THE INTERESTED CHILD

Ideas for Engaging the Interest and Excitement of Children of All Ages

Peter Gow
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by

Peter Gow
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The Independent Curriculum Group
P. O. Box 1308
Dedham, Massachusetts 02027
USA

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ABOUT THE INTERESTED CHILD

*The Interested Child* has lived in many forms.

In the early 2000s the idea came to a fellow administrator at the school at which I was then working, the estimable Rob Connor, that a list of activities might be an apt complement to the school’s summer reading list. In short order he and I had created a list of dozens of activities that we handed out to families.

That practice continued at the school for several years, but in time it was discontinued. In my household, which by then included two very interested children being parented by two adults who were both educators and big fans of experiential learning of all sorts, the list was cherished, and it kept growing.

At one point one of my children suggested that I expand on the list and turn it into a book. I spent the better part of a summer doing just that, but finding the right publisher seemed difficult and I had other work to do as a college counselor, education writer, and family person. A dear friend suggested that I create a website and unfold the content of the book—then close to a hundred entries—as blog posts. They even secured for me the domain name.

*The Interested Child* is still on line, and the content of this book can be found there with illustrations, tags, and other useful content. Along with the specific suggestions offered and described, there are also other essays, often related to current events as of the writing. (These have been stripped of time-bound elements and interspersed in this book.)

The idea is simple: to offer to educators and families specific suggestions on activities that children of all ages might find interesting. Not all children, we know, but at least some children.

An educator with whom I once worked held to what I call the Candle-Making Theory that seems to pertain to this project. We were discussing the pros and cons of taking our middle school classes to the local symphony, and his rationale was this. “With some things, you just have to kind of dip the kids in and see what sticks.” If you are a parent or guardian, think of introducing your child to new foods or taking them to their first sporting event; you see what my colleague meant.
So think of *The Interested Child* is a great vat of potential experiences, waiting for you to see if anything sticks with the children in your life. Much won’t but some will, and, as the description on the website tagline puts it, “Intellectually curious and engaged kids will find endless ways to enrich their own lives and the lives of others.”

As the parent of interested children (as all children are, if we open ourselves and themselves to multiple possibilities), I have had great fun trying to live principles espoused in this book.

I could not have done any of this without the loving support of my late co-conspirator and spouse, Mimi Harrington, whose loss in 2016 has created a void in my life that can never be filled. It is to Mimi’s memory, and to the curiosity and vigor of interested children Sam, Nat, Will, and John that I dedicate *The Interest Child*.

Peter Gow  
Dedham, Massachusetts  
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HOW THIS WORKS

The ideas presented here have been organized by general category, although most are also tagged with other categories into which they might fall; some are hard to categorize precisely, so I recommend at least scanning each category.

The categories are
• The World and its Cultures
• Service and Helping Others
• The Arts and Creative Expression
• Language and Literature
• Sports, Fitness, and the Great Outdoors
• Civic and Community Engagement
• Business and Entrepreneurship
• Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

Most of the suggestions can be taken up with relatively little planning, even at the spur of the moment; I’ve tried to make these low-cost or even free. Where I can, I recommend public libraries or the internet as sources.

A few are also tagged “COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources.” These tend to be are more complicated than the rest and might involve considerable expenditure. Where I can, I try to offer thoughts for sharing the cost or finding funding.

I’m also pre-supposing that the parents or guardians of The Interested Child are inclined to help the child become independent—to go to a library alone, say, or use public transportation. These determinations are in the hands of the parents and guardians, but it’s been our experience that independence and curiosity often go hand in hand.

Finally, to avoid the awkwardness of double pronouns and to recognize that not all children choose to be placed in binary gender categories, I have used “they,” “their,” “them,” and very non-standard “themself” as singular pronouns. As an old English teacher who was forced to swallow Warriner’s in middle school and who has earned some crumbs of his bread as a copy editor over the years, I made this decision not to observe the traditional ways out of respect for those interested children who are pioneering new concepts of gender expression and identity. If only we all had, and had always had, the courage to be our truest selves!
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The Interested Child Mindset: On Doing Things Badly and the Cult of Expertise

We live in an age that venerates expertise and success, when children specialize in a single sport by puberty and when family cars accumulate miles transporting kids to and from lessons and tutorials, workshops and competitions. Ten thousand repetitions and probably as many tears are rites of passage for children bred to ambition by ambitious families, and mediocrity is viewed as failure.

We do worry that The Interested Child may in some way contribute to this exhausting program of accomplishment at any cost. This regimen frames too many American childhoods and adolescences, starting far too early and ending too often with a hollow emotional thud! barely audible beneath the applause as college acceptances roll in or similar external rewards pile up. I’m not sure what values this promotes in the end, but I have my suspicions.

