



Bluff Heights Geography with Young Children

By Frank Ginipro

In thinking about how very young children can understand the concept of geography and, in turn, neighborhoods, especially one as beautiful as Bluff Heights, I discovered that there are simple ways to accomplish this with children from ages 3-5. The following tips were developed by the **Illinois Early Learning Project**, and would seem to hold true almost anywhere. Take a look!

"Where's my new preschool?" "What does 'desert' mean?" Children's natural curiosity about places is the basis for learning about geography. It's important for children to express geographic thinking and to locate objects and places in familiar environments.

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.

Examples include business cards, fliers, leaves, seeds, and rocks. Resealable bags or "fanny packs" are handy for carrying specimens. And 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, sidewalk, bus, water? 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.

Examples include 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/parents mount a laminated map on a tabletop. They show how the map represents oceans, cities, towns, and freeways. Children might want to trace the map, copy it, or just take a look.

Read picture books with geographic themes.

These 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 litter 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.)

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