Learning on the Go:
Tips for Connecting, Watching and Listening, and Extending Learning

Doing Laundry:

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: What is your child interested in? Ask yourself: Is my baby curious about how the clothes feel? Does my toddler like to take clothes in and out of the laundry basket? Can my preschooler have fun 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
Dean, Heller Graduate School, Brandeis University

Extend:

For your baby

• Just because your baby doesn’t talk, doesn’t mean he or she isn’t listening. Language is learned through listening and through talking. Follow your child’s gaze and talk about the things that your child seems to be looking at. Try to see this everyday experience through your child’s eyes. Then talk about what interests your child and about what you’re doing: “Now we’re putting the clothes in the basket. Oh, and now we are taking the clothes out of the basket.” You can also talk while you sort the clothes, “Let’s put the socks here and the pants over here. Can you find another sock?” Adults who connect language to children’s everyday experiences are helping children learn to speak and communicate, which are important pre-reading skills.

For your toddler

• If your toddler likes to take clothes in an out of the laundry basket, he or she might also like to put clothes into the washer and dryer. “Can you put the socks in the basket? Can you put them in the dryer?” Or you can name colors together, “Here are the blue socks. Where is another blue sock?” These activities can be fun while they 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, finding all of the shirts or folding the towels and washcloths. These activities help build strong language, math and cooperation skills. Children also feel good when they feel useful.

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Families and Work Institute
In the Car

**Connect:** You can use driving time to connect and enjoy being with your child.

*As a parent (and as a teacher) think of yourself as the child’s greatest play thing. Your voice, your face, the things you do, 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
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Co-Director, Center for Mind, Brain and Learning

**Watch and listen:** Look: 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 noticing the trees as they flash by the window? 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. And you don’t have to be a professional singer to invent a new song that your baby will love. Singing about everyday activities helps children enjoy the sounds of language. It also helps babies to begin to associate words with good experiences and creates a sense of togetherness.

*For your toddler*

• If your toddler likes trucks or has a favorite color, look for trucks or cars of that color as you drive along and see who can yell out “truck” or the color first. Or listen to what your toddler says and repeat his or her words, adding new words or making up rhymes with the words they say. These games help children learn to watch carefully and to categorize.

• Toddlers also like to hear stories and you can tell children stories when you are driving in a car. Any story will do. You can talk about what went on during your day, what it was like when you were young or tell a favorite story from your childhood. You can also ask your child to tell a story or make one up together. Story time helps develop language skills.

*For your preschooler*

• Use car time to talk about your child’s day. Ask specific questions, such as “Did you draw in when you visited your friend?” or, “Did you eat a cheese sandwich?”, rather than general ones like “Did you have fun?”. Specific questions are easier for young children to answer. Talking about past experiences also helps enhance your child’s memory. And the ability to remember is an important element of learning.

*Be a conversation elicitor, not a conversation closer. Find ways to talk with your child so that you can keep the conversation going. This social dance requires that you ask questions and encourage children to come up with answers. Ask detailed questions rather than broad ones. When you ask,
“What happened at school today?” you might get, “Nothing.” If you ask, “What did you do at circle time today?” or “Was Jenny in school today?” you open up opportunities to dance together.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, PhD
Professor, Department of Psychology, Temple University
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Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, PhD
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• Talk with your child about the past, the present and the future, like remembering what you did yesterday or imagining where you are going and what you will do when you get there. Talking about the future helps your child learn thinking and planning skills. Talking about past experiences helps enhance your child’s memory.

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 in to 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
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On the Bus or Subway

**Connect:** Traveling on public transportation, especially if it crowded, can feel overwhelming to a young child. It can also be a learning adventure. You can encourage your child to focus on travel as an adventure.

**Watch and listen:** Look: 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.

**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 tired or excited? Let your child help—putting the fare in the fare box, asking the driver for a transfer or signaling the driver to stop help 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, 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 of 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, create special fun routines or traditions that are always remembered and makes the world feel predictable and safe to children.
At the Park

Connect: Being in the park can be a restorative time for you and your child. It can also be a time for you and your child to play and be physically active.

Watch and listen: A park is a virtual “classroom” of activities. Look: What does your child like about being in the park. Ask yourself: Is it nature, looking at flowers, 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?

Extend:

For your baby

• Notice what delights your child at the park and give your child more of those experiences, whether it is swinging, 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 the things your child wants to do at the park. Do those things – again and again following the child’s lead. Then make a point of talking about what you did on the way home. This helps your child make choices, plan ahead and develops memory.

• Let your child collect little rocks or leaves or other natural things that fascinate him or her. Sorting helps your child learn to form categories, seeing the differences and similarities between objects. Bring along containers for scooping and pouring sand.