My grandfather, a reflective educator whose own library was filled with how-to books on subjects that interested him through his life but on which he was no expert, used to cite G. K. Chesterton’s contrarian take on the adulation of expertise: “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.” (We will again refer to this adage in our entry here on learning to play a new musical instrument.) I have tried to take these words to heart in my own life and parenting, and we are pleased to remind our readers here of their profound wisdom.

My interpretation of Chesterton’s maxim: If someone truly enjoys doing something, then let the pleasure of doing it take precedence over doing it perfectly or even particularly well. Enjoy the doing as an end in itself. It’s okay to let go of the mantra that failure is only a step on the road to success; enjoying something that we don’t do all that well is just fine—contrary to cultural messages that a thing is worth doing only if it yields an impressive line item on a c.v., or a profit.

I can think of only one area where Americans seem to allow themselves wide latitude in performance: golf. Duffers may strive for years to be better, but shooting par remains a distant goal for all but near-professionals. Most golfers are surprisingly philosophical about being average, or a bit worse, but for most golfers (at least the ones I have known) the camaraderie and perhaps the
scenery seem to be adequate recompense for “a good walk spoiled” around 18 holes.

Our task is gently to urge our children to try new things and then support them in engaging more deeply with the ones they seem to like. But we must not, in our parental exuberance and our own embrace of the Cult of the Expert, push them where our hearts and hopes, and not theirs, are leading. If they enjoy something, take something away from an experience, then that might be as far as it goes. We can dangle carrots to entice and encourage, but we must not resort to even the most metaphorical of coercive sticks in our quest to help kids learn to identify, follow, and build upon their own interests.

I’ll offer myself as an example here. I have played the guitar for fifty years, but I’m not very good and unlikely to get much better. I own a nice instrument, and early on I really did practice for the requisite hours to achieve “expertise.” But about thirty years ago I hit a plateau, and now I mostly play when no one else is at home. But my limitations as a musician don’t limit the pleasure I take in making music.

We like to think of The Interested Child as a mindset, not a checklist or a roadmap—as a compendium of ideas that might intrigue, not an enumeration of imperatives.
THE WORLD AND ITS CULTURES

It’s a big world, and the future will belong to those who not only understand this but who are comfortable with cultural differences. From world population shifts to changes in the demographics of our communities to the globalization of production and distribution, Americans young and old need to develop the personal tools to live in a world whose boundaries are fading fast.

Many of the ideas in the section are explicitly directed at cultural exploration, sometimes in a virtual mode, while others challenge the readers to dig more deeply into aspects of their own lives, even to the extent of stepping out of comfort zones. The point is for The Interested Child (and any accompanying adults) to enter each experience with an eager, open mind, ready to take in what is novel and exciting and then to reflect on how it relates to their own lives and aspirations.

IDEA #1. Go to a restaurant featuring a kind of national or ethnic cuisine you’ve never tried. Whatever you do, don’t order a Coke. Eating what some grocery stores still call “ethnic” food is an experience as old as our nation itself—European settlers were trying pumpkin and corn as part of the same cultural exchange that gave native American Indian peoples a taste for breads and cakes. Within living memory Italian cuisine, once considered exotic has become a staple of mainstream American cooking, and today tacos, Chinese take-out, and pad thai can be had in nearly every American community.

The stipulation about beverages—no familiar cola drinks—challenges the child to step away from the ubiquitous and try out the particular. Lassi, tchai, or guaraná soda are emblematic of the cultures that have produced them and deserve a taste; the finicky eater can always order water to wash down the distasteful, although the open-minded eater may be pleasantly surprised. It might be harder to resist the fried potato, which eked its way into global cuisine a hundred years ago in various shapes and degrees of spiciness, but remember that macaroni was once a delicacy to be found only in eastern Asia. Perhaps this ought to be a reminder that, like so many other aspects of human experience, taste itself seems to be subject to globalization, and that restaurants serving the cuisine of a diverse planet are standing firm against the goal once stated by McDonald’s executive, to serve every meal to everyone on the planet every day.

Vive le différence! we say.
IDEA #2. Go to a concert or performance of music from a tradition you’ve never listened to before

It should not be terribly hard to find music from unfamiliar traditions, if only because even Western “Classical” is so little heard and appreciated by young Americans in the age of *American Idol*; in many of the cities and suburbs of “blue states” country-and-western music is equally rare. But while even an afternoon or evening of Mozart or Hank Williams might fit the bill here, I’d urge readers to push the envelope further still. In many communities with either significant immigrant populations or universities with many international students musical performances from many cultures are very easy to find. Even in the absence of these resources, world music concerts abound; some religious institutions regularly welcome musicians from around the world, sometimes but not always playing tunes relating to their faith.

What should the listener be alert for? New instruments, new voices, new languages, and sometimes even music whose entire structure and tonal properties are significantly different from the familiar. What activities or concerns generated this music? Are the familiar themes and anxieties of the listener’s culture present in the “new” music?

