

At the store with young children

Theoretically I believe it is possible. Someone somewhere may have missed the experience altogether. But personally I have never met a single soul who has told me that grocery shopping with a small child does not include some degree of challenge.

As an infant nestled into the grocery cart in his car seat, Ben was a magnet for adult shoppers. While adults ogled over the new baby sleeping peacefully amidst loaves of bread and bags of milk, Justin, who was almost three, would race the aisle and skid on his pants to see how far he could slide. He'd swing on my leg while I decided on the brand of peanut butter or flavour of juice to buy.

With the addition of Sarah to our family, grocery shopping always began as a contest to see who would sit in the front of the cart, who would ride on the back and who would have to walk. When child-sized grocery carts were introduced I thought my stresses were over. I was wrong. All three wanted their favourite food items in their own carts. Unless I wanted to buy packages of cookies or cereal in triplicates, our trips up and down the aisles were filled with negotiations.

The grand finale loomed at the check out. As food items slowly rolled along the cashier's conveyor, my children stared and salivated at the display of chocolate bars, gum and candy. It seemed all three had to publicly tantrum at least once to express their indignation at being told "No."

The energy required to bring children into a grocery store makes me wonder why we do it at all. Sometimes, of course, there is no one available to help look after our children so we can solo shop. But many times, even though a family member or friend could care for our children, we choose to bring them along. Why do we do this?

Intuitively we know that grocery stores are ideal places for children to gain in every aspect of their development. We know children learn communication skills and emotional self-control through the grocery shopping experience. We know their muscles and coordination are strengthened when children help move food items from store shelves to carts to kitchen cupboards.

We also know that children develop literacy and numeracy in grocery store aisles. Parents who write a grocery list, or help their child rip or cut pictures from food flyers to glue onto paper as a list of their own, reinforce the value of print. Labels with pictures help pre-readers make smart guesses about the print on cans or boxes. Children who are asked to find six bananas or one pineapple learn about quantity. Older children who are asked to select cereal based on nutrition and price learn how to compare and contrast. Children who are given a small amount of money to buy a treat develop estimating and addition skills. And children, who are talked to about kumquats or unfamiliar things they see in the store develop a broader knowledge base that helps them understand the words they read.

So the next time your child's face turns beet red and she screams for candy at the checkout, remind yourself of what you already know?. Grocery shopping is an ideal experience for your small Einstein.

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