



“A” is for Apple: What Kids Can Learn at the Grocery Store

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While grocery shopping with children can sometimes be stressful, there are ways of turning this regular outing into an opportunity for interaction, conversation, and fun! There is a lot to see and do at the grocery store, and by making use of some Hanen strategies, both children and parents can enjoy themselves a lot more.

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Before you go shopping....
 - **Make a list.** Making a list with your child is an excellent way to introduce your child to the vocabulary related to shopping as well as to printed material. Both will encourage your child’s early literacy skills.
 - Younger children can make a list by pasting cut-outs from grocery store flyers or old packaging/labels onto their list. You can print the name of the item underneath and point to the word while you read it to your child.
 - Older children can print their own list, or draw pictures of the items to buy.
 - **Read a recipe.** Sometimes looking at a recipe for a favourite dish together can motivate a child to go shopping for the ingredients. Some children’s cookbooks have ingredients with pictures to help children “read” the recipe.
 - **Prepare your child for the visit.** Explain to your child that you will be going to the grocery store. If your child has difficulty understanding

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language, you can use a *Visual Helper*¹. Take a photo of your local grocery store ahead of time or download one from the internet. You can show this picture to your child when you explain the upcoming trip to help him better understand where you are going. If your child is reluctant to go shopping, try showing him a picture of something fun that will happen afterwards (For example, point to a picture that was taken at Grandma's house and say, "First we will go shopping, then we will go to Grandma's house!").

- **Time it well.** Try to avoid grocery shopping at meal times or nap times. Tired, hungry children are not good shoppers! Also, if you avoid shopping at peak hours, your shopping trip will go faster and you will not have to wait in long line ups – two other factors which will make the trip more enjoyable for your child.
- While you shop...
 - **Follow your child's lead** Observe what your child is interested in. Wait for your child to point out something to you, then talk about it with your child. Actively listening to your child while you shop can spark interesting conversations about what your child sees, smells, feels, and hears.¹
 - **Add language.** The grocery store provides endless opportunities to add language that will expand your child's vocabulary and understanding. You can emphasize important and interesting words that describe your child's interests. For example, if your child wants to buy milk, you can say things like "Okay. Going to get a *carton* of milk", or draw attention to the different sizes of milk containers, emphasizing which ones are small or big.¹ You can also comment on what your child is experiencing. For example, if your child shivers in the freezer aisle, that's a good time to talk about how cold it is, saying things like "It's *freezing* here!", "You're *shivering*", or "This is the *coldest* part of the store".
 - **Refer to the shopping list.** Let your child hold his list and look for those items. Not only will this keep your child busy, but it will encourage your child's matching skills as he tries to match the picture on his list to the real-life item. This can also be done with coupons (match the image on the coupon to the real item). He can also cross out the items on the list once you put them in the cart.
 - **Point out print.** You can stimulate your child's early literacy by pointing out print in the grocery store.²

- You can point out the numbers and wording on the aisle signage by pointing up and asking “Let’s look for aisle 6. We need to find the cereal”.
 - You can point to the price tag while you read an item’s price.
 - Packaging offers wonderful examples of print in different eye-catching colours and sizes, as well as images that correspond to the printed material. Hold up a product you are about to put in the cart and point to the letters on the package while you read the word. For example, if you are holding a box of Cheerios, you can point to the word “Cheerios” while saying “This word says *Cheerios*.” You could also point out that they put a Cheerio over the letter “i” in the word instead of a dot. This will draw your child’s attention to the print.
- **Let your child get involved.** When adults go grocery shopping, they are constantly touching, smelling, squeezing, shaking, and looking at the items in the store. It is impossible to shop without your senses! Whenever possible, allow your child to use his senses to experience the grocery store. This will motivate your child and spark new conversations. Allow your child to touch products that don’t easily bruise or break (eg. cereal boxes, apples, packages of cheese, etc). Let him pick out items, put them in baggies, and into your cart. Be sure to talk about what your child sees and touches.
- When you get home...
 - **Let your child help you put away the groceries.** This provides a good opportunity to repeat words that you may have emphasized at the store, and also to add other ideas. For example, you can emphasize location words by talking about where the items go (*in* the cupboard, *on* the shelf, *in* the freezer, *up* high, *down* low, *beside* the cereal, *under* the sink, etc). This also provides you with another opportunity to point out the print on the package labels.
 - **Set up a pretend grocery store.** Children often pretend about things they have experienced first-hand. Therefore, your recent trip to the grocery store might spark a new pretend theme for your child. Keep empty boxes and packages, grocery store flyers, and coupons so you can set up a pretend grocery store at home. Give your child a small basket or bag to fill with their “groceries”. You can make pretend money out of paper, or use money from games like Monopoly. You can make signs with your child using cut outs from flyers and print the name of the item on the sign. You can make pretend grocery lists too.

Grocery shopping with your child can be fun and educational, but it doesn’t always go as smoothly as planned. Here are some tips to think about when your plan backfires:

If your child...

- **is overwhelmed by the grocery store...**For some children, such as children with autism or sensory difficulties, the grocery store can be an overwhelming place. These children may feel overwhelmed by the sights, smells, and sounds of the grocery store. Try bringing something calming for your child along with you to the store, such as a favourite toy or snack. Try to shop at off-peak hours so the store is less crowded and quieter. Use visual helpers to prepare your child for the shopping trip, as well as to focus your child while you are shopping.
- **doesn't like shopping....**Start with quick shopping trips. If necessary, plan to buy only 1 or 2 things at first. Don't expect your child to manage a 45 minute shopping trip initially. Work up to this.
- **constantly grabs things off of the shelves...**Give him something to hold such as his shopping list. Allow him to pick appropriate things off the shelf whenever possible (things that won't bruise or break).
- **doesn't want to sit in the shopping cart or needs to move/keep active...**Some grocery stores have small carts/baskets on wheels that are the ideal size for children to pull. And all grocery stores have hand-held baskets for lighter loads. Try giving your child his own small cart or basket so that he can walk beside you and shop. This will increase the length of your shopping trip, but it's well worth it if your child enjoys himself!

Grocery shopping with your child might involve a little extra planning, and the shopping might take a little longer, but it is well worth it given the benefits your child will gain from his exposure to print, new vocabulary and conversation.

Endnotes

1. Pepper, J. & Weitzman, E. (2004). *It Takes Two to Talk™: A practical guide for parents of children with language delays* (2nd ed.). Toronto: The Hanen Centre
2. Weitzman, E. & Greenberg, J. (2010). *ABC and Beyond™: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings*. Toronto: The Hanen Centre

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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