If live performance is just too hard to find, a trip to the recorded music section of the public library might turn up a few surprises. It’s also been my experience that many restaurants play culturally appropriate music; perhaps a friendly restaurateur would be willing to lend a tape(!) or a disc or two. Some specialized food stores actually rent music to members of their community.

And if the internationally exotic is just not accessible, consider the multitude of musical traditions that have arisen and thrive in our own culture but few of us fully know or appreciate: gospel, Delta blues, Big Band, traditional folk, Old Timey, bluegrass, Gullah, and dozens of distinct Native American musical forms. All of these are available in recorded form, and some can be streamed from the internet or even found on the radio.

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #3. Attend a service or rite of a faith tradition that is not your own

Religious traditions are one of the most powerful forces affecting human behavior and values, and the last decade has amply demonstrated the degree to which the failure to comprehend and respect the beliefs of others can trigger disaster. Few nations of the world are home to as much religious diversity as
the United States, and few peoples should have as much incentive as Americans to explore and come to terms with different faith traditions. The author remembers very well being taught in school that “polytheism” describes the religion of the ancient Romans and Greeks—but never being informed that it also describes the belief, for example, of hundreds of thousands of American Hindus.

Worship services are commonly listed in local newspapers and on the internet, but the smallest and most esoteric of religious bodies may schedule and communicate the times of their services or ceremonies by word of mouth only. In some areas public Native American Indian gatherings include aspects of worship, and indigenous religious festivals also take place in many immigrant communities.

It should go without saying that attendance at a religious observance ought to involve a mindset of respect and openness. While it may be that the observance itself includes language that sounds exclusionary, it is the obligation of those in attendance to listen and watch with an open mind and an open heart, following as much as possible whatever members of the faith may be doing.

It should also be mentioned that the nature of some religious traditions is to seek new adherents. While many religious bodies welcome newcomers openhandedly and without expectation, the young person (and any adult chaperone, for that matter) attending a religious observance needs to be cautioned as to signs that they are being targeted for conversion. It might be well to have a practiced exit line to use if the situation becomes in any way uncomfortable. While it is unlikely that such a thing will occur, it is important that young cultural explorers, whether they are participating in a religious exercise or a noshing in a restaurant, know when it is all right to curtail the exploration and return to more a secure setting. But it is more important for this young explorer to develop the capacity to experience cultural difference with positive equanimity and not apprehension.

**IDEA #4.** Plan and then take an imaginary tour around the world. Discover or imagine places you would like to visit, and then, using the internet or resources found in a library or perhaps at a travel agency, plan out the details of a trip that would take you there. Make a detailed itinerary and a record of
the things you want to “see;” you could even make a budget that included travel, lodging, and food.

A virtual or fantasy trip can liberate the young spirit to imagine what it might be like to be somewhere else as well as encouraging speculation along the lines of “The ten places I would like most to visit are … because ….” It doesn’t matter what the draw of each destination might be—historical, cultural, culinary, sheer curiosity—what matters is that the child has picked it out.

Many schools assign students to plan a trip of this sort and combine it with mathematical and geographical instruction by giving students a budget and by requiring the development of a detailed itinerary and estimate of expenses. This might be a bit more than most children would see as fun, but the idea of adding to the child’s level of reflection and engagement by suggesting that the young traveler keep a journal or even illustrate and share seems within reason. Some time with a pile of National Geographic magazines might be a good source of ideas for this virtual adventure.

Although travel agencies are undergoing a transition in the age of on-line reservation systems, their offices, if you can find one, are still good places to find brochures and posters to excite the traveler. Travel offices may also have the Official Airline Guide, which contains schedules for most airlines across the world. (Of course, most of this information is freely available on the internet.) A friendly agent might even be a good resource in setting up a globe-trotting itinerary.

And who knows but what a particularly well-designed trip plan might become inspiration for later travel, like a circumnavigating gap year between high school and college; such odysseys are the norm among university-bound students in many European countries, and many colleges smile on and even encourage gap year travel or service.

**IDEA #5.** Pick an important current issue in the news and follow it for a week or a month on two different news outlets (newspapers, news websites, radio, television...)—one of which is not from your native country. Talk about these events with an adult or two.

This exercise in comparative political science and news analysis is intended to help youngsters understand such complex concepts as point of view and self-interest as well as to uproot the participant from the single point of view with which one’s “home country” media may portray an issue.
The first challenge is to identify an ongoing issue that is receiving at least a moderate amount of play in the media. This may include any field, from politics to science to sports to the arts, although a sports issue probably ought to involve a sport that is truly international in its popularity base, as interesting as it might be to read what a Spanish newspaper thinks about a trade in the NBA.

