



FOSTERING WONDER

Gentle Early Years

What to Nurture and How to Nurture It

Informal Guidance for Ages 3–5



Artwork: George Barret the Elder, *A Mother and Children Resting Beneath a Large Beech Tree*, 1776.
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What This Guide Is

This is not a full curriculum. It has no weekly schedule, term plan, sequence of lessons, or list that a parent must complete.

It is a simple guide to help a parent think about what may be gently nurtured during the early years and how to nurture it through ordinary family life. The ideas are options. The parent chooses what suits the child, the season, and the opportunities already present at home.

The early years are not a smaller version of Grade 1. From ages three to five, a child's days should still have abundant room for outdoor life, free play, family relationships, good habits, beautiful stories, conversation, useful work, and making things with the hands.

The aim is not to produce academic work. The aim is to help the child form happy relationships with language, number, nature, people, beauty, and the responsibilities of home.

How to Use This Guide

- Read through the areas and keep the possibilities in mind.
- Offer an activity naturally when it fits family life or the child's interest.
- Repeat favorites as often as the child wishes.
- Stop while the child is still interested and cheerful.
- Let free play and outdoor life occupy more time than adult-directed activities.
- Do not feel obligated to touch every area each day or even every week.

The activities in this guide should feel like invitations, not assignments. If the child is not interested, put the material away pleasantly and offer it another day.

Language Arts

What to Nurture

In the early years, language arts means much more than learning the alphabet. The parent is nurturing:

- delight in stories and beautiful language
- careful listening for a short time
- natural conversation
- familiarity with rhymes, songs, letters, and sounds
- interest in books and print
- confidence using words to express thoughts, needs, and feelings

How to Nurture It

Read excellent children's books aloud and allow the child to enjoy them without a lesson afterward. Welcome any conversation the child begins, but do not require narration, quiz the child, or ask the child to prove that they were listening.

Keep letter experiences playful and tactile:

- press letter tiles into playdough
- form large letters with playdough
- use letter stamps with washable ink or in playdough
- trace or form letters in a tray of play sand
- play a children's alphabet sequencing game
- notice the letters in the child's name and the names of family members
- enjoy nursery rhymes, songs, and rhyming games

The parent may name a letter and its sound naturally. There is no need to test the child, teach every letter in order, or insist that the child finish an activity. A child who wants to arrange or stamp letters without naming them is still becoming familiar with print.

If the child begins asking how to read words, the parent may answer and help. More direct reading instruction can wait until the child is developmentally ready for short lessons.

A Beginning Shelf of Living Picture Books

These books are a starting collection, not an assigned reading list:

Affiliate disclosure

Each linked book title in this list is an Amazon affiliate link. As an Amazon Associate, Fostering Wonder earns from qualifying purchases.

1. [*The Tale of Peter Rabbit*](#) — Beatrix Potter
2. [*Millions of Cats*](#) — Wanda Gág
3. [*Madeline*](#) — Ludwig Bemelmans
4. [*Make Way for Ducklings*](#) — Robert McCloskey
5. [*The Little House*](#) — Virginia Lee Burton
6. [*Goodnight Moon*](#) — Margaret Wise Brown, illustrated by Clement Hurd
7. [*Blueberries for Sal*](#) — Robert McCloskey
8. [*The Snowy Day*](#) — Ezra Jack Keats
9. [*Where the Wild Things Are*](#) — Maurice Sendak
10. [*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*](#) — Eric Carle

It is better to know and love a smaller number of wonderful books than to hurry through a very long list. Rereading allows the child to notice the language, pictures, humor, patterns, and story more deeply.

When choosing other books, look for well-written language, beautiful or expressive illustrations, and stories worth returning to. Nursery rhymes, folk and fairy tales, poetry, and seasonal picture books may also become part of family life.

