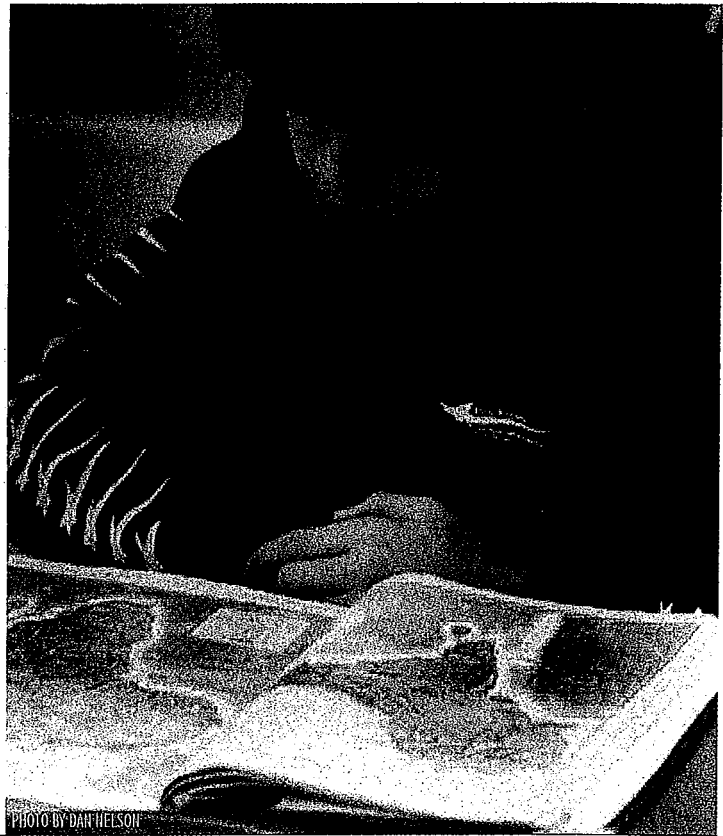


Helping Children Learn about the Larger World



toddler's world, though small, grows each day. She learns about the world gradually at first, then faster—first her own family, then progressively more about her neighborhood, then the town or city, other towns and cities, then the concept of being in a state, a part of a country, and finally the world. There are many different countries, governments, languages, cultures, and customs. How can we help our children learn to be a part of this larger world?

Clearly, the world has become “smaller” in the sense that communication is now almost instant, and foods and countless other goods are transported routinely across oceans and continents. Whole economies depend on international trade. There is no doubt that it is more important than ever for our children to know about the world beyond the United States. Schools are slow to pick up the slack on global topics; it's hard enough these days for teachers to cover the three R's, so educating children about the larger world can get lost in the hustle pretty easily. Sometimes teachers can supplement children's learning with enrichment activities, including reading and talking about other countries and cultures, but largely it is up to parents to help children understand the interconnectedness of the world, as well as to get them thinking about our future world.

Until they learn specifics about other places in the world, all this talk about other countries and cultures is pretty abstract and hard for young children to imagine. One obvious and enjoyable technique to help children gain a more concrete understanding is travel. Visiting

new places, whether in our own country or abroad, is one of the best ways for children to learn about the larger world.

With young children, figure out what they can reasonably do, and then start planning your trip—and be sure to involve them in the planning. If you live in New Mexico and decide to travel to Minnesota to vacation at a cabin on a lake, your children learn, among other things, about distance—that it takes three long days of driving to get there or a flight that involves changing planes. Parents can build enthusiasm with such comments as: “Let's look at the map. What states will we have to drive through (or fly over) on our way? How many miles total is it? Let's mark the route and see how many miles we go each part of the trip.” Children also learn some geography this way. Ask open-ended questions to get their imaginations sparking: “What do you think Minnesota will look like when we get there? How do you think it might be different from home? Why do you think Minnesota has so many lakes?”

Once there, talk about differences you see. Create a game to see how many things the children notice. “How are the houses different? Why do you think they are different? What else is different?” These kinds of questions help children learn to observe and to think about and make sense of what they see and experience.

It's optimal if family travel includes other countries or destinations within the U.S. that have a climate and landscape far different from what your children experience at home (such as Alaska or Hawaii or national parks such as the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, or the Ever-

glades). Seeing different landscapes helps children understand how varied the world is in geology and biodiversity.