The second challenge will be to find a news source from another country; most major newspapers and news magazines have websites, and many large city or university libraries subscribe to at least a couple of English-language newspapers from other countries. English-language news sources from other nations include the Guardian, the Daily Telegraph, The Times of London, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (United Kingdom); The Guardian.ng (Nigeria); The Japan Times and Asahi Shinbun (Japan); the Globe and Mail and the Montreal Gazette (Canada); The Hindu (India); The Star (South Africa); French News (France); Gulf Times (Kuwait); Al Jazeera English (Qatar); China Daily (China); and the International Herald Tribune. There are many more, and a thoughtful internet search (try “English-language news [country name]”) should find them; most national broadcast media also maintain written-word sites.

One thing for the young news hunter to be on the lookout for are syndicated news stories from press agencies like the Associated Press and Reuters. These are often purchased and published in identical form by news outlets around the world and will not show appreciable difference from one outlet to another —although when they are different, it’s worth figuring out why.

In the end, the youngster should consider the differences and similarities they have observed, and any interested adult should be delighted to hear about the project and the result.

(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement)

IDEA #6. Spend some time in a place where English (or whatever your native language might be) is not in common use

(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)

This may be a suggestion for older (probably high school-age) children, but family vacations and even group service trips or tours could involve younger children.

Although this suggestion may sound as though it involves exotic and expensive international travel, it might also be possible to accomplish this
through low- or no-cost domestic service or service-learning programs into the Southwest, into immigrant communities, or even onto Native American reservations. And Canada has several regions in which English is not residents’ usual first language.

A fact of North American life is that in many areas—some large, some small—English is spoken only as a second language. Whole communities of Spanish speakers abound in New Mexico, Arizona, California, and Texas, while in a few Native American Indian communities indigenous languages are making a strong stand or even in resurgence. Particularly in urban areas, growing populations of recently arrived immigrants maintain their own languages as a barrier against cultural loss. Even if it may be difficult to find residential experiences in the non-English-speaking U.S.A., there may be abundant local opportunities to spend significant amounts of time among communities that function with little or no use of English. Some volunteer experiences in such communities involve teaching English, but others focus on even more elemental needs; many such programs are faith-based. Family experiences in culturally novel regions of one’s home country can be of great value.

If finances allow and interests inspire ways to seek non-English-speaking experiences outside the country, a number of programs—some focusing on language instruction, others on service, and some on cultural exchange—exist. In addition, family travel is a great and supportive introduction to unfamiliar cultures, and it may be that the younger family members adapt to linguistic and cultural challenges more readily than adults, providing a shot of confidence in addition to the learning. Let language not be seen as a barrier but rather as an opportunity; some basics can be acquired via on-line or media-based programs, but one of the exciting aspects of travel is to learn to communicate across language barriers. (And do not forget that virtually the entire province of Quebec in easily accessible eastern Canada is aggressively involved in maintaining its heritage as a French-speaking region.)

Formal cross-cultural experiential programs that serve high-school students are growing in number, including even a few that involve the student living away for a full school term or year. Of course, any program should be thoroughly investigated, and no student should ever be enrolled in any program about which any unanswered questions exist. Reputable programs like the American Field Service, School Year Abroad, and the Experiment in International Living have been engaged in this work for decades, but about less well-known operators the family will need to do research, perhaps with the help of a school counselor or language teacher. The most established programs, incidentally, offer some financial aid.
The point of cross-cultural experience is to be intellectually challenged and inspired and not merely to have one’s ticket punched as part of a résumé-building experience. If the prospect of such an experience is truly exciting to the student, then find it and do it, and the results will be far more profound than a line-item on a college application. 

(ALSO: Language and Literature)

**IDEA #7. Go to a grocery store that specializes in a national or ethnic cuisine you don’t know much about—try a new snack food and an unfamiliar beverage**

Thanks to the proliferation of American-style packaging, snack foods and drinks are often the easiest things to identify in shops specializing in particular regional or national cuisines. Candy, chip-type snacks, and fruit drinks and ices can give an idea of what the dominant flavors or spices of a culture might be, and even something as exotic as a mango-flavored potato chip will meet with the approval of most young eaters.

The next level of exploration might involve delights sold in packages that do not so eloquently telegraph “sweet non-nutritious item for kids”—nuts, baked goods (beware of these the child has allergies), or dried fruits packaged only in plastic bags and sold by weight or wrapped in white paper with the price scrawled in wax pencil. An inquiry to the clerk, “What should I try if I wanted to learn more about food from your culture?” may yield a tasty surprise, sometimes savory or sometimes sweet. Most specialized stores would be happy to expand their customer base, and so an inquisitive customer who has learned to enjoy salted plums or lamejun (or pulled pork, for that matter) can become a de facto ambassador of national or regional good will.

