

HOW TO HELP CHILDREN BECOME GEOGRAPHICALLY LITERATE

Dear Family:

This pamphlet suggests ways in which families and caregivers may work with children to help them learn about the world in which we all live.

Some of the suggestions in this pamphlet may seem more suited to your needs than others. We suggest that you select those that have the greatest appeal for the children with whom you are working. Children develop map reading and spatial skills at different rates. Some do this early and almost by instinct, while others develop these abilities later and need help from those around them. With your help and a little patience, your child can acquire a basic knowledge of geography.

The Canadian Council for Geographic Education (CCGE) is indebted to our colleagues at the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE) in the U.S. who developed the original version of this pamphlet. The NCGE graciously gave permission for the CCGE to modify and adapt this information for Canada.

The members of the CCGE welcome your involvement in furthering your child's geographic education. We hope you and your child will enjoy learning about geography both at home and at school. The suggestions contained in this pamphlet are offered as a means of extending the partnership between home and school as we work together to enhance the education of our nation's young people.

Sincerely,

Dickson Mansfield
Chair
Canadian Council for Geographic Education

Why is it important to learn geography?

Students in Canada know less about geography than students in many other developed countries.

Surveys show that the geographic knowledge of Canadian students leaves much room for improvement. This is especially so, when compared with nations such as Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany. In many cases geographical knowledge has declined over the years to the point that many of our children cannot read maps or locate provinces, territories, cities or important physical features. Lack of geographical knowledge and skills is not, however, restricted to children: in 1992, 23 graduating Harvard University students were asked what causes seasons on the earth. Only two were able to say the tilt of the earth with respect to the sun accounts for the seasons. Results from a Canadian university would probably not have been very different!

Lack of geographical knowledge is more than an embarrassment; it can affect the future of our nation

- How can citizens evaluate Canadian foreign policy options if they know nothing about the countries involved?
- How can we assess the merits of the North American Free Trade Agreements (NAFTA) if we are unfamiliar with current Canadian trade patterns with the United States and Mexico?
- How do we know if Canadian military peace-keeping personnel should be sent to places such as Bosnia-Herzegovina or Haiti if we are ignorant of the land and people with whom they must deal?
- How can we develop options on such matters as conserving forests, managing development in cities or spending billions of dollars to clean up toxic waste dumps if we lack the basic knowledge of geography that is required to understand the issues that are involved?
- Concern over lack of geographical knowledge and skills on the part of elementary and secondary school students has been expressed by Canadians at the local as well as provincial/territorial level.
- Geography is not included as a core subject in many provinces and territories across Canada. Some geographical knowledge and skills are developed in social studies programs; however, this varies greatly across Canada.
- While many provinces and territories seem to be downplaying geographical initiatives, our U.S. neighbours are working hard to expand geographical education. Under the "Goals 2000" program, U.S. educators have realized the value of geography by making it one of five core subjects in the curriculum.

- Over the past five years, our colleagues in the United States have led in the development of a “world class” document of geography standards for grades 1 to 12. These standards were developed with input from outstanding educators and geographers around the world. The resulting document, *Geography for Life*, was released in late 1994. Copies of this document have been made available to Ministries and Departments of Education across Canada as well as to all Faculties of Education. Copies may be purchased through the CCGE office or the National Council for Geographic Education in the U.S. These geography standards are benchmarks against which the content of geography courses at all grade levels can be measured. They have the *potential* to affect the education of all children in Canada. We strongly urge you to encourage educators in your child’s school to consider adopting these standards as part of their educational program.
- Geography subject associations in some provinces/territories have already adapted these standards to their geography courses. We are confident that if these standards are implemented, they will have a positive affect on student outcomes.

Canadian students need geographic skills in the global workplace because geography builds:

- a strong sense of spatial relationships;
- skill in data collection, observation, organization, interpretation and presentation;
- an understanding of relationships between physical and human environments.

If you think these skills are important, then your child should be including GEOGRAPHY as part of their elementary and secondary school program.

How can you as a parent or caregiver help in the process of improving geographical literacy?

Get geographic materials for your home and keep them where they can be located easily for reference

- Maps are the tools of the geographer. A world map and a map of Canada can be hung on the wall of your child’s room or elsewhere in the home where they can be used easily and frequently. Maps are available in most bookstores.
- A globe is a useful reference item. Large, illuminated globes may cost hundreds of dollars but a small, inexpensive inflatable globe that may be bought from many toy and novelty stores can be just as effective for helping a child see the proper shape and relationships of Earth’s features.

- An atlas is the most comprehensive and useful geography reference work. Atlas maps allow children to locate countries and physical and cultural features. Atlases also contain data on population, climates, economies and many other factors that are important for understanding a country’s place in the world.
- Almanacs contain a wealth of useful and interesting geographic information. These handy, inexpensive references can be purchased at bookstores, discount houses and many other places. Some almanacs have small atlas inserts with political maps of the continents.
- Encyclopaedias, atlases, almanacs and geographic databases are now available in CD-ROM and other electronic formats. If your child has access to a computer, you should consider using this form of access to geographic reference works.
- Help your child learn to use maps, atlases and globes. Work with your child to find places on the globe or look up information in the atlas or almanac. Be a good role model by consulting the atlas yourself (even if you already know where a place is, look it up so your child sees that the atlas is used by adults as well as children). Encourage your child to keep references nearby to use as they study.

