

# PLANNING FOR THE EARLY YEARS

# The local community

How to plan learning opportunities that **engage** and **interest** children

By Jennie Lindon

BIRTH  
TO  
FIVE

## Contents

Planning to make a difference for children	2	Learning about a local service	20
Learning about your immediate neighbourhood	8	Learning to use a local facility (the library or museum)	22
Learning about the wider local community	10	Learning about a special local event	24
Learning about going to the local shops	12	Learning about print in the neighbourhood	26
Learning about going to the park (or other open green space)	14	Learning about building and road works	28
Learning about water in the natural environment	16	Learning about different ways to travel in the local community	30
Learning about eating out in the local community	18	Final reflections	32
		Finding out more	32

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# Learning about going to the local shops

Plan an outing with a small group of children in which you will walk to your nearest shop or shops and make a purchase. This activity is suitable for younger children, although the babies and very young toddlers will be in a buggy. Even two-year-olds can hand over the money to buy the cress seeds from your local garden centre. You will help very young children as they move towards understanding this process.

## What do you need to do beforehand?



Childminders will look at the daily routine. Today it makes sense for you and the younger children to buy a range of fruit on the way to the school pick-up for the older children. You can all make a fruit salad tomorrow. In a group setting you plan jointly with colleagues, so that small groups of children can get out throughout the week.

What are the pedestrian skills of the children you plan to take? Will they be able to walk to the market and back? Can a couple of older children be trusted to hold hands together, without an adult? They can walk in the middle of your group, with an adult, plus two children in front and another set behind. Have a store of small, robust bags that will allow children to carry purchases back. Or else have a shopping trolley for this purpose; a child can probably tow it until it is loaded with shopping.

Very young children may be keen to walk but will get tired. One child may have a physical disability or health problem that means a buggy needs to be available. Organise a timing that enables this child to walk some of the way. You will have asked for a general permission from all parents, but you may have further conversations when families have special concerns about their son or daughter.



It is useful to have a specific purpose for some local trips. Today you might plan to buy fresh bread from the bakery or vegetables from the market. Perhaps you explain to the children that this morning you will all go to the supermarket and buy the ingredients for making blueberry muffins this afternoon. Around Halloween there will be some impressive displays of pumpkins in the shops. Children may already have seen some carved into shapes, but are unaware that you can eat this vegetable. Maybe you can make some pumpkin soup or a pie today.

You share the plan in advance with the children, even the youngest who understand only some of what you say. The advantage of explaining what you are all going to do is that young children sometimes start to ask you questions on the way, about what and why and where. Of course, your main aim of making a purchase still allows time for spontaneous events, like watching the huge stag beetle crossing the path.

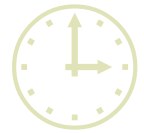
Young children benefit from being active in the preparations for any outing. Toddlers learn to fetch their outdoor coat and shoes, although they will need help in getting these on. Learning the skills of self-care is an important task for early childhood, and some children have special health issues. Yet, four- and five-year-olds can take an active part in remembering their own inhaler, with adult support. Some over threes are already good organisers and like to be part of final checks, such as whether you have got the blanket, so the baby can be comfortable on the grass. Or they may well remind you how you forgot the camera last time.

## Responding to children and babies' interests

What catches the attention of the babies or toddlers? In dry weather you can lay out a thick blanket for sitting babies, or put them on their stomach. What do they see, what seems to get them to pause and listen? Perhaps they like to watch the waving branches, so you need a spot where they can lie on their back and look (clearly not looking into the sunlight.) Babies and children love to watch feathers or leaves float down and try to get the sycamore 'helicopters' to spin. Throw some of these items up in the air for them. Maybe you anticipated that the toddlers would love to clamber on the fallen tree trunks. But they surprised you with their interest in the bandstand.



## Time for you to think



Are you striking the right balance between safety and freedom for children? They need to explore the park actively in order to learn. You can guide them over what and how 'we touch', but they will have a very limited experience, if adults take a no-touching approach. Carrying a store of wet wipes will deal with clean-enough hygiene.

Perhaps children became intrigued by trees and bark. So, next time you could bring magnifying glasses. Did the children become interested in what they spotted high in a tree or at a distance? Maybe next time you could bring some binoculars.

## Listening to children and talking with them

Babies may have a favourite spot to which they want to return. They will show you by their eye movements and pointing. Older toddlers will make it clear by gestures and a few words that it is very important to go via the flower bed with the funny little fence or here is the big tree that they like to run round very fast. Long before they understand much about growth, very young children will delight in watching how signets grow into swans, over a series of outings to the pond in your local park pond.

As children's speech extends, then they will use their words to direct your attention. "Look, look!" will start the conversation that flows when one or two children spot a squirrel up high in the tree and then, great excitement, there is another one. Your natural use of vocabulary will extend the words that they later use: up high, on the next branch, hanging on tight, spinning around and other phrases. Some children will need several go's at the word 'squirrel'; the opening combination sound is not that easy. Also, younger children may need your help when they want to share this experience with their parents at the end of the day.

Children's questions or questioning comments are the best opportunity for you to share some information about the changing seasons. Be ready for any chance for you all to ask a gardener or park keeper, "Where have the rose bushes gone?"

A relaxed meal or snack in a café can help young children understand how to behave in this kind of venue. Together you will find a table, sit down, and make choices from a menu or a counter display. They experience how everyone remains sitting, chats to each other and maybe looks around. At some point, most likely at the end of the meal, you (or one of the children) will ask for the bill and pay.

## Responding to children and babies' interests

Kennet Day Nursery surprised their local pizza restaurant with how much three- and four-year-olds already knew about making their own pizzas and the questions they therefore wanted to ask. In general, when children understand more about how a café works, they are better equipped to set up or extend their pretend version.

Were children intrigued about what goes on behind the scenes? In some local cafes it is possible to watch as the counter staff make sandwiches, brew coffee or bring out the bun that you have chosen. In other places the cooking and food preparation happens in another room and full plates appear with the waiter or waitress.

Once you have made friendly contact with a local restaurant they might be happy to invite children to look at the kitchen when it is not in full swing. An alternative is that some restaurant chains will organise a tour.



## Time for you to think



As you reflect on the outing, you learn more about individual children. Was the idea of a menu a new idea to some children? Did some know enough to ask, “What does that say?” Or perhaps one child queried, “Where are the pictures?”, because he was familiar with illustrated menus. It may be a novel idea to some children that once you have made your choice in a café, you cannot change it, unless you are very swift. Even if children understand some written numbers, it is not necessarily obvious that numbers on a menu – card or board – tell customers the price of items.

## Listening to children and talking with them

A visit to a café or small restaurant will show you the differences between individual children: what they understand and what puzzles them. Perhaps some ask a lot of questions about what is inside pies or flans, whereas another child is attracted by nice icing and decorations. Conversation flows alongside enjoyment of the food, but there will be opportunities for you to use vocabulary appropriate to this meal and to the eating out experience. Specific words for different types of cake or bread will arise naturally, as well as questions about unfamiliar ingredients. Encourage children to direct some of their questions to the café owner or waitress. Even young children can gain the confidence to ask for apple pie but without any custard.

In a small café or deli the children may be able to watch most of the food preparation. They may be intrigued by use of food tongs and want to know why these are used. Or they notice that the person making up your wraps is wearing plastic gloves, rather like those you wear when you change the baby. If the kitchen is out of sight, then some children may ask where do people make all this food.

Children may ask questions within this outing about the whole business of payment. They wonder about who you are supposed to pay or how you know what the baked potato costs.