Even when traveling in the United States, the curious shopper may find astonishing local or regional differences: self-rising flour in a half-dozen brands in the South, a myriad of locally produced mustards and sauerkrauts in northern cities populated by many people of German or Eastern European descent, meats and seafoods of startling variety. Favorite candy bars, sodas (the many regional root beers that sweetened my childhood are, alas, largely extinct), and baked goods still define American regional comfort food.
IDEA #8. Attend a sporting event that comes from a culture other than your own—cricket, bocce, Irish football

This may not be quite so easy to do if you reside in an area that does not have a large immigrant or expatriate population, but it may even be possible to find cable television or internet broadcasts that provide not only a view of the sport but also explanatory play-by-play (unless the broadcast is in a language unknown to the viewer).

In areas that do have significant numbers of residents representing other cultures, there may be flourishing leagues and clubs devoted to homeland sports. Caribbean and South Asian expatriates may gather to play cricket regularly in a public park, or bocce may be one of the activities offered at Italian-American associations or other cultural groups who play variations of this ancient lawn-bowling game. (Bocce’s world regulatory body, headquartered in Rome, goes by a Latin name: Collegium Cosmicum ad Buxeas—surely a unique attribute in the world of sport.) Cultural festivals may also involve sports—the various “Highland Games” events around the country include several unusual events involving feats of strength and timing. Although they are not exactly “cultural,” lumberjack festivals also feature uncommon sports, some involving chainsaws. All of these activities give the thoughtful spectator an opportunity not only to marvel at the range of human ability to test ourselves but also to speculate on the nature of cultural difference and why certain kinds of activities appeal to certain people.

For many years ABC television’s bygone Wide World of Sports introduced viewers to sporting events of the sort we didn’t see every day. Fortunately our increasingly diverse society and the proliferation of ethnically focused cable television channels make up for the cancellation of that show.

(ALSO: Sports and the Great Outdoors)

IDEA #9. Explore a place that is part of your heritage—it could be a neighborhood, or it could be a country. Imagine what it was like to live there “back in the day,” and imagine what your life would be like if you lived there now.

(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)

It is common in schools for students to engage in exercises relating to their heritage, and questions among students such as, “What are you?” or “Where are you from?” (meaning, What is your ethnic background?) are a regular part of young people’s experience. And although a child may know in some vague way that his or her ancestors are from Scotland or West Africa or Greece, they
may not be truly able to imagine what it would be like to have lived and worked, or to live and work today, in an ancestral homeland. Furthermore, the child may also be unaware of specific information about his or her heritage, information that could be gathered either from existing family records or memories or from some library or internet research.

This activity may be among the most challenging, and possibly the most engaging, of any. Aside from the obvious financial difficulties involved in putting a heritage trip together, there is the matter of planning an itinerary that somehow authentically relates to known aspects of the child’s family background. Where to go, what to see—these questions require choices and sometimes best guesses.

For children who may be refugees, or adopted, or whose families may have been brought to America by force (as slaves, say), the challenges are more profound and potentially more troubling. Clearly some destinations are simply out of bounds—war zones or prohibited travel zones—while others may only be approximations of a family’s place of origin; although more resources are becoming available for the study of genealogy of slave families, many lead only to regions and not to specific localities. For some adopted children, the question of heritage may touch on emotional vulnerabilities as well as legal restrictions that may be better left alone until the child is older, in which case this activity should be ignored for now.

For those with limited resources or Native American ancestry, domestic travel is an answer. With Americans so mobile a people (families in this country move on the average of once every five years), it does not take long for many miles to accumulate between generations; few youngsters can tell you, much less have visited, where all their grandparents were born. A trip to one of these birthplaces, even if it just another town in the same state, will help connect the young person with his or her heritage in a way that mere words can never do.

**IDEA #10.** Find a radio or television broadcast in the modern language you study or would like to study at school and listen to or watch it for a half-hour every week. For example, Spanish-language soap operas, soccer broadcasts, and game shows are pretty easy to find and understand. Or tune your radio (or use shortwave or streaming on the internet) to French-language broadcasts from Canada, Africa, the Caribbean—or France. And
the shortwave radio spectrum opens up, quite literally, an entire linguistic world.
The multicultural reality of the United States is never more palpable than when one is channel surfing or seeking stations on the radio. AM radio in many metropolitan areas is a cornucopia of broadcasts in many languages, from Spanish to Hindi to Mandarin to Portuguese to.... And in almost every part of the country one can find several Spanish-language cable broadcasts featuring game and variety shows or soap operas (telenovelas) with vividly emoting actors. It is also possible nearly everywhere to find at least a few hours a week of programming designed for speakers of other languages.

