

Map Skills for Elementary Kids: Value, Activities and Games

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As a child, you probably remember growing up learning how to read maps, decipher symbols, and measure the distance between landmarks using an array of sharpened colored pencils. But let's be honest: when was the last time you looked at a map? Chances are, the last time most of us parents have looked at a map is after searching for a destination using Google Maps, which can easily be navigated at the click of a mouse. In a world where GPS can steer us in the right direction, most folks today type in a destination and are directed to that location with the voice assistance provided by the app on our smartphone.

All that said, you might be wondering whether kids today really need to develop map skills given the fact that most adults rarely use them. You might be surprised to discover that the answer is a resounding yes!



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Why Do Children Need Map Skills?

Even though it seems that GPS services would make reading a map obsolete, the skills we need to accurately read one are complex and goes far beyond merely having the ability to get from point A to point B on a daily basis. In fact, map skills for elementary kids are just as important as ever! By learning to read maps, students develop critical spatial reasoning skills that literally help them learn their place in the world.

Let's take a closer look at the educational value behind reading maps before diving straight into exciting hands-on activities and games to jumpstart your child's map skills.

Maps and Spatial Thinking in the Classroom and Beyond

Spatial reasoning or spatial thinking skills is the ability to understand the spatial relations between objects, pictures, or symbols. Ultimately, the development of spatial reasoning skills leads kids to gain the capacity to visualize objects and understand their distance or relationship. Developing these highly important skills help us visualize and understand the world using the "mind's eye". With spatial thinking, we can understand the larger world around us. It's a problem-solving skill necessary for everyday life. For instance, spatial thinking can help kids understand how far the grocery store is from their house, or how far away another state might be from the one they live in.

While spatial reasoning skills are already important for everyday life, you'll be happy to know that it's also an incredibly important STEM skill that engineers and architects use to plan projects and build machines or buildings. If your child pursues a future in STEM, those map skills now will translate into the development of an invaluable set of reasoning skills!



So how do learning to read maps help kids develop spatial reasoning skills? The answer is quite simple: learning to read a map assists kids in making that mental image of where objects or landmarks are located, and the distance between them. Kids are then able to read maps to assist them to get around, but it also means that kids can use globes to understand where major countries, cities, and landforms are located across the world.

Additionally, once kids can use their mind's eye to visualize objects, they can also understand the spatial relationships that exist within their own home, neighborhood, or familiar buildings. As mentioned above, reading maps kids make sense of their world.

Now that it's obvious that map skills are a must, how can a parent get started helping their kids? Let's turn to some awesome ideas for building map skills in a hands-on way!

Hands-On Activities and Games for Elementary Students

Make a Globe!

For the little learner just starting out in preschool or kindergarten, it's important to get an idea of what your child knows before getting started. For this first activity, you'll need to grab at least two inflatable balls—an inflatable globe (available at your nearest teacher supply store), and a plain blue inflatable ball or beach ball. Have some dry erase markers

and a baby wipe on hand to clean up. First, hand your child the plain blue inflatable ball and ask him or her to draw the continents as they think they might appear on the world if someone was in space looking at Earth. Watch as your child goes to work drawing the continents as he or she knows them!

Next, take out the inflatable globe. Help your little learner check it to see how they did. Are all the continents in the right place? Are they somewhat the right shape? If not, that's ok! Use the baby wipe to clean the globe and start over again using the inflatable globe as a guide. To extend this lesson, connect your child's map skills with geography by pointing out specific continents, countries, or landmasses. Pick a random spot on the globe and research that country. With endless ways to use these globes, your child will be busy learning for many lessons to come!

My Family on a Map- Playing with Maps of Your Town

Google Earth is an amazing technology that is freely available to anyone! Use it to its full advantage by printing out images from Google Earth of your child's very own city or town. For younger children, print out images of your neighborhood, and give him or her markers to mark familiar locations, like your home, the library, stores, school, and more!



Watch on [YouTube](#)

Watch and see how your child finds real-life structures and builds spatial skills by looking at aerial pictures of his town! For older children, print out a picture of the larger city. For instance, if you live in Houston, simply print out an image of the greater Houston metro area and watch as your child locates where on the map your neighborhood is located!

Make an Interactive Floor Map

Nothing is more fun for kids than making something on the floor they can manipulate and walk around in! Supplement your at-home or classroom map skills lesson plans with an interactive floor map! For this activity, search for printable roads that can be used to create your child's neighborhood! Use felt or foam board to make objects that represent houses, trees, cars, stores, and more! Make a legend complete with symbols, and grab toy trucks, Hot Wheels, or any toy that can be used to represent an object or structure in the neighborhood. Using all the above supplies, create an interactive map of your child's community that can double as a play town to spark your child's imagination!

Depending on your child's age, be sure to talk about community locations and helpers that can be found in your town. For older kids, make a floor map of an imagined city to stretch his or her creativity!

Hunting for Treasure

It's time to make like a pirate and go on the hunt for treasure with this exciting activity! Treasure hunting will delight any child that already knows a bit about map reading, so use this activity with 2nd through 3rd graders depending on your child's ability. Plan ahead to determine an appropriate reward or "treasure", and hide it within your house before making a map that will help your child find it. X marks the spot, but create your map with your home's structure in mind, and be sure to use symbols that kids can easily identify using a map legend.

If your house is two or more stories, you may want to keep the "treasure" on one of the floors and draw the map as if one is looking down at the floor from above. Situate the map so that north, south, east and west correspond to the direction your home faces and provide a compass rose on the map.



Watch on [YouTube](#)

Once your map is ready, give it to your child to start the hunt! Help him or her read the map key to determine the symbols on the map, and watch as your child utilizes those newly-formed map skills to find the treasure!

Cardinal Directions Grid Game

When learning to read a map and how to get around, it's important to understand the concept of cardinal directions, and its especially tricky for little learners still mastering the idea of right and left! All you'll need to play this exciting game is sidewalk chalk and a compass. After reviewing cardinal directions with your child, go outside and make a large 4x4 grid of boxes. Make sure to label each side, N for north, S for south, E for east, and W for west. For older elementary learners, make it harder by mixing in intermediate directions, like northwest, and so on.

Draw or place objects like leaves or pine cones in some of the grid boxes before starting. Armed with the compass, your child will start at spot you designate towards the bottom of the grid, facing north. Instruct your child to move towards the drawings or objects by calling out directions. For instance, tell your child to "move one box north, and two boxes west". Once your child gets to the picture or object, begin traveling to the next until he or she gets to the other side of the grid!

By developing your child's map skills, you are giving your elementary kids an advantage when it comes to STEM! One day your child will use spatial thinking for tasks in their daily lives as well as in their future careers, so get started now to give your child's skills a boost!

