

## Learning on the Go



It's easy and fun to provide early learning opportunities for your young child. You can do it anytime, anywhere — it's learning on the go! On the following pages, we'll explore a few ideas to turn ordinary daily activities into eye-opening experiences for your child.

**At home:** Turn everyday activities at home such as **laundry, meals,** and **bedtime** into learning experiences for your child.

**Traveling:** Going places is often exciting for children — learn how to make riding **in the car, taking public transit,** and **walking** educational for them, and fun for you too.

**Public places:** Being out and about exposes children to many learning opportunities. Learn how you can turn excursions to the **market, library,** and **playground** into learning.

## Learning on the Go at Home

You can turn everyday household chores and activities, like **doing laundry**, into fun learning games for your child, no matter how young she or he is.

Laundry is a frequent activity that young children love to join in — from watching clothes tumble to matching up socks. Find fun ways to help your children take part in these chores.

### Connect

You can make children a part of this everyday task in ways that are fun for you and your child.

### Watch and listen

Look at your child to see what he or she is interested in. Is your baby curious about how the clothes feel? Does your toddler like to take clothes in and out of the laundry basket? Is your preschooler interested in sorting clothes by color?

“Curiosity is an important part of mastery. It’s the desire to know. And the nice thing about it is you never get there. It’s not like you ever get to the point where you know everything or you’ve mastered everything.”

*Jack P. Shonkoff, MD  
Samuel F. and Rose B. Gingold Professor of  
Human Development and Social Policy  
Brandeis University*

### Extend

#### For your baby

- › Just because your baby doesn’t talk, doesn’t mean he or she isn’t learning language. Follow your child’s gaze to see what seems to intrigue him or her. Try to see this experience through his or her eyes. Talk to your child about what he or she is watching or what you’re doing: “Now I’m putting the clothes in the washing machine” or “Here goes the soap” or “You’re watching the clothes spinning in the dryer.” Children whose caring adults connect language to their everyday experiences learn to speak, communicate and eventually read better.

#### For your toddler

- › If your toddler likes to take clothes in and out of the laundry basket, have him or her help you put the clothes into the washer and dryer. Ask questions like “Can you find the pants and put them in the dryer?” Or, name colors together. These activities can be fun and help build language and thinking skills.

#### For your preschooler

- › If your child likes to sort things, have him or her make piles of the light clothes and the dark clothes. Older children can also help by finding matching pairs of socks, or finding all of the shirts to put into a pile for folding. These activities can build math and cooperation skills. Feeling useful also helps children feel good, which encourages them to continue to want to be helpful.

## Learning on the Go at Home

For many, meals are a time when the whole family comes together. Learn how your **mealtime** discussions can help the development of your child, and ways that meals foster learning.

### Connect

Studies show that meals are one of the most important times to be together as a family.

Catherine Snow and her colleagues at Harvard University conducted research on literacy development by taping what happens at family meals. **They found that the families who interacted with each other at meal times were more likely to have children with better literacy skills in the school-age years.** Family mealtime interaction took place when caregivers extended children's interests, which helped children use language to analyze, sequence, and predict while helping children appreciate the joy of language.

### Watch and listen

Do your children listen to what you and others say? Do they have opportunities to talk, listen and take turns? Do they look forward to telling you about their day? What sounds and words do they try to say? What are they trying to communicate?

### Extend

#### With your baby

- › Give your baby ordinary kitchen objects, such as plastic cups or wooden spoons, to play with while you are fixing a meal.
- › Name the foods you are eating and talk about foods your baby loves to eat.

#### With your toddler

- › Let your young child help make the meal — let him or her tear the lettuce for a salad, stir the spaghetti sauce or put napkins on the table.
- › Ask your toddler to name the foods you are preparing or to fix a pretend meal for his or her toy animal or doll while you fix dinner for your family.

#### For your preschooler

- › Ask your child to tell you a story about his or her day or tell him or her a story about yours during mealtime.
- › Create family traditions at meal times, such as a song that you always sing or a game like “I Spy” that you always play.

## Learning on the Go at Home

Help your child wind down at the end of the day, and discover ways to make **bedtime** less stressful and more calming for all involved.

