

Travel & Learn

By Ilisa Caohen, *Working Mother*, workingmother.com, June 2008

If you've heard experts say that summertime is synonymous with kids' brain drain, fear not: Even the most laid-back family travel provides prime locales for learning. "Vacation sights, sounds and activities offer a great opportunity for curious kids to ask questions and seek information," says Steven L. Pastyrnak, PhD, a pediatric psychologist at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital in Grand Rapids, MI. Here, kid learning ops in popular vacay spots.

Beach Blanket Brain Boosters

Trips to the sand and surf offer kids a world of natural wonders to explore and interpret—as you inject a little environmental consciousness into the scene.

Hunt for shells.

Kids will naturally spot and select pretty shells and rocks from the beach. For value-added learning, have your young child group them by size, shape and color to hone classification skills. A simple book on shells will help older kids identify the types and the creature that once inhabited them. For an added eco-learning twist, ask your kids to leave most of the shells on the beach, suggesting that they respect the items as a part of someone else's home, says Samantha Brown, host of the Travel Channel series *Passport to Great Weekends*. "The best beach lesson is 'live and let live,'" she explains.

Raise a bird lover—not a chaser. Kids often think it's fun to chase birds around the shore, but they don't realize they're disturbing nature, says Brown. While you needn't get into a speech on the ecosystem (you are on vacation, after all), you could ask a child who's bugging the "natives" to imagine how it makes birds feel to be chased around their home.

You can even make it a storytelling game: "Imagine if a bird came into your home and chased you around. What would you do? How would you feel?" Then point out the colors and patterns of the birds' feathers and suggest your child look up the birds he's spotted when you get home. As for feeding feathered friends—another no-no—ask questions like: Do you think potato chips are healthy for birds? What would happen if you ate bird food? What do birds find to eat on their own? Your child might have smart guesses and seek real answers.

City Smarts

For a hot time in a cool town, with lots of mental stimulation.

Go interactive. Many cities offer a wealth of obvious teaching venues, like museums, aquariums, historic sites and zoos. Seek out the ones with "hands-on" programs that allow kids to participate actively. The more involved your child is in any kind of learning, the more it'll feel like fun. Brown recommends looking at websites like gocitykids.com to find monthly calendars of kid-friendly events in various cities.

Catch the local culture. Once you've hit the popular tourist attractions, try festive areas

like San Francisco's Chinatown or New York City's Little Italy. "The diverse cultures that make up many U.S. cities offer great lessons for children," says Brown. So contact the visitors bureau in your destination city to ask what's where, and nix chain restaurants in favor of sampling new ethnic cuisines. Also, pay attention to store signs, menus and conversations to help your child learn words in a new language. "Hello" and "thank you" are perfect choices because kids can practice them with you, their multicultural friends and staff in ethnic restaurants.

Country Classroom

A trip to a farm, campsite, national park or quiet bungalow—away from the hustle and bustle of civilization—can bolster one of your child's most important learning aids: self-confidence.

Be skill seekers. Opportunities to gain skills in the outdoors bring kids not only new acumen but also feelings of accomplishment and independence. Look into family camps, dude ranches or just camping grounds where your child can learn to pitch a tent, ride a horse, find safe food in nature, cook, kayak or fish. Find information on national parks and activities for kids at nps.gov/learn.

Focus on survival.

Roughing it in the wilderness can make for great bonding time even as you help your child learn survival skills that can be useful in an emergency. Just be sure to keep activities age-appropriate: Have your younger child find sticks and twigs to build a campfire, but leave it to your teenager to help get the fire started. Breaking up tasks this way gives each family member something to contribute. Also talk about what foods travel and keep well outdoors, and show how to safely cook campfire cuisine like fish, beans and s'mores.

Chills, Thrills and Skills

Roller coasters and pirate rides might seem to be unlikely teaching tools, but there are plenty of life lessons your child can learn in a theme park.

Seize the moment to discuss safety. It's all too easy to get accidentally separated in a crowded setting. So make sure your child knows his full name, your cell number and who to look for if he gets lost. Point out park security staff at the beginning of the day so he knows what their uniforms look like, and show him the information centers so he can spot one if he needs to ask for help. Also show your child how to get in and out of ride cars carefully (watch for gaps between platforms and cars) and remind him to always keep his hands and arms inside the car during the ride.

Have him manage money and time. Even younger kids can learn money management skills when you have them spend some of their allowance on treats or at the gift shop. Making decisions and budgeting cash are great lessons, and fun in this setting. As for time management, waiting in ride lines might be the most boring vacation "activity" ever. So encourage problem-solving by asking your child to come up with ways to pass the time, like playing a round of Eye Spy or Geography. Turning line time into fun and games—what a smart idea!

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