Be patient and listen for familiar words and patterns. Even if the words are unintelligible, the sense of what is being communicated is often clear. Along with trying to suss out the meaning of the show, the thoughtful television viewer could muse on a number of questions:

- What is the nature of the aesthetic or aesthetics that are being shown? Are the production values (pacing, scenery, make-up, dress, sound, color palette, and even the framing of each shot) like or not like what might be seen on a typical American English-language broadcast? The same questions, incidentally, could be asked about some of the BBC programming that is seen on American public broadcasting stations. (It is also possible that the child habituated to listening to a variety of British Isles speechways via the BBC—or public television’s anglophile Masterpiece Theater—will be that much more ready to appreciate the richness of Shakespearean language when encountering the Bard at school.)

- What is being advertised? In what ways are the consuming patterns of the target audience like or not like those of mainstream American viewers, at least insofar as comparisons can be made based on the ads seen or heard on similar English-language shows.

- If you can find a sports show, preferably fútbol (what Americans call soccer), how does the coverage vary from typical American sports coverage, if in fact you can observe differences?

- What, actually, is the place of origin of the programming? Are you looking at shows produced in the United States or material produced in a country in which the language is the majority tongue?

- Is the setting beyond the television studio visible? Do exterior scenes look typically “American” (like what you might see on an American-produced English-language sitcom, for example), or do they offer a glimpse of what you might see if you were visiting another land or culture? Can you actually define the differences, if any exist?
Beyond developing your skill in the language of the broadcast, can you make out any English words, or words from English that are just like words in the language? (These are called cognates.) Some people are concerned that, because of the spread of American cultural products like films and television shows, English is gradually “polluting” many other languages and thus threatening the cultures associated with them. Do non-English-language broadcasts on American radio television support this theory?

As a corollary suggestion, if the household has a DVD player it is usually possible to view many feature films either in another language—often Spanish or French—or with subtitles in English or another language. Try watching a favorite film on DVD several times through, using the other-language and/or subtitle functions. (Consider some Japanese anime—the films of Hayao Miyazaki, for example—that are already dubbed and sometimes come with original titles or soundtracks in Japanese.)

It is worth emphasizing to young viewers that nothing that appears in the frame of a film or television program is there by mistake. Watching a film when unable to understand the dialogue forces the viewer to attend carefully to the detail in the scene (it’s called mise en scène) in the struggle to make meaning out of what is being viewed. Sometimes this detail has symbolic or other content value that supports the theme or the storyline in subtle ways, and the astute viewer is alert for these elements.

(ALSO: Language and Literature)

IDEA #11. Find the closest piece of Native American territory to where you live and pay a visit. Perhaps it’s a large reservation, or just a casino. Stepping onto what is legally Indian territory is a good reminder that half a millennium ago the whole continent had that status, and that American Indian people today represent a vibrant and important part of our population.

(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources) This might well be a family activity, especially if the nearest Native American destination is a either far away or a standalone gaming casino. But it is more than a little healthy as well as humbling to be reminded that American Indians are still very much a part of the American landscape and that they maintain sovereign control over at least some territory in about forty states. As inadequate and even pernicious as the reservation system may be, it is a part of the national experience. A trip that includes travel on reservation land is
essential for giving children an understanding that the Native Americans who seem to disappear from history books sometime around 1890 are still very much present in our society.

It is critically important that travel to Indian land be undertaken in a spirit of healthy interest and respect. It may be possible to support Native American enterprise by making purchases at Indian-owned stores or gas stations (in some areas state taxes are not applied to purchases on Native American land), and there may be cultural events or institutions with an educational or entertainment mission. The bane of American Indian tourism is that so many Americans seem unable to move past the stereotypes of Indian customs that have long been prevalent in our entertainment media and even in our schools. Sadly, some Native Americans who rely on tourism have found it expedient to play into those stereotypes out of sheer inability to overcome the apparently inexhaustible ignorance of visitors; we hope that no readers of this blog would be party to such a travesty.

There is also the matter of what social scientists call “appropriation of culture”: the utilization of Indian-made objects with cultural or spiritual significance by members of the dominant culture as entertainment or decoration—e.g., Indian devotional objects used as ornaments in homes and automobiles. How or even whether a non-Native person can respectfully own and display an Indian-made “dream catcher,” for example, would be a great adult–child conversation in conjunction with this activity, and this might even be a question that could be broached to a Native American seller of such objects.

White America has a long and unfortunate record of dismissing—and much worse—Native American cultures and people. The interested child of any age or race who is willing to make an effort to correct or repudiate this history, will be deepening his or her own understanding of an important issue as well as helping our society make progress toward a better place.

