

Neighborhood Geography with Young Children



“Where’s my new preschool?” “What does ‘prairie’ mean?” Children’s natural curiosity about places is the basis for learning about geography. The Illinois Early Learning Standards call for children to express beginning geographic thinking and to locate objects and places in familiar environments. These tips can help children in your program meet these benchmarks!

-  **Explore the neighborhood.** Preschoolers and babies learn from watching the world, especially if you talk with them about it. “That’s a noisy red truck!” “Mm, do you smell that bread baking?”
-  **Help preschoolers predict what they might notice on a walk.** Make a list and take it along, adding to it as you go. What animals, plants, machines, or buildings do they see? What sounds and smells do they notice? They can sketch what they see, if time permits, or take photographs. Later, they can build models or make a book of drawings to share with their families. Or they can create a mural of the neighborhood.
-  **Encourage children to talk about what they see.** If you describe places precisely, children learn to focus on details too. When they are very young, start using words that describe direction and position (“above,” “left,” etc.). Children also need terms for natural features like “hillside” or “beach” and words for colors, temperatures, sizes, and shapes. This vocabulary is useful on walking trips: “Turn left at the big tree!”
-  **Ask children to collect things to document the trip** such as business cards, fliers, leaves, seeds, and rocks. Resealable bags or “fanny packs” are handy for carrying specimens. And the children can make displays of what they have collected.
-  **Invite children to investigate transportation.** How do people, things, and ideas get from place to place in the neighborhood—by road, trail, railroad, waterway? What kinds of vehicles are used? Where are they going? Blocks, small wheel toys, and materials such as sand or water allow children to play with geography.
-  **Let children experience the tools of geography** like maps, a sturdy compass, and measuring devices. They won’t fully understand these tools yet, but they can begin to learn their uses. Some teachers mount a laminated map on a tabletop. They show how the map represents rivers, mountains, towns, and highways. Children might want to trace the map, copy it, or just take a look.
-  **Read picture books with geographic themes.** They can spark discussions of how other places are like, and different from, the neighborhood.
-  **Plan walks throughout the year.** Children can keep track of ways the neighborhood changes through the seasons. They might do an in-depth study of a park or a business. Special trips to pick up trash can foster a sense of responsibility for the environment. (Each child needs a pair of rubber gloves and must not pick up glass or sharp metal.)
-  **For related Web resources, see “Neighborhood Geography with Young Children” at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.**



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