### Connect

Bedtime is time to wind down. Creating a schedule that your child comes to expect makes the transition from an active day to a quiet time easier.

Many parents create “a special time” to be together at bedtime. Sometimes they read or tell stories. Other times, they let the child select what she or he wants to do.

### Watch and listen

What helps your child get ready for bed in the most peaceful way, and what stirs up your child? Emphasize the calming activities and turn them into family traditions.

### Extend

#### For your baby

- › Create a consistent bedtime schedule that your child can count on.
- › Think of bedtime as a quiet time to be together rather than a scary time of separation. Your attitude will help build a more positive attitude in your child.

#### For your toddler

- › Create traditions: First we take a bath and brush our teeth, then we read a story, put on the nightlight, give a kiss and go to sleep. With practice, a consistent schedule will help children learn to go to sleep by themselves.

#### For your preschooler

- › Your preschooler can take a more active role in planning bedtime traditions and use special time for listening to stories, making up stories about his or her stuffed animals, or for talking about the day.

#### Anytime

- › Be curious about your own learning and about how your child learns. Parents and caregivers who are truly engaged and excited about learning are more likely to have children who do the same.

**Have fun!** Children and adults learn best when they are connected to others, when they’re learning about something they want or need to know, and when they’re having fun. So don’t make learning in everyday moments a chore, or something to strike off of your to-do list to give your child the best early start. Instead, make it something that *you* enjoy. The gift of joy in lifelong learning is a very important gift you can give your children.

## Learning on the Go Traveling

Are we there yet? Use the time **in the car** to enhance your child's natural curiosity — find ways to interact and connect with your child.

### Connect

Rather than finding toys to amuse and distract your child, use driving time to connect and enjoy being together.

“As a parent (and as a teacher) I would think of yourself as the child's greatest play thing. Your voice, your face, the things you do, and your actions are the things that intrigue them most. They have a natural curiosity for the things humans do. The thing to remember is that you and your time are the most valuable things to a child.”

*Patricia K. Kuhl, PhD  
Professor of Speech and Hearing Sciences,  
Co-Director, Institute for Learning and Brain  
Sciences, University of Washington*

### Watch and listen

What interests your child on car trips? Is it looking for signs that you are almost home or it is talking while you are together? Is it repeating new or silly words or sounds? Is it saying nursery rhymes, singing or watching for when the traffic lights change?

### Extend

#### For your baby

- › Use car travel as a time to sing. Play a tape or CD or sing songs you know or love. You can also make up songs about what you are seeing along the road or sing along with the radio. Singing about everyday activities helps children enjoy the sounds of language, and helps babies begin to associate words with good experiences. Singing also creates a sense of togetherness.

#### For your toddler

- › If your toddler likes trucks, look for trucks as you drive along and see who can yell out “truck” first. Or listen to what your toddler says and repeat their words, adding new words or rhyming with words he or she says. These games help children learn to watch carefully and to categorize.

#### For your preschooler

- › Use car time to talk about your child's day. Ask specific questions (“Did you draw in preschool?” or “Did you eat a cheese sandwich?”) rather than general ones (“How was your day?”) because they are easier for young children to answer. Help your child talk about past experiences to enhance memory.
- › Talk with your child about where you are going in the future (“We are going to the market on the way home”) to help him or her develop thinking and planning skills.

“Memory is at the center of the cognitive universe. Every other kind of cognitive function depends on memory. Memory is bringing an experience that you've had in the world into mind. Memory is extremely important to learning because if you cannot remember, you can't acquire new abilities. Without memory you cannot store the products of learning.”

*Patricia J. Bauer, PhD  
Professor of Child Development, Institute of Child  
Development, University of Minnesota*

## Learning on the Go Traveling

**Riding public transit** exposes your child to different people and new things. Use this time to heighten your child's sense of adventure.

### Connect

Traveling on public transportation, especially if it crowded, can feel overwhelming to a young child, but it can also be an adventure. Encourage your child focus on travel as an adventure.

### Watch and listen

How does your child react to the bus or subway? Help put words to your child's feelings, which will help your child feel known and understood. Notice how your child reacts to other people, sounds, sights, escalators, doors opening and closing or other things you see, feel and hear.