Math

What to Nurture

Early math is familiarity with real quantities and relationships. The parent is nurturing:

- counting with meaning
- recognition of small quantities
- more, less, and the same
- size, length, weight, shape, order, and pattern
- familiarity with written numerals
- confidence using number in real life

How to Nurture It

Begin with objects the child can see and handle. Count when there is a real reason to count: plates for the table, socks in a pair, apples for a recipe, steps on a walk, or birds at a feeder.

Keep numeral experiences playful:

- press number tiles into playdough
- form large numerals with playdough
- use number stamps
- trace or form numbers in play sand
- match a numeral to a small group of real objects
- play dominoes and notice the dot patterns
- sort safe household objects by color, size, shape, or kind
- make simple patterns with blocks, movements, sounds, or large beads
- compare full and empty, long and short, heavy and light, more and less

Cooking is especially valuable. A child can count spoonfuls, find two eggs, fill a cup, divide a snack, follow the order of a simple recipe with parental guidance, and notice how ingredients change.

Where Structured Math Fits

When a child is eager for a little more structure, the family may use an age-appropriate math curriculum. I have used Singapore Math Kindergarten resources with my own children. We work on an assignment for no more than ten minutes at a time, and I use manipulatives such as beans, buttons, and counters to present concepts concretely.

Keeping bookwork short, concrete, and secondary to real-life number experiences remains consistent with the Charlotte Mason method. The child does not need to finish a page simply because it was started.

Families may also use Arithmetic Practice after creating a [free Fostering Wonder account](#). A three-month free Family Tools period begins when the family acknowledges and starts using an eligible Family Tools feature. After that period, previous Arithmetic Practice results remain available to view, while starting or continuing practice requires an active Family Tools subscription. Arithmetic Practice includes a Level 0 option designed for preschool and kindergarten students.

Singapore Math is an optional outside resource in this guide, not a required schedule that Fostering Wonder reproduces or assigns.

Nature and Science

What to Nurture

Science in the early years begins with a relationship with the real natural world. The parent is nurturing:

- curiosity
- careful observation through the senses
- affection and respect for living things
- familiarity with local plants, animals, weather, water, earth, and sky
- the habit of wondering and looking again

How to Nurture It

Go on a nature outing once a week when possible. This may be a walk through the neighborhood, time in the yard, a visit to a pond, a beach walk, gardening, or unhurried play at a park.

The child does not need a prepared lesson or named topic. Allow time to run, dig, climb, listen, carry, watch, and investigate. If the child becomes absorbed in one puddle, stone, flower, bird, snail, or ant trail, the outing has been worthwhile.

The parent can help by:

- slowing down and noticing what catches the child's attention
- giving the correct name of something when it is known
- saying, "I wonder," when the answer is not known
- returning to the same place or tree in different seasons
- using a magnifying glass for a closer look
- observing creatures gently and returning them safely
- offering clay, drawing, or painting to let the child create what they saw on the nature outing.

The Fostering Wonder [*Nature Study Quick Start Guide*](#) may give the parent ideas when the child wants to explore a subject more deeply. It should remain a source of possibilities, not a checklist.

A nature journal is optional. A young child may simply draw. If the child wants words recorded, the parent may write down the child's own observation or question.

Social Studies

What to Nurture

For a young child, social studies begins close to home. The parent is nurturing:

- a sense of belonging within the family and neighborhood
- familiarity with community helpers and shared places
- awareness that people do different kinds of useful work
- courtesy toward people in the community
- a beginning sense of location and direction in familiar places

How to Nurture It

Take community-helper and museum field trips as opportunities arise. Possibilities include the library, fire station, post office, farmers market, bakery, farm, nature center, public garden, and children's, art, history, or natural-history museums.

Prepare the child with one or two simple thoughts about where you are going. During the visit, follow the child's attention instead of trying to see everything. Afterward, natural conversation, pretend play, drawing, or helping write a thank-you note is enough. No worksheet or required narration is needed.

Ordinary errands also teach the child about community life. Notice the mail carrier, librarian, sanitation worker, cashier, baker, crossing guard, gardener, and others whose work the child sees.

