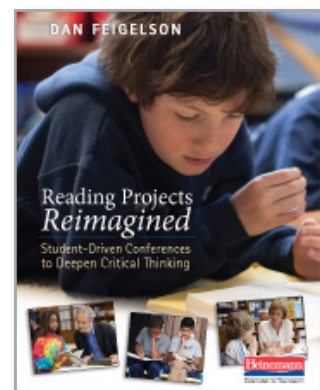
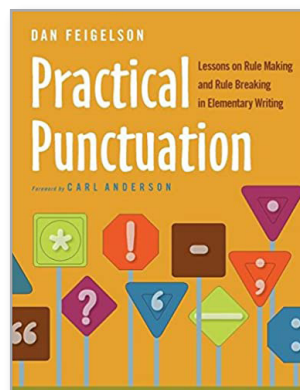
by DAN FEIGELSON

*Nothing encourages deep, joyful comprehension more than having someone to talk to about what you read. Adults can promote this love of reading by listening to children in particular, responsive ways.*



## LITERACY CHAMPION: DAN FEIGELSON

Dan Feigelson is a national and international literacy consultant who has traveled the globe leading institutes, workshops, and lab-sites on the teaching of reading and writing. An early member of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, he worked for decades in New York City public schools as a teacher, staff developer, curriculum writer, principal, and local superintendent. A regular presenter and keynote speaker at national and international conferences, Dan is the author of [\*Reading Projects Reimagined: Student-Driven Conferences to Deepen Critical Thinking\*](#) (Heinemann); [\*Practical Punctuation: Lessons in Rule Making and Rule Breaking in Elementary Writing\*](#) (Heinemann); and the forthcoming *Radical Listening: Individual Reading and Writing Conferences as Equity Work, Grades 2–8* (Scholastic). Aside from his work with teachers, children, and schools, Dan is passionate about jazz and gardening. He lives in New York City and the Hudson Valley.



## One to Know: Book Talk Is Key

Research shows that reading comprehension “floats on a sea of talk (Britton, 2005).” The key to this sort of rich book talk is listening to children, but in a different way than we may be used to. Naturally it is important to be sure they understand the words on the page—but it’s also critical to understand who each individual child is as a reader. What unique perspective does this particular six-year-old bring to the book she is reading today, or to books in general? One ten-year-old may focus on a character’s feelings, while another likes to make predictions about what will happen next. By noticing, naming, and celebrating individual reading personalities, we help children feel like “members of the literacy club” (Frank Smith, 1985). And that “insider” feeling creates a sense of confidence that allows young readers to stretch themselves and try new things.

To get this sort of book talk going, it’s helpful to keep some principles of listening in mind.

- **Concentrate on learning before you worry about teaching.** Often as adults we quickly take on the role of explainer when we talk with children about books. Instead, try to learn as much as you can about the young reader before leaping in with your own ideas or corrections.
- **Be curious. Ask questions.** When an observation made by the child strikes you as interesting, it’s worth asking her to “say more about that.” As Ellin Keene (2012), asks, how often is the first thing out of your mouth your best thinking?
- **Listen for the strength, not the deficit.** Focus on the most interesting thing the child says or does, not the thing she needs the most help with.
- **Listen for the general in the specific.** Young children are concrete thinkers. Their book talk comments are usually literal, and don’t stray too far from the particular text in front of them. One of the most powerful moves we can make as adults is to name what children are doing as readers in transferrable language that can apply to the next book and the book after that, e.g., “I see you are the sort of reader who pays special attention to parts that are surprising;” “It seems to me you often compare a character’s life with your own,” etc.

The not-so-subliminal message we send with this sort of listening is yes, your thoughts matter. As one conversation connects to the next, a relationship of trust is established that develops and grows as new ideas are discovered and explored.



## What to Do: Engage in Book Talk

- Start conversations by asking what the child is thinking or feeling about the book, without asking leading questions.
- Have the child pick a favorite page, or picture, or passage in the book and tell what she likes about it.
- Ask follow-up questions; when a child makes an interesting observation or uses an interesting word to explain an idea, ask her to “say more about that.”
- Then when she explains, pick out the most interesting part of her observation, and ask her to “say more about that” again!

## More to Know and Do: Keep Up the Book Talk!

- Ask children to consider the opposite idea from the one they are expressing. For example, if she says the book is funny, is it ever not funny? The main character may be brave, but are there any parts where she is not brave?
- When asked to talk about a book, children often just summarize, or tell “what happened.” Listen for a part of their retelling that suggests an idea or opinion (e.g., “She was sad,” “That wasn’t fair,” etc.). Ask the child to say more about that!
- When a young reader expresses an idea or opinion, ask her to find the exact part in the text that made her think that.



## How to Find Dan Feigelson

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