"Stress happens when there is a challenge that matters to you and you don't have the resources to manage it, with a secure relationship you have your resources."

*Megan R. Gunnar, PhD  
Distinguished McKnight University Professor  
Institute of Child Development  
University of Minnesota*

### Extend

#### For your baby

- › Follow your baby's gaze while you travel and say aloud what you think he or she may be focusing on: "See the baby across from us" or "It is very noisy on the bus."

#### For your toddler

- › Imagine what your child is feeling and try to see the experience through his or her eyes. Is she or he feeling overwhelmed or excited? Let your child help you by putting the fare in the fare box, asking the driver for a transfer or signaling the driver to stop. This helps develop a sense of confidence and mastery.

#### For your preschooler

- › Talk with your child about the last time you went on the bus or subway or what interests him or her about where you are going and what you will do when you get there. This will give your child a greater sense of control over his or her experiences and will help build memory and planning skills.
- › Make up special games on a bus or subway, such as counting the stops until you arrive. This helps children understand where they are going, and creates special fun routines or traditions that are always remembered, making the world feel predictable and safe.



## Learning on the Go Traveling

Taking your child **on a walk** is not only good exercise, but also allows him or her to experience nature and learn about the outdoors.

### Connect

Taking a walk is a wonderful physical activity for you and your child, plus it can also be a special time together. Focus on the present moment and being with your child, not on all of the things you have to do when you get back.

### Watch and listen

Look at the walk through your child's eyes. How might a bug or a big crack in the sidewalk look to your child? What sounds do cars or birds make? Is the sun shining? Is it cloudy, warm or cold?

"Young children, like little scientists, have a hypothesis to begin with, but then they go out and make predictions and even do mini-experiments... and the experiments cause the children to change their minds — their hypothesis."

*Andrew N. Meltzoff, PhD  
Job and Gertrud Tamaki Endowed Chair,  
Professor of Psychology  
Co-Director, Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences  
University of Washington*

### Extend

#### For your baby

- › Name things that your baby looks at or is interested in — from street and business signs, to animals, flowers, bugs, cars, trucks, people or other sights.
- › Take time to let your baby watch things until his or her interest shifts. Notice how intently your baby studies things.

#### For your toddler

- › If your toddler likes to run and jump and practice moving around, make games of doing this.
- › Help your child learn to be safe by stopping at corners and driveways and showing him or her how to look both ways for cars.

#### For your preschooler

- › Ask questions about what you see on your walk that seems to interest your child. These questions can include the past, present and future. For example, if you and your preschooler see a dog, ask if he or she remembers seeing that dog before, what the dog is doing, or what they think the dog might do if the dog were bigger or smaller, or faster or slower.
- › Make up rhymes or sing marches as your walk. Try walking and singing or chanting fast, then slow.

## Learning on the Go In Public Places

Errands can equal education. Your everyday outing or errand — even if it's just **to the market** — can be a chance to connect with your child and to encourage his or her early learning.

### Connect

Going to the market is obviously a chore, especially at the end of a busy day. But markets also offer many opportunities for learning that can make the time there less trying.

### Watch and listen

Make sure that your child is not too hungry when you go to the market. Either take a snack or let your child pick an acceptable snack to eat. Then you and your child can focus on other things. Notice what your child is interested in to help make marketing a fun learning time together.

“There are so many ways that parents and caregivers can encourage language in young children and it's not through flash cards. It's through conversation, it's through questioning. The important thing is to invest words with meaning and once you do... those words live on forever.”

*Kathryn A. Hirsh-Pasek, PhD  
Professor of Psychology  
Director, Infant Language Laboratory  
Temple University*

### Extend

#### For your baby

- › The market is like a collage in motion — there is so much going on. Talk about the things you see as you shop.

#### For your toddler

- › Talk to your child in advance about a special thing that she or he can buy at the market. Then look for it, like a treasure hunt. This helps your child learn to be a good observer.
- › Ask your toddler about the shapes and colors he or she sees. Or, ask your toddler to name things that are up high or down low.
- › Give your toddler a cracker or piece of apple. Then point out the crackers and/or apples in the store.