Art and Work with the Hands

What to Nurture

Art in the early years gives the child experience with beauty, materials, movement, color, shape, and the satisfaction of making something. The parent is nurturing:

- freedom to experiment
- control and strength in the hands
- observation of form, color, and texture
- patience with a process
- pleasure in creating rather than performing for approval

How to Nurture It

Keep a few simple materials available and supervise as needed:

- finger paints and washable paint
- large crayons, chalk, and watercolor
- playdough and air-dry clay
- nature impressions or simple clay models of subjects observed in science
- large beads for bracelets and simple patterns
- paper for tearing, folding, gluing, and safe scissor practice

[Art for Kids Hub](#) may be used occasionally for a drawing activity that the parent and child do together. Choose a lesson suited to the child's age and let the child interpret it freely. A child's picture does not need to match the instructor's or the parent's picture.

Offer open-ended art as well as occasional guided activities. Do not take over the child's work or correct every detail. Talk about what the child noticed, chose, tried, or enjoyed.

Habit Formation

The Parent's Approach

Work on one small habit at a time. Make the expectation clear, arrange the situation to help the child succeed, and follow through calmly. Habit formation should reduce repeated correction and frustration over time; it should not fill the day with commands.

Attention

Build attention through short experiences that are genuinely worth attending to.

During a read-aloud, choose a good book, remove unnecessary distractions when possible, and stop before the child's attention is exhausted. Do not require narration or quiz the child afterward. Quiet movement does not always mean the child is failing to listen.

During baking, give one manageable direction at a time. Ask the child to listen before beginning, then allow the child to complete a real part of the recipe. If attention wanders, gently bring the child back to the present step.

The goal is gradually lengthening willing attention, not forcing a young child to sit still for an adult-sized amount of time.

Obedience

The parent gives a safe and reasonable direction once, clearly and calmly. There is no countdown and no rising series of repeated warnings. If the child does not begin, the parent moves close and helps the child follow through.

A simple pattern is:

1. Gain the child's attention. I like to say the child's name and have them respond, "Yes, Mom," before I give the direction.
2. Give one short, specific direction.
3. Allow a brief moment for the child to process and begin.
4. If needed, move near and calmly help the child complete it. When introducing a new direction, remember this simple progression: "I do, we do, you do." First, show the child what to do. Next, do it together. Once the child understands the task, allow them to complete it independently while you remain nearby to offer help if needed.

The parent considers whether the child understood, is able to do what was asked, or needs help with a difficult transition. Calm authority and developmentally appropriate support belong together.

First-time obedience concerns safe, reasonable parental directions. Children should also know that they may refuse unsafe behavior, unwanted touch, requests to keep harmful secrets, or directions that violate family safety rules.

Truthfulness and Precise Language

Truthfulness includes learning to say what we really mean. Young children often use large phrases for large feelings: “I hate that,” “I always have to do this,” or “I never get a turn.” Rather than arguing with the feeling or labeling the child dishonest, help the child choose more accurate words.

For example:

- “You really do not like that.”
- “You are disappointed because you wanted another turn.”
- “It feels as though you have been waiting a long time.”
- “Tell me exactly what happened.”

The parent models the same habit by avoiding exaggerated threats, promises that will not be kept, and careless use of *always* and *never*.

What Is Enough?

A young child does not need to complete a program to have a rich early education.

A home is offering enough when the child has regular opportunities to:

- play freely
- spend unhurried time outdoors
- listen to a few excellent stories many times
- talk with attentive adults
- handle letters and numbers without pressure
- help with cooking and household life
- meet people and visit places in the community
- paint, draw, model, build, and make things
- practice a few good habits with calm parental guidance

Some children will recognize letters, count confidently, or begin reading before six. Others will not. These differences do not determine whether the early years have been successful.

Safety and Supervision

Letter tiles, dominoes, counters, beads, and other small pieces require close adult supervision and are not appropriate for a child who still mouths objects. Use age-appropriate, non-toxic art materials. Adults remain responsible for knives, heat, appliances, food allergies, and choking hazards during cooking.
