

Keys to Great Parenting

Fun and Learning with Your Baby or Toddler

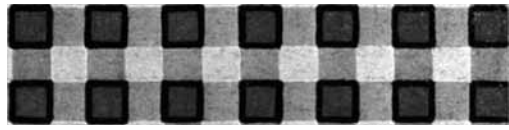


Cooperative Extension Service
University of Kentucky
College of Agriculture

in partnership with

Kentucky Extension Homemakers Association

Cooperative Extension Program
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Show Your Child the World

From the moment your baby is born, she has active brain cells—100 billion of them. They need to make trillions of connections with each other for your child to learn as much as possible while growing. She cannot learn without help. She needs stimulation—not only from you, but everyone and everything around her. That is why this key—**Show Your Child the World**—is so important.

As adults, we have grown used to most of the wonders in the world. We tend to take our five senses for granted. Not so with babies and toddlers!

They are experts at taking in information through their senses of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching. In fact, almost all of their learning in the first two years takes place through their senses.

Children embrace their world with a focus that adults should copy. In any given day, depending on their age and abilities, children might shake, push, pull, dump out,

fill up, roll over, or reach out and grab anything in their world.

They do all this with wonder and a desire to explore and learn. The more your child explores, the better her brain grows, and the richer become the all-important connections in her brain that help her learn.

For example, if you have an older baby or toddler, she may become absorbed in how a small ant moves. Imagine what is going on in her mind! As you watch her tiny finger reach out toward the moving creature, say “That’s an ant!”

All at once, thousands of the connections in her brain cells “turn on.” The connections that know ants when she sees them get stronger. So do those that help her connect the word “ant” to the actual creature and remember it the next time she sees one.

Your little one depends on you, her older brothers and sisters, and other caring adults to help her explore. But as her parent, you are her best guide to the exciting world around her—her first and most important teacher.

To be a good teacher, you need to take time to help her explore. You also need to relax and enjoy the process yourself, letting yourself be fully in the moment. Try to see everything around you in a fresh and vibrant way, as she does.

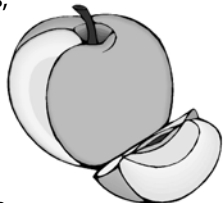
Becoming an explorer with your child has an added benefit. It is good for your well-being. It will leave you feeling fresh and relaxed, give you more concentration, and make you more creative.



Wake Up Your Senses

To help your child explore his world, you need to become tuned in to your own senses. To help you do that, try these two short experiments, or come up with similar ones of your own:

Experiment 1: What does an apple (or another food you especially enjoy) smell like? Cut open the apple. Shut out all your other senses, and breathe in its fragrance. Try to put into words how it seems to you: sweet? tangy? tart? Now open your senses of tasting, seeing, hearing, and touching. Enjoy the apple's flavor, the color of its skin, its crunchy sound, and the way it feels in your hands and mouth.



Experiment 2: What does soap feel like on your hands and body? See if you can describe the feeling in words: smooth? cool? gritty? slippery? Now notice soap's other qualities—its perfume, color, shape, or the thickness of its liquid. How does the water feel on your hands as it mixes with the soap? Can you hear the sound of the water as it swishes the soap bubbles down the drain?

Showing Your Little Explorer the World

You can use simple, low-cost ways to help your child explore his world. It is OK to go back to the same place again and again. Young children enjoy repeating experiences, and it makes the connections stronger between their brain cells.

You often can change the experience just enough to keep it interesting for you, too. Remember to use as many descriptive words as you can as you talk to your baby or toddler. If there are older sisters and brothers in the family, you might like to invite them to join in the fun!

Suggestions for exploring are grouped into four kinds of places to explore: indoors, the backyard, the neighborhood, and the community.

