

Early Learning Parents' Pages ADA Edition

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Spring is Here! Time for a Garden

Teaching your child about healthy fruits and vegetables and how to grow them lets you combine learning with exercise and makes gardening a perfect family project. In Florida, spring is the best time to plant and grow a garden. If your family has little or no outdoor space for a garden, you can help your child plant a container garden on a patio, deck, in windowsill boxes or near windows indoors. Buy some small gardening tools for your child so he will be comfortable digging or weeding in the garden. First, ask your child to help you find a good spot for the garden. A garden will need at least six hours of sunlight a day and will need to be protected from animals such as rabbits or deer. Pick out which plants to grow. Visit a local nursery or home and garden center to find the types of plants that will grow best in your area at this time of the year. Ask if you need to buy seeds or plants. You can contact the local extension service or a *Master Gardener* (someone who has been trained by the USDA or [Florida Extension Service](#) and volunteers to help others grow gardens). The local [extension office](#) will answer questions you may have about gardening in your area. Make sure you learn about [poisonous plants](#) and [flowers](#) before selecting plants for your garden.

Preparing soil for the garden will be fun for your child. Adding compost, turning the soil to make it soft and raking it to smooth it will be exciting and good exercise. Show your child how to follow directions in the seed package or on the nursery's instructions when planting. Measuring the depth of holes or distance between plants will allow your child to practice math and science skills in real life settings. Remove any weeds from the soil in your garden area. They may absorb all the nutrients in the soil or choke out your plants. As your plants begin to grow, teach your child to pull out weeds carefully, trying not to pull out new plants as seedlings appear. Let your child water the plants as directed on seed package labels or by information included with the plants. Over- or under-watering can kill plants. Have your child help you look for insects on the plants and remove caterpillars or bugs that you see. Try using organic soap sprays, or spray garlic or hot spices mixed with water on plants to get rid of insects. To locate other ways to eliminate garden pests without using poisonous products find out about the [organic way to deal with insects](#).

Learning the natural way

Families want their preschoolers to be ready for kindergarten and often spend time at home helping them with math, language and science skills. These sessions need not just consist of practicing new words or numbers, counting and reciting science facts, but can also be pleasant explorations of nature. Walking outside in your yard or a neighborhood park can be a great way to help your child practice important concepts and skills needed for success in school. Observing nature together and asking questions will focus her attention on basic concepts and language necessary for school readiness. Looking at leaves on plants or trees is a great way to begin. Using one stem or small branch, count with your child the number of leaves she sees. Ask about their color and size. Ask, "Are all the leaves the same color? Are they all the same size? What is on the outside of the tree? Is the bark smooth or rough? Why do you think it is called bark? Can bark mean something else? Are trees animals or plants?

Why? How big is the tree? Is it taller than you, or Mom or Dad? What are you taller than? Are you taller or shorter than the tree, a flower, a bug?" Discussing questions with your child will help him learn new words or

new meanings for words, expanding his vocabulary and knowledge of words as he practices math and science skills.

Counting steps from a tree to another spot in the yard or park is an excellent way to practice counting. Using a stick, write the numeral in the dirt or sand or have your child write it. Count *your* steps as well and compare that number to your child's steps. Ask your child if it took you more or less steps than it took her to cover the distance. Ask, "Is your foot smaller or larger than mine?" Trace around your foot and your child's foot and help your child compare the two.

Look around for different colors in nature. Ask, "Is the dirt brown, black or white? Is all dirt the same color? What else is the same color as the dirt or soil?" Look around for birds. "What colors are the birds? Why are some red birds called cardinals?" Are there rocks in the yard? "What size or shape are the rocks?" Collect some rocks, pine cones, leaves, twigs and other treasures to take inside after your walk. These natural treasures can be used to count, sort, group and describe at home. Your child can use these later to make a picture or dictate/write a story about your walk or nature exploration. You could look in books at home, in the library or online to find out more about the things your child collected. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has a [list of books for young children about nature](#) you may want to use. There is also a series of [Take A Walk Books](#) that help children discover nature in their own backyards or local parks.

