

Where Are We?

Maps and Young Children



Maps are tools for comprehending the spaces we occupy: rooms, towns, nations, the planet. They help us know where we are, and how to get to other places. Using maps involves spatial awareness – concepts such as shape, dimension, relative size, position, and location. Adults can help young children use maps to construct a deeper understanding about the important places in their lives.

Encourage spatial awareness and geographic thinking.

- Call children’s attention to relationships among objects in familiar spaces. Is the blue chair on the table, or next to it? Which is closer to us, the gate or the sand-box?
- Teach map-related concepts such as *above, below, distance, symbol, landmark, path, cartography*, and the four cardinal directions (*north, south, east, and west*). Demonstrate drawing objects from a *bird’s-eye view*.

Introduce maps of familiar places.

- Make a bird’s-eye view map of a familiar space such as classroom or playground. Include doors, windows, fixtures, and furnishings. Have children help you label those objects.
- Give children copies of the map. Invite them to stand in different parts of the space, turning their maps to orient them. That may be hard at first!
- Encourage children to map familiar places, like a bedroom or laundromat, with family members.

Make maps part of every day.

- Call attention to routes and pathways. Where do we end up when we follow the sidewalk? What do we pass on the way?
- Add a road map rug to the block play area. Invite children to draw extensions to the roads on cardboard.
- Share picture books such as Joan Sweeney’s *Me on the Map*. Ask a children’s librarian about other preschool-appropriate books, videos, and apps about maps.
- Build a map collection children can play with or study. Include road atlases, raised relief maps, globes, and weather maps. Briefly describe how each one is used.

Teach games that involve map-related skills.

- Hide a puppet or other toy. Mark its location on a map of the space, and invite pairs of children to find the object, guided by the map. Try marking a “tricky” path on the map for them to follow.
- Teach games that involve pathways, such as Candyland. Create an obstacle course and make a map of it so children can guide themselves.
- Add map puzzles to the puzzle shelf, such as a puzzle of the seven continents on Earth. Laminate maps of your town or state and cut them apart to make puzzles.

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