Prior to a trip, parents can ask their local librarian for help finding books about the places they plan to visit, and they can discuss with their children some of the history associated with those places. For example, the Laura Ingalls Wilder series describes pioneer life in Minnesota in ways that appeal to young children. Older children may enjoy learning about pioneers who traveled the Mississippi River, which starts as a tiny stream in northern Minnesota and grows to a mighty river that carries hundreds of barges each day between Minnesota and New Orleans. With this type of enrichment in their homes, children are more likely to develop their curiosity, research skills, and a lifetime love of learning.

Children in middle school and high school often have opportunities to travel with groups like Girl Scouts or Boy Scouts, religious groups, or school bands. Some of these groups even travel abroad. These experiences are invaluable. In high school and college, students can apply for student exchange programs in which they go to other countries and live with a family for a summer or a semester. Programs are available through Rotary International, American Friends Service, and others. If parents are reluctant to allow a high school-age child to live abroad, the family might instead apply to host a foreign student in their home here in the U.S. Some parents decide that the entire family can spend a year abroad, which not only broadens their experiences, but also models the importance of a world view. It also removes the children from the peer pressure in their local community and school to focus only on the limited and narrow interests in their locality.

Since travel isn't always possible due to schedules, cost, or other factors, "armchair travel" is a good substitute. There are hundreds of books in libraries and bookstores for children of all ages about other countries and cultures. Reading these books is enjoyable and inexpensive, and children can be "transported" to many different places through their reading. National Geographic, through its TV programs and magazine, is a good source of information about other countries. TV shows like *Nova*, *Animal Planet*, or the Discovery Channel also offer educational programming featuring other countries.

As children get older, their concept of the world broadens, and the information they learn can be troubling. They know U.S. soldiers are fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. They hear talk about the economic recession; their own family may be experiencing hardship due to unemployment. They are aware of global warming and the melting of the polar ice caps. These are worrisome matters for our gifted young people, as well as ourselves. As adults, we wonder what kind of world our children will inherit.

The world is going to get even more complex, so it does no good to act as though these worries don't exist. Parents can help anxious youngsters understand the basic facts and then reassure them that there are people working to solve these problems worldwide. For example, when news stations reported the recent earthquake and resulting tsunami in Japan, families could discuss how these events affected not only the livelihoods of people in Japan, but those of people beyond that country as well—countries such as the United States were affected by the

sudden halt in Japanese trade and exports. Children can find Japan on a map (or globe) and learn what time it is there, as well as how many hours it takes to fly in a plane there. They can learn about why Japan is important to the U.S.—what products we and other countries buy from it, how and why the earthquake stopped production in Japan's factories, and how that in turn affected the world economy. In this way, children begin to understand the interdependence of countries through trade and commerce.

We want our gifted children to be problem solvers. It is important that they know the world is full of specialists working to solve problems, and they can begin early in life to recognize and value relevant information. When they grow up, they may well be one of those people working to solve some of the world's biggest problems.

Foreign language study is also important. Children in other countries study English, many starting in kindergarten. In the U.S., however, budget cuts threaten to prevent substantive language study in many schools. Parents whose local school districts don't offer foreign language classes can search for schools that do include language study. Many private schools provide these classes, but most large city school systems offer them as well. A magnet school within a school district is another option. Also, some summer camps offer foreign language study in which students in grades three and up can experience language immersion. Another option is for parents to invest in an electronic home learning program such as Rosetta Stone, which currently offers training in more than 35 languages. Parents and children can practice the lessons together. Certainly a trip to France is made richer if the traveler speaks some French, and the same holds true for other countries.

It is astonishing how many gifted children have a narrow worldview. Knowledge and ability do not exist in a vacuum, and they are at their most powerful when they are viewed in a worldwide context. Our brightest minds must become aware of how their actions can influence the world—for good or for bad—and they can only do this if we help them understand and appreciate the many different facets of our world that often are quite different from our own. ■



JANET L. GORE, M.A., M.Ed., has over thirty years experience in gifted education as a teacher, administrator, counselor, policy maker, and parent. For three years she was the State Director of Gifted Education in Arizona and served on the Board of Directors of the Arizona Association for Gifted and Talented. She is co-author of two major award-winning books—*Grandparents' Guide to Gifted Children* and *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*.



JAMES T. WEBB, Ph.D., the founder of SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted Children), has been recognized as one of the 25 most influential psychologists nationally on gifted education. The lead author of five books and several DVDs about gifted children, Dr. Webb served on the Board of Directors for the National Association for Gifted Children. In 2010 he received the prestigious Ruth A. Martinson Past-Presidents' Award from the California Association for the Gifted.