Indoors

- Walk around the house with your young baby, holding him upright. Talk or, if you wish, sing a song to him about the things you walk by. You could say things like "There's the sofa, and there's the lamp. Here's Thomas the cat to say 'Hello.' Now, here's the fridge and there's the stove. Soon you'll have some milk to drink!" He will look around with big eyes.
- Bring his face within 12 inches of some objects for the first month or two. As he grows, his eye muscles and nerves will become stronger quickly. He will be able to see things clearly from a longer distance.
- Place your baby or toddler in a playpen, infant seat, or high chair near you in the kitchen as you make a meal. Talk and sing to him about what you are doing.
 - Point out the names and colors of the fruits and vegetables you are using.
 - Let him touch, hold, and smell the foods.
 - Let him taste the foods you are using. Show him how you mix them together. (*Small food items, such as uncooked vegetable or fruit pieces, grapes, raisins, slices of hot dog, and nuts, should not be given to babies or toddlers. They can choke on them.*)
 - Point out the sounds of clocks, washers, dryers, fans, and other appliances when you are using them. Use words to describe their sounds, such as "humming," "growlina," or "roaring."





- Carry your child to the window to watch birds at a feeder, on the ground, or in bushes.
 - Use words to describe the sounds of the birds, the colors of their feathers, and the ways they peck and fly.
 - Watch to see what things interest your child most about the birds, then talk more about those things.
- Provide a variety of pleasing sounds inside your home.
 - Clap your baby's hands and wiggle his legs and feet to music. Rhythm and melodies help his brain grow. Select sounds that start and stop rather than those that go on without a break. Babies' brains will be able to recognize and remember a variety of sounds more easily if they have a beginning and an end.
 - Play music such as lullabies, children's songs, classical pieces, or other styles that please your baby.
 - Sometimes, just listen to the quiet. Babies need quiet times, too.
- Invite a friend over to visit who has a child about the age of your child. Have enough toys so that both children can have fun without fighting for the same toy. The two children may begin to learn how to be friends, take turns, and share. These are important social skills that can be picked up early in life and make it easier to learn later at school.

Backyard

- Take your little one outdoors, daily if possible. She will feel more free out in the open, and the fresh air is wonderful for her health! If your baby is not yet sitting alone, creeping, or crawling, put her on a blanket on the ground. Place her on her stomach so she can practice lifting up her head and chest to look around. She will make her upper body muscles stronger at the same time.

- Show her how you fill the bird feeder with seeds. Say something like "Birds eat their seeds; you eat your food. You eat cereal, bananas, and carrots!"

- Carry or walk with your older baby or toddler around your yard or some place nearby. Crouch down to her eye level so you can



bushes and feel the sides of grass as she does. Name colors, such as the yellow and red color of tulips or the orange color of autumn leaves. Create an art project with your toddler by

picking up colored leaves and gluing them to styrofoam meat trays you have saved and washed.

- Dress your baby or toddler warmly and go out in the winter snow. Feel the coldness of snowballs and enjoy the shiny surface of ice. In the spring, smell the fragrance of flowers and feel the breeze. At night, go out and look at the stars and moon. In the summer, if you have a gentle shower, why not play in the rain with your toddler?

- Bring your child close to a tree. Get close to her eye level and run your fingers over the bark. If she does not imitate you, bring her hand to the trunk.
- Use words to describe to her how the bark feels to you, such as *rough*, *bumpy*, or *smooth*.
- Name the colors of the bark and the leaves. If she is old enough to repeat words, see if she echoes you.
- Do not be concerned if she does not say the words right. Just keep using them in sentences. Your baby is learning the sound of language, even before she can speak.
- Walk with your toddler to an interesting spot in the grass. Together you can find out what insects might be creeping through the grass. Choose one that will not hurt either of you and talk with her about it. Show her how many legs it has, how it moves, and where its eyes and antenna are. Is it long and slender or short and squat? What color is it? Can it fly? Let the insect climb on her fingers and tickle her skin. If your child is close to age 2, you could bring along a magnifying glass for her to use.
- Stroke a puppy. Study a fuzzy caterpillar. Let your toddler explore dirt, rocks, leaves, bugs, and other treasures. Watch for wildlife like squirrels and chipmunks. Say, "Look how the squirrel's fluffy tail flicks up and down! Look how it scampers away so fast!"