(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement)

IDEA #12. Go to a library and read from cover to cover a magazine about history (past or current) or archaeology. Old copies of the now-defunct American Heritage would be a natural choice, but there are plenty of current magazines about specific aspects of history—wars, ancient civilizations—that are pretty easy to find. To whatever degree the past creates the present, a knowledge of the subtleties of history (as opposed to the collection of facts that often passes for history
instruction in school) can be helpful in understanding how governments and societies make decisions, or at least how they can arrive at various predicaments. In history the persistence of certain issues and problems is known as continuity, and anyone who pushes their own study of history past the superficial level soon discovers that the problems of socioeconomics, ethnicity, foreign policy, religious conflict, and taxation that vex the world today also vexed the world a century or a millennium (or three) ago.

Magazines of history (as well as documentary programming on television, it must be added, although these are not the focus here for reasons that will appear below) provide multiple windows into small and specific aspects of history—a single person, place, or event, or a specific historical issue or trend. As these magazines are intended to entertain as well as to inform, the writing tends to be a good deal livelier than textbook prose and the overall coverage richer in terms of the inclusion of quotations and, above all, visual material. The best of the history magazines—and the classic *American Heritage* is the grand-daddy of the genre—solicit articles from the best writers of history and biography, and careful attention to design means that everything about the magazines is attractive and of high quality—so high as to make one wonder whether textbooks need be a dull as they usually are. *Smithsonian* is a fine example of such a publication.

The argument for going through an entire issue is that the activity will provide first and foremost an idea of the rich menu of material that such periodicals offer and secondly an increased probability of the young reader finding something of real interest; in addition, even the advertisements in such magazines can be fun, offering books, objects, and experiences that may be a bit out of the ordinary.

A couple of hours in front of The History Channel might have some of the same effect as reading a whole magazine, but to be blunt the quality can be uneven and sometimes younger viewers can find themselves watching an infomercial or a program that is distinctly pseudoscientific (aliens and UFOs make regular appearances on several “history” channels) without knowing it. We approve of the concept of the channel but believe it should be watched in at least loosely supervised doses.

Another point in favor of history magazines is that they last in physical form nearly forever, and, along with back issues of those being currently published, there are a number of bygone periodicals with a historical focus—*Horizon* chief among these—that are worthy of attention even forty years after their
first appearance. Horizon, like American Heritage, first appeared in hardbound editions with superlative production values and excellent writing.

It’s worth noting here that historical narratives are likely to have their own biases and even to advance narrow or one-sided perspectives. An interesting comparative exercise might be to find an article written a while ago on a particular topic and then research that topic using contemporary sources—even Wikipedia.

(Also: Civic and Community Engagement; Language, Literature, and History)

IDEA #13. Go to a library or a newsstand or bookstore and pick out and read from cover to cover a magazine about a place that you might want to visit or live in some day. Examples are New York Magazine, Arizona Highways, Cape Cod Life, and Up Here (about far northern Canada). There is a magazine for practically every city and region in the United States as well as for nations and cities outside the United States. Get yourself interested enough to think about planning a visit there some day.

If one cannot always travel to a new place, it is fun to imagine what it might be like to be there. Some “place-based” publications—New York Magazine, for example—are primarily intended for those who already reside in and are familiar with their eponymous location, while others—like New Mexico Magazine—are “destination” publications, filled with enticing material designed to coax readers into visiting or relocating.

Readers of these magazines should be looking carefully not only at the articles but also at details of content like advertisements, including even the smallest. What is the appeal of this place? How do those who live in and like the place present its “story”? What are some common graphic themes—colors, symbols—and images that readers are intended to associate with the place? What can be learned about the economic life of the place—real estate prices and the types of jobs or economic activities to be found there?

In the same vein, what can we learn about the cultural opportunities and activities in the place? Does the magazine focus any particular aspect of the fine arts or other cultural features in music, theater, or folk traditions? Is there anything about food that looks interesting or unique; are particular aspects of culinary heritage represented that may stem directly from the history of people who live there or who have immigrated there? What would make you
want to visit the place on vacation or perhaps even move there? Does the place look as though it would be fun for children, or does the magazine focus only on adult-oriented subjects?

In the United States a fifth of the population moves every year; consequently learning to “read” a place and its culture is a valuable skill; a young reader can start mastering this skill by reading about a place. Specialized magazines focusing on a particular area have proliferated in recent years, and for the thinking child learning how to read cultures with skill and in detail is a skill well worth having.

(Also: Language and Literature)

**IDEA #14. Trace your family history back as far as you can. Ask relatives for help; go online; try a library.**

For some children this will be much harder than for others, but all the basic resources needed are a family member or two and perhaps access to a good public library or internet database. This activity is a wonderful way for children to understand the nature of their own lineage as well as the influence of real historical forces on their own forebears.

For a fortunate few, primarily of English or Northern European heritage, there exists a body of written documentation that may even include published family histories. Beyond that, however, lies a wealth of genealogical resources and, more important, individuals with genealogical obsessions. A local library or historical society might be able to point the child (or the family) in the direction of people who will happily undertake specific research and whose interest in these matters is deep and whose knowledge is broad. Their guidance or assistance may help the child to locate marriage, birth, immigration, property, and death records, but it may suffice for the child to rely on the oral testimony of family members to construct a limited family tree that at least explains the child’s place in the cosmos.

