

Opening a can of worms with idioms

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Can't make heads or tails out of it? He keeps beating around the bush and it is making you feel bent out of shape? Well, if you are in over your head, zip your lip, and let sleeping dogs lie. No one is trying to pull the wool over your eyes ... but someone may be using too many idioms!

The Oxford Dictionary defines idiom as 'a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words.' 'I can't make heads or tails of it!' expresses confusion to someone familiar with this idiom but to a young child, or adult learning English as a second language, the literal images are bizarre.

Our conversation, print, and media are peppered with idioms. Miriam Trehearne, international literacy consultant, tells us that television uses four idioms per minute. Trehearne emphasizes that reading comprehension can be thwarted by idioms. Poorly understood idioms are one of the major reasons for the fourth grade slump - a time when many children stop reading for pleasure. Trehearne explains that we cannot assume children will absorb the meaning of idioms. We need to teach them their meanings. Trehearne suggests two ways to do this. One way is through drawing. Write an idiom, such as 'It's raining cats and dogs?', at the top of a piece of paper. Draw a line down the centre from top to bottom. Ask your child to draw a literal picture of these words on the left side of the page. Your child might draw clouds with barking dogs and meowing cats falling from the sky. On the right side of the line, have your child draw what the idiom really means. Now your child might draw black clouds with hundreds of falling raindrops.

Trehearne also recommends using picture books to help you and your child explore the meaning of idioms together.

'Monkey Business' by Wallace Edwards uses elaborate, imaginative illustrations that show a wide cast of animal characters in absurd situations. Each one is a literal portrayal of an idiom. An alligator, for example, eats her words as she sweeps books off a table into her gaping mouth.

In a second children's picture book of idioms called 'Cat's Pajamas' Edwards continues his amusing literal interpretations of sayings children hear every day. As described on chapters.indigo.ca, 'To ensure you get the hang of it, each expression is used in a sentence and explained at the back of the book. And if you look closely you'll discover a cat hidden in every painting; some cats are a piece of cake to find, others may require you to use your noodle.'

'There's A Frog in My Throat: 440 Animal Sayings A Little Bird Told Me' by Loreen Leedy is an illustrated collection of idioms grouped by animal types. Though this book has no storyline, your child may enjoy flipping to certain pages that are silly or fun to talk about with you.

Successful readers understand idioms. With so many to know, preschoolers and young children will be over the moon if you take the time to help them discover the coded meaning of words grouped so surprisingly that they are in a class all of their own.