Visit a national, state or county park

Spring is a great time to take your family to visit a national, state or county park. Family passes are available on an annual basis or just for a day at reasonable prices.

[Florida State Parks](#) has an app families can download. Smartphone users can download the free Florida Pocket Ranger® State Park app for on-the-go information, providing advanced maps, photo waypoint feature, built-in compass and social media connections. The Pocket Ranger ® app has been updated to include a global positioning feature that shows the exact proximity of the user to each public-beach access point in Florida, along with information and locations for the 171 state parks and trails. You can follow the state parks on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Pinterest](#) and [Instagram](#). Cost of an individual annual entrance pass is \$60.00. The cost of the family annual entrance pass (up to eight people in a group; only allows up to two people at Homosassa Springs and WeekiWachee Springs) is \$120.00. Discounts on the purchase of annual entrance passes are available to those who currently serve or have served in the United States Armed Forces. Free lifetime military entrance passes work the same as the family annual entrance pass and are available to veterans with service-related disabilities; surviving spouses and parents of members of the U.S. military who have fallen in combat; and law enforcement officers and firefighters who have died in the line of duty.

How your child can become a Junior Ranger

Parents can download a copy of the Junior Ranger Kit for their children or contact the nearest state park for a copy.

1. Visit any [participating Florida State Park](#) and ask for a Junior Ranger Kit.
2. Complete the [6 CORE Activities](#) from the kit.
3. Review the 6 CORE Activities with park staff.
4. Recite the Junior Ranger Pledge to receive a certificate, member ID card and an official Junior Ranger PASSPORT.
5. Complete more activities to earn stamps for your PASSPORT.
6. Turn in your completed PASSPORT to receive an official Junior Ranger badge, patch or pin.

New parents have app for health messages

Parents of young children use social media and technology for information about health, safety and education for their children. [Text4baby](#) is an app to help mothers get information about their own and their children's health.

Mothers can sign up and receive three free messages a week with health and safety information for themselves and their babies. The messages are timed to the baby's due date or birthday and are sent through pregnancy, up until the baby's first birthday so messages will be relevant and timely. There are no advertisements or product promotions, and messages address topics for mothers and newborns such as prenatal care, nutrition, immunizations, access to health care, developmental milestones, safe sleep and breastfeeding. Some messages link to mobile web pages or videos and health hotlines. Interactive features let mothers set up appointment reminders and LIKE messages. Urgent health and safety alerts are sent by participant zip code if needed. Product recalls, infectious disease alerts and natural disaster alerts are sent as soon as the information is released to the public. *Text4baby* is available in Spanish. Examples of messages for mothers with new babies:

- Free msg: It's time for baby's 1-month Dr.'s visit. Your baby had blood tests right after she was born. At this visit, ask your Dr. for the results.
- Free msg: Not sure if your car seat is installed right? Get it inspected. Department of Transportation can help. Call 888-327-4236 for locations near you.
- Free msg: Your baby's mouth needs cleaning now—even before his first tooth! Wipe your baby's gums each day with a wet washcloth or use a soft baby toothbrush.

Text4baby is launching [Dads Matter](#) messages for expectant fathers and dads with babies under age 1. Dads will get three messages per week with tips and information on babies' health and safety, ways to support a mother's health and ways to engage with their babies. Dads can sign up by texting BABY (or BEBE for Spanish) to 511411 and entering the baby's birth date to get the correct messages.

Just Park It!

To locate county parks and recreation areas, look on your county's website or call the local parks and recreation department. Many county parks have free admission and offer playgrounds and recreational activities for families as well as special events.

Starting in September, every fourth-grader in the nation will receive an "Every Kid in a Park" pass that's good for free admission for a full year to all of our public lands for the children and their families.

Free admission to all of our national parks, monuments, forests, wildlife refuges and waterways will allow families opportunities to spend time enjoying the outdoors while participating in physical activities together. [Recreation.gov](#) is a website for locating national parks, public lands and waterways.

[Sesame Street Explores National Parks](#) are short videos that help younger children learn about national parks with hands-on materials to accompany each video segment.

Read more about [National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Passes](#).

Read more about [Let's Get Every Kid in a Park](#).