#### For your preschooler

- › Take the adventure of looking for items you are going to purchase a step further. Cut out a picture of an item you are going to purchase and have your child match the picture with the real item on the store's shelf.
- › If there is conflict over what you are buying, set rules. For example: we will buy an item, but sugar can't be one of the first four ingredients. Or it can't have too many preservatives in the food. Have your child look at labels with you to see if this is something you can buy. All of these games can build pre-reading and thinking skills.



## Learning on the Go In Public Places

Parks and playgrounds are very active places for children. Discover ways to transform activity into learning while you're **at the park**.

### Connect

Being in the park can be a time that is restorative, both for you and for your child. It is also a time for you and your child to play and be physically active.

### Watch and listen

What does your child like about being in the park? Is it nature, looking at flowers, or watching the autumn leaves tumble to the ground? Is it the activities, the swings or jungle gyms? Is it other children? Is it all of the above?

“Stimulation to me means how you can provide rich opportunities that fit with your child — that your child will grab. If the stimulation is making opportunities available and the child takes the initiative, that’s great. But if stimulation is something that you *do* to a child, it generally is, probably at best, not going to be helpful and, at worse, potentially harmful.”

*Jack P. Shonkoff, MD  
Samuel F. and Rose B. Ginzburg Professor of  
Human Development and Social Policy  
Brandeis University*

### Extend

#### For your baby

- › Notice what delights your child at the park and give your child more of those experiences, whether it swinging on a baby swing, tossing piles of leaves or sitting in the sand box. Put words to these experiences or make up a song: “What did you do in the park today, dear little girl of mine? I saw another baby in the park today, mama dear mama of mine...”

#### For your toddler

- › Talk about what your child wants to do at the park and then make a point of doing that. Then talk about what you did on the way home. This helps your child begin to make choices and plan ahead.
- › Let your child collect little rocks, leaves or other natural things that fascinate him or her. Sorting helps your child learn to form categories, by seeing the differences and similarities between objects. Bring along containers for scooping and pouring sand.

#### For your preschooler

- › Make plans to meet other friends at the park and discuss those plans in advance. Do you want to meet at the swings or at the climber?
- › If your child likes flowers, talk about their colors and sizes, count them, or ask questions about all the things you could make with them. Or stop to watch a bug or a dog and talk about what you saw later.

## Learning on the Go In Public Places

**Libraries** are full of learning, and are wonderful for exploring language and books. Here are some helpful tips for library-going.

### Connect

The library, especially if it has a section set up for young children, can provide a wonderful space to be together and enjoy the world of language and books. Many libraries offer story times for children of different ages, or have play areas with toys, puzzles and soft pillows or couches.

### Watch and listen

What does your child like best when you go to the library? Is it looking at books or story hour? Is it climbing the steps to get into the building? Notice what interests your child and encourage him or her to do more.

### Extend

#### For your baby

- › It is never too early to introduce your child to books. Babies like books made from cloth or heavy paper with pictures of other babies, of everyday objects or animals. Hold baby on your lap and let him or her “look at” books. Name things that are in the books and show your baby the real life object, such as the “nose” in a picture and the nose on your face.
- › Borrow books that your child enjoys or seems interested in and read them together at home again and again.

#### For your toddler

- › Let your child help choose books that interest him or her, even if your child chooses the same books. Repeating a known story gives your child a sense of mastery.
- › Have your child “read” by telling you a favorite story or repeating words or phrases in the story, such as “Ten Apples on Top” or “Goodnight Moon.”

#### For your preschooler

- › Think about what your child loves to watch and do. Then borrow books that you think your child will be interested in. Keep looking for books that extend this interest.
- › Let your preschooler choose books to borrow. Looking forward to reading a story your child chose will increase your child’s love of books and reading.

“Children learn language in a situation where they talk to you about what they are interested in and you respond.”

*Catherine E. Snow, PhD*

*Henry Lee Shatluck, Professor of Education  
Graduate School of Education, Harvard University*

*Born Learning<sup>SM</sup>* is a public engagement campaign helping parents, caregivers and communities create early learning opportunities for young children. Designed to support you in your critical role as a child’s first teacher, *Born Learning* educational materials are made available through the efforts of United Way, United Way Success By 6 and Civitas. For more information, visit us online at [www.bornlearning.org](http://www.bornlearning.org).

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