For your preschooler

• Make plans to meet friends at the park and discuss those plans in advance. Do you want to meet at the swings or at the sliding board?

• If your child likes flowers, talk about their colors and sizes, count them or talk and ask questions about all the things you could make with them. Figure out what you and your child can do with twigs and bark. Don’t forget to notice the bugs and ants that live in the grass and to talk about what you see—now and later.
On a Walk

Connect: Taking a walk is good exercise for you and your child and can also be a special or quiet time together. Focus on the present and on being with your child, not on all of the things you have to do when you get back.

Watch and listen: Look: What does your child notice? Try to look at the walk through your child’s experience. How might a bug or a big crack in the sidewalk look to a child? What sounds do the whoosh of cars or the singing of birds make? Is the sun shining? Does it feel warm or breezy outside?

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 like a small scientist.

For your toddler

- If your toddler likes to run and jump and practice moving around, make games of doing this and even follow along yourself
- 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 those things that capture your child’s attention. These questions can include the past, present and future. If you both see a dog, ask about that dog, about what the dog is doing or about what the dog might do if it were bigger or smaller; faster or slower.
- Make up rhymes or sing marches as your walk. Try walking and singing or chanting fast, then slow.
At the Library

Connect: The library can provide a wonderful space and time for being together and enjoying the world of language and books. Many libraries have special areas for young children and offer story times for children of different ages. Some even have play areas with toys, puzzles and soft pillows or couches.

Watch and listen: Look: What does your child like best when you go to the library? Ask yourself: Is it looking at books or story hour? Is it climbing the steps up and down to get into the building? Notice what interests your child and encourage them to do more.

Extend:

For your baby

• It is never too early to introduce books to your child. 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 book(s) over and over. Repeating a known story gives your child a sense of mastery.

• Have your child “read” or tell you a favorite story or repeat words or phrases in the story, such as “ten apples on top” or “goodnight moon.”

For your preschooler

• Think about what your child likes to watch and do. Then find and borrow books that you think your child will like. Keep looking for books that extend this interest, whether it is dinosaurs, airplanes, animals or bridges.

• Let your preschooler choose books to borrow. Looking forward to reading a story he or she chose will increase your child’s love of books and reading.

• Make reading fun:

  If you want to bring the reading lesson home, the most important thing we can tell you is to just have fun. Make sure book reading is a great pleasure for your child. Talk about some of the pages and take turns describing pictures. You can also pretend to make mistakes. Children love correcting their parents.

  Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, PhD  
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  Director, Infant Language and Perception Laboratory, Temple University

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At the Market

Connect: Going to the market can be a challenge, especially at the end of a busy day. But markets also offer many opportunities for enjoying learning that can make the time there positive.

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 right away. Ask yourself: What is my child interested in that can make shopping an interesting learning time together?

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.

• If your baby is eating finger foods, give him or her a cracker or piece of apple. Then point out the crackers and or apples in the store.

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 can help your child learn to be a good observer.

• Ask your toddler about the shapes he or she sees. Ask him or her to name things that are up high or down low.

For your preschooler

• Take the adventure of looking for items you are going to purchase a step further. Cut out a picture of a cereal box and have your child match the picture with the boxes on the shelf.

• If there is conflict over what you are buying, set rules such as, “Sugar can't be one of the first four ingredients in the food we buy.” 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.
At Meals

**Connect:** Studies show that meal times can be 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 recording what happens at family meals. They found that the families who talked with each other at meal times, who extended children's interests, who helped children use language to figure things out, to move beyond the here and now and think about the future, and who helped children appreciate the joy of language were more likely to have children with better literacy skills in the school-age years and beyond.

**Watch and listen:** Look: What do your children do or notice at mealtime? Ask yourself: 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 son or daughter 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 the 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 playing with a friend or tell a story about yours, during meal time.
- Create family traditions at meal times, such as a song that you always sing or a game like “I Spy” that you always play.
At Bedtime

Connect: Bedtime is winding down time. Creating routines that your child comes to expect makes the transition from an active day to a quiet time easier.

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

Watch and listen: Look: What helps your child get ready for bed in the most peaceful way and what stirs up your child? Ask yourself: Do we have a routine like book reading? Studies have found that reading to children at bedtime makes an important difference in children’s later literacy skills.

Extend:

For your baby

• Create consistent bedtime routines that your child understands and 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, then we put on the nightlight, give a kiss and go to sleep. With practice, a consistent routine will help children learn to go to sleep themselves over time.

For your preschooler

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

- Be curious yourself—about your own learning and about how your child learns. Parents and caregivers who are truly engaged in 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, something to strike off of your to-do list to give your child the best early start, but something that you enjoy. The gift of engagement in lifelong learning is a very important gift you can give your children.

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