Relate maps, atlas and globe use to current events

- When names of countries, cities and other places appear on TV news, radio broadcasts or in newspapers and magazines, help children find the places or encourage them to find the place on a map, in the atlas or on the globe. Reinforce children’s use of maps by congratulating them for learning about places and being up-to-date on local, regional, provincial/territorial, national and international events.
- When a place is mentioned on TV, radio or in the newspaper, talk about it with your child. Find the place together, discuss the important characteristics of the area and try to bring out geographical relationships or important factors.

Make geography a family activity

- If members of your family or if relatives live in distant places, have your child look up the places to be visited or where the relatives live and get information about them.
- If your family takes vacation trips, obtain a road map or highway atlas and have your child help plan the trip. If it is convenient, let your child help choose the vacation destination or select among possible routes. Ask your child to figure out how far you should travel each day, where the best stopping places are, what points of

interest might be found along the way (and some background about them). Will you pass across a time zone boundary on the trip? How will the time change and why?

- If you are going to a special place such as a zoo, museum or amusement park, let your children plot the route there on a street or road map.
- Play geographical games. Many “geographical” board games are available for children and families. If you are so inclined, playing these games with children may help them to learn interesting facts and locations. However, commercial games are not necessary for learning geography. Spending fifteen minutes or half an hour a day, or every other day, asking questions from an atlas or wall map, or taking turns with the children asking questions of the adult, will probably be more effective in the long run as a learning strategy. For younger children, map puzzles of Canada and the World are a good tool for beginning to learn the shapes and relative positions of the provinces/territories and global relationships.

Learn about geography in your community

Look up your province/territory, district/county or city on a map. Ask children to identify local landmarks such as rivers, mountains, water bodies or nearby large cities.

- If you live in a city, use a street map to learn about the geography of your neighbourhood and other parts of the city. For rural areas, county road maps may serve a similar purpose.
- Learning first hand about local geography can be a source of very good learning experiences, especially for young children. As you travel to school, place of worship, the store or other frequently visited places, ask your child to identify important landmarks along the way (public buildings, major streets and thoroughfares, parks, monuments or architecturally distinctive buildings).
- Have your child draw a sketch map of the route, locating the important landmarks seen along the way. The sketch map doesn't have to be geographically accurate; it may reflect your child's mental images of the route and the important places along it; it may not show all the places you think should be included. The important thing is that your child begins to learn the process of mapping a route. Be encouraging, regardless of the quality of the drawing or its accuracy. If the map has major errors, gently help your child to improve the map's accuracy through questions or discussions.

Pen pals can help children learn geography

- Urge your child to develop a pen pal relationship with someone in a foreign country or in another province/territory. Pen pals may trade geographical materials from each other's home areas such as maps, tourist brochures, postcards or stamps. Encourage your child to learn as much as possible from the pen pals about where they live and reciprocate with information about the area where you live. If your child has access to a computer with a modem, e-mail may be used to communicate with electronic pen pals.

Geography in schools

- Take an active interest in your child's education. Visit the school and talk with teachers and the school principal. Encourage school administrators to have up-to-date globes and atlases in every classroom. Find out if wall maps are available to teachers, if they are up-to-date and if they are used in teaching geography and other subjects such as history, science, social studies and economics.
- Are your child's teachers properly trained to teach geography? If not, encourage the school administration to send them to workshops or short courses on teaching geography. Canada has a geography alliance called the Canadian Council for Geographic Education (CCGE) that conducts regional and national summer institutes as well as regional workshops on teaching geography throughout the school year. Information on these programs may be obtained through the CCGE, The Royal Canadian Geographical Society or your provincial/territorial geography/social studies teacher associations.
- If the school does not already participate in “The Great Canadian Geography Challenge” or other such competitions, suggest their participation. Ask the school to plan special events for “Geography Awareness Week” every November or “Earth Day” in April.
- See that students have meaningful homework assignments and make sure they are completed. Be positive about your child's school work (not just geography, but all of it). Congratulate your child for successes; be helpful (not critical) with mistakes. Work with your child to correct problems; don't just say, “you have to do better.”
- Ask if geography is brought into the teaching of other subjects (for example, science, literature, history and social studies). Geography through its very nature is a naturally interesting and integrative discipline; therefore, it is fairly simple to point out elements of geography that are important to the study of other school subjects.

- Suggest that the schools develop student geography projects. Students may draw maps of places in the news or of the area around the school, make posters, displays or models on geographical themes or collect materials from different countries or provinces/territories. For example, help your child write letters to embassies and tourist bureaus requesting brochures and posters (addresses may be obtained from phone directories, maps and tour guides).
- Work through your Parent Teacher Association and school board to make geography a high priority. Learn about geography yourself and become familiar with how students learn geography. Encourage features about geographic information in the school newspaper, local newspapers, radio and TV stations.
- Schools from Kindergarten to grade 12 can now make use of Geographical Information Systems (GIS), using computer software to map, interpret, solve and analyze problems and issues.
- See that the school's geography students have an opportunity to compete for prizes in such competitions as "The Great Canadian Geography Challenge." Let everyone know that geography is important to you!

To obtain additional information about geography education

Improving geographical knowledge and skills is important to our nation and its future. We hope that you agree and that this brochure has provided some ideas to help you achieve this goal. We encourage you to contact the CCGE to obtain additional information on the discipline of geography or on geographic education. *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards 1994* and other publications are available from the CCGE or the NCGE at the addresses indicated below.

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