For some children—adoptiveees, unaccompanied refugee minors, or others whose family records are hidden or have been obliterated by history—this activity could be much more challenging, and even potentially painful. Much adult guidance is called for in these cases, where it is even possible to run afoul of the law (with regard to statutes covering access to adoption records, for example). And as Alex Haley’s 1970s *Roots* project and more recently the *Finding Your Roots* program on public television have demonstrated, discovering the details of the heritage of those who came to America not by
choice but by force can be extremely difficult, although resources to assist research in this area are more extensive now than they were thirty years ago.

One sees advertisements frequently these days for internet genealogical resources, which sometimes come with high subscription prices and that therefore should not be accessed without adult permission and supervision. These can be helpful for an investigating child or adult with an abiding interest and sufficient resources to cover the cost.

But at some point most children will express a desire to learn more about their lineage and family history, and this is not infrequently the subject of school projects. Whatever the amount of information to be found, the object of the exercise is to help the child in the development of a positive personal heritage and identity.

It can be very interesting to a child to establish that this heritage shows the influences of history—most people’s forebears have been part of one or another of history’s large-scale migrations—and of the cultures from, through, and into which they have passed. Even if specific information or evidence is scarce, sometimes family lore can also be a powerful thing in a child’s life.

**IDEA #15. Go to a library or bookstore and find and then read from cover to cover a magazine or newspaper whose content is about a cultural, religious, or gender group that is not your own:** The Advocate, Essence, Savoy, Ebony, Latina, aMagazine, or a local or regional paper or magazine devoted to the Jewish or Roman Catholic religious community. If you are a member of a cultural or ethnic minority, you might look at “mainstream” publications like *Time* or *The Atlantic* or even *Outside* or *National Geographic*. How does the publication that represents or focuses on a culture different from your own seem different from and the same as—content, layout, advertisements—magazines or newspapers that you normally encounter?

Like viewing films or television broadcasts from other cultures, looking at magazines with a specific ethnic, cultural, or spiritual focus opens, for many of us, a window into a hitherto little-known world. Along with explorations of the aesthetics at work in these publications—their graphics, their layout, the nature of the images displayed in both editorial and advertising copy—there is also an opportunity for thoughtful content analysis. What issues are being
addressed? What editorial stance can be discerned? How are the topics of articles like or unlike articles in publications that one might commonly read that represent that majority culture or that would be readily associated with one’s own culture?

In addition, some analysis of the advertising content would be interesting. What “mainstream” products are being advertised, and how are the ads for these products like or unlike products in mainstream publications? What products seem to be unique to or directly connected with the culture or group at whom the magazine is aimed? How are these products advertised?

As we live in a society in which the dominant, white, European culture makes up a shrinking majority of our population, reading about and understanding the concerns of other groups as these are represented in their own media can be a powerful tool for building cross-cultural understanding. It can also be reassuring to know that the same brands of automobiles one drives or cottage cheese one eats are equally a part of the experience and aspirations of other Americans whose “differences” are often more emphasized in society than the characteristics we all share.

The possibility exists here that the young reader may encounter editorial opinions or content that will surprise or even unsettle. We would hope very much that this activity would be undertaken entirely in the spirit of empathy and open-minded curiosity, but it is true that historically marginalized or oppressed groups may express positions in their publications that may be hard for complacent or untutored readers to digest or appreciate. The reader and his or her adult guides must be ready to discuss what the reader encounters and to work hard to understand and make sense of unfamiliar or unsettling points of view. This, after all, is the point of the exercise: to build the child’s capacity to recognize, understand, and respect other viewpoints, even if they conflict with his or her strongly held beliefs or unexamined positions. But history demonstrates that nothing kills real thought and the prospects of a truly democratic society more effectively than permitting the survival of unquestioning intolerance.

(ALSO: Language and Literature)

IDEA #16. Attend a sporting event that comes from a culture other than your own—cricket, bocce, Irish football
This may not be quite so easy to do if you reside in an area that does not have a large immigrant or expatriate population, but it may even be possible to find cable television or internet broadcasts that provide not only a view of the sport
but also explanatory play-by-play (unless the broadcast is in a language unknown to the viewer).

In areas that do have significant numbers of residents representing other cultures, there may be flourishing leagues and clubs devoted to homeland sports. Caribbean and South Asian expatriates may gather to play cricket regularly in a public park, or bocce may be one of the activities offered at Italian-American associations or other cultural groups who play variations of this ancient lawn-bowling game. (Bocce’s world regulatory body, headquartered in Rome, goes by a Latin name: Collegium Cosmicum ad Buxeