



When I was a kid, the very best day of the week was Sunday. My dad left the house in the morning, only to return with an armload of newspapers—including the color comics section in all its glory. The funnies, as they were then called, were my paradise. They sparked a passion in me that still burns today. Not yet a strong reader, I adored the challenge of deciphering the letters suspended in each white speech balloon. With help from my father, I figured out how to sound out the words and make sense of each story.

That was how I first learned to read and to think outside the box—and how your child can, too. Each strip's three or four panels make up a world small enough for young children to explore from start to finish in just a few minutes. They're compact "educational" gems!

Create Your Own

Comic strips, like their cousin's graphic novels and comic books, are more accepted today by educators as tools for helping children master literacy. The funny, silly, clever, and touching story lines in each short strip draw eager readers in. Just a few words per frame is all it takes for a comic strip's characters to reveal a complete story. They don't require long sentences or paragraphs to relate a captivating tale or a powerful message.

Getting your kids into comic strips is easy. Just pick up a newspaper or visit a comic strip website like gocomics.com. Then, you can extend the educational value by helping them create a strip of their own. Some kids need only a blank piece of paper and pencil to churn out box after box. For those who need a prompt, you can enjoy the fun of creating one together. You'll be surprised how easy it is. Try these ideas:

- ❖ **Draw** a row of story boxes or print one from the Internet—try blog.zingerding.com/tag/comic-strip-template. A few large boxes is best at first. Your child can work up to a grid when she's ready for a longer sequence.
- ❖ **Brainstorm** with your young cartoonist. Will the characters be humans or animals? What emotions might they display—happiness, sadness, anger? Where does the story take place?
- ❖ **Think about real-life situations** to depict, such as a joke Dad told yesterday or a wacky thing that happened on the way to school. Move on to fantasy if your child wishes.
- ❖ **You can either** draw by hand or use a free online comic strip generator (like my site, www.makebeliefscomix.com).

Once your child has gotten in the swing of things, you'll probably find that her vocabulary expands as she searches for new words to help her characters express themselves. Older kids might use comic strips as a terrific way to grasp classroom lessons. Summarizing the Boston Tea Party, for instance, with simple images and text is as memorable as it is fun. Comics are also a great way to record family memories for scrapbooks.

From a comic-loving kid, I grew up to become a journalist, newspaper editor, and author of a number of books that aim to help young writers find their creative voice. Your little one may not turn into a word fanatic like I did, but reading and creating comic strips might inspire an interest in other reading material, art, humor, or history. All you need is a spark.