- Watch for living things that move and make sounds: Birds chirp, fly, and peck. Insects buzz and crawl. Salamanders slither and dart.
- Fill a tub with sand, leaves, bark, rocks, and other things from nature. You and your toddler can stir the mixture with your hands and enjoy the way it feels.

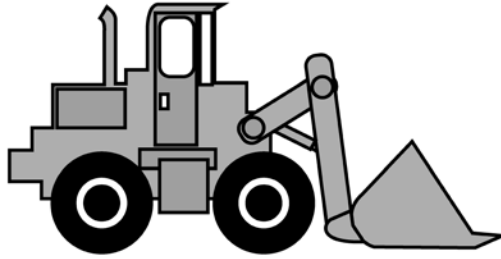
Neighborhood

- Push your baby or toddler in his stroller down the street and around the block if it is safe to do that in your neighborhood. Your older toddler may enjoy walking short distances with you.
- You may meet neighbors in their yards or on the sidewalk. People often enjoy seeing babies and young children and may strike up a conversation. Neighbors' pets can be enjoyable to meet, but be sure the animals are friendly and calm before allowing your child to move close to them. Children are easily frightened, and a bad experience can affect the way a child feels about animals for years to come.
- Be a tour guide. Point out interesting buildings, trees, stores, and other scenes along the way. Go inside stores and show your child what is sold there.
- Describe things to him along the usual route you take on your walk. Later on he will recognize those same landmarks. He will gain a sense of belonging and a feeling for the space in which he lives.
- Taking walks together makes the bond between you stronger. Hearing the names you use for landmarks adds to the list of words he knows.

Community

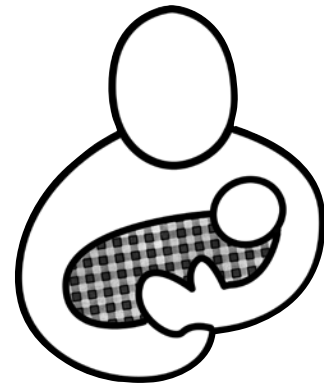
Exploring your community usually works best for toddlers 18 months or older. Take along essentials like extra diapers, bottles, and crackers or other healthy snacks. Keep your trip fairly short so that your toddler does not get cranky or too tired.

You'll be able to think of many more, but here are a few places to go and things to see for both girls and boys:



- a building construction project with large earth-moving vehicles.
- a fire station with fire trucks and protective clothing for the firefighters.
- a children's museum.
- a local holiday parade.
- a supermarket (when you do not have lots of shopping to do).
- an automated car wash.
- a farm with animals to view and maybe pet.
- the public library, where the two of you could check out books to bring home.

After the trip: Talk with your child on the way home about what you saw and heard. The talk will help her remember her experiences. Remember that she understands more of what you say than she can tell you. Maybe later, you can find library books or photographs that show things that are like those she saw on the trip and talk about the trip again.



Your child is an unfolding miracle, and you are his first and most important teacher. He can teach you many things, too. Open your heart and your senses to the wonder all around you. Do not forget the importance of naming and describing the things you see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. Have a delightful time as you and your child explore the world together!

This publication provides information about good parenting. Readers are encouraged to use it for education but not as a substitute for other professional advice.

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Kentucky Invests in Developing Success

Show Your Child the World

This publication is No. 5 in a seven-part series on fun and learning with your baby or toddler, an educational program based on seven keys to unlocking your child's wonderful abilities:

- 1 Care for Yourself
- 2 Cuddle, Talk, and Read with Your Child
- 3 Know How Your Child Develops
- 4 Be Playful with Your Child
- 5 Show Your Child the World
- 6 Teach Self-Control
- 7 Practice Health and Safety

