



by Karen Stephens

Curiosity and Wonder: Cue Into Children's Inborn Motivation to Learn

Children are born eager to learn. Curious by nature, you can't keep them from exploring as they try to comprehend their environment. Everything is a wonder.

Children's curiosity is first focused on you: mom and dad. You're an amazing miracle to gaze upon, touch, and smell; just like baby is for you! The unique pattern of your face and sound of your voice captures rapt attention.

Quite literally, **you** are baby's doorway into the world of love *and* learning. From warm, responsive interactions with you, children develop a *love of learning*, too.

Children's enthusiastic curiosity doesn't need to diminish over time. When conditions allow children to satisfy curiosity through safe, self-initiated, and playful exploration, learning occurs naturally. As children investigate, the experiences simultaneously fuel emotional, social, intellectual, physical, and ethical development.

Capitalizing on children's curiosity as a learning motivator isn't complicated. Their brains are designed to learn. By providing children with enriching experiences, we give learning potential a helping hand. Our support promotes brain-power so learning pathways become refined and strengthened.

Parents and other caring adults provide support by creating an intriguing environment. Throughout childhood, an involved adult close by, who enthusiastically shares and responds to children's delight in discovery is very important.

Of course, nothing about parenting is completely easy. Setting the stage for learning requires a bit of finesse. Create an environment and atmosphere that intrigues, but doesn't overwhelm or over-stimulate. Too much sensory stimulation causes children to withdraw. They turn away or move elsewhere rather than interact and follow curiosity.

Offer experiences according to your child's current interests, stage of development, and temperament. As children grow, curiosity propels them to enjoy broader, more complex encounters.

Through play, children not only figure out how the world works, but how it can work for them. The following are basic strategies for making the most of children's natural curiosity and wonder.

- ***You are your child's first host and teacher.*** Explore curiosity *together* with enthusiasm. Have fun, laugh, sing, cuddle, and hold your child as you introduce the world's wonders.
- ***Create an interesting environment.*** Children explore with their senses. With your child's age and abilities in mind, gradually introduce meaningful objects or experiences that feature new colors, shapes, textures, tastes, and sounds.
- ***Use as little restriction as is safely possible.*** Children, even in infancy, need to move to promote brain connections. No child is a passive learner.

“Throughout childhood, an involved adult close by, who enthusiastically shares and responds to children's delight in discovery is very important.”

Avoid keeping children in restrictive devices for long periods that prevent active exploration, such as cribs, playpens, swings, cars seats, walkers, or strollers. Of course children need the protection of a caring adult and a reasonably “child-proofed” home. But for most of a child’s waking hours, allow them to interact and observe freely in the “real” social world. Taking part in family life is their best learning environment.

- **Follow children’s curiosity in the immediate environment: indoors and outdoors.** Comment upon fascinations, even with infants who don’t yet speak. Listen to wind chimes. Watch rain drops drip down windowpanes. Gaze upon a butterfly on a flower. Listen to the sound of wind through leaves. Lie on a bench or grassy knoll and watch clouds. Play in sand or mud. The Earth is children’s birthright and offers the widest variety of curiosities. Frequently explore it together.
- **Provide materials that engage the senses and encourage children’s interactions.** Toys, such as activity quilts in infancy or puppets in early childhood, provide comfort. And they’re responsive to children’s expanding language and communication skills. Avoid battery-operated toys that “perform” for children. Toys powered by children’s skill and imagination are best.

Helping children learn to satisfy curiosity through exploration is one of the best skills you’ll ever nurture.

- **As a child’s skills increase, offer play materials they can control, manipulate, and make an impact on.** Children love figuring out how things work, especially things they can use in play. Blocks, play dough, dolls, puzzles, non-toxic art materials, and interlocking toys all engage children’s senses and thinking abilities. For instance, with blocks, children explore size, shape, number, and texture as well as weight, balance, and symmetry. Imagine, all that complex learning from “just” a children’s toy!
- **Tune into children’s curiosity and let it guide experiences.** Be aware of what attracts attention. Note what entices children to ponder and tilt their heads in wonder. That curiosity is a natural path to learning.
- **Respectfully listen and respond to children’s questions.** Children ask *a lot* of questions: what, why, how come, when, who? Alert children come up with a million. Because questions are often so logical, we can be tempted to laugh; but it’s best to refrain. Answer questions based simply on your child’s ability to understand and their attention span.
- **When you’re stumped by a question, say, “I don’t know.”** Engage children’s problem solving by asking them what they “guess” the answer could be. Together decide how to find the answer. When questions pop up, use a book or the Internet to find the answer. Or ask an informed neighbor or teacher for information.
- **Engage curiosity with simple, hands-on experiments.** Experiments don’t need to be elaborate. During the preschool years, children can play in the tub with waterproof toys to determine which float and which sink. Kids then learn to compare and analyze information while having fun. Planting and watering a seed in a dirt-filled paper cup to see what happens is another simple example. School-agers enjoy more complex experiments learned at school or from the Internet. With time, space and materials, children’s curiosity finds plenty to explore.
- **Gradually introduce your child to the world beyond home.** In a backyard or community setting, there is a lot to explore. A walk around your neighborhood can be fascinating to children. Be prepared to stop often. The ground is close to their eye level, so bugs, fallen leaves, and animal tracks grab their attention regularly. Don’t rush or you’ll discourage curiosity and frustrate your young learner.
- **Provide children with basic discovery tools.** A grocery bag for gathering nature treasures is handy. Kids also enjoy a safe, child-sized magnifying glass, magnet, digging shovel and bucket, bug catcher, balance scale, measuring tape, and other types of “investigation” toys. You’ll find such items in the nature, science, or child gardening section of an educational toy store. Your community might even have the items in a toy lending library. There are lots of web resources, too.

- **Participate in your community.** Include children in errands to stimulate curiosity. They like to see how the bank's drive through works or how food is stacked in grocery stores. Take advantage of local resources, such as the library, park, children's garden, zoo, nature center, planetarium, aquarium, and children's discovery museum. Local festivals, parades, celebrations, and farmers market are exciting to kids. Select places that appeal to all family members. And pace your visits; you don't want to tire or over-stimulate children. Occasional visits will tantalize kids and won't over-tax their energy.
- **Encourage preschoolers and school-agers to create "curiosity" collections.** Collections encourage child to observe details to compare similarities and differences. Counting and naming collection objects leads to learning. The beauty of a collection is important, too. Preschoolers enjoy finding and displaying nature collections, including seashells, pine cones, leaves, acorns, flower seeds. School-agers make even more complex nature collections of artifacts such as minerals, fossils, bird feathers, insects. School-agers also enjoy creating personal collections of multi-cultural dolls, sports cards, car models, miniature toys, and the like.

One of parenting's biggest rewards is getting a "ring-side" view into children's curiosity. It expands and advances as children grow, so the show never ends. Helping children learn to satisfy curiosity through exploration is one of the best skills you'll ever nurture. Enjoy the process.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

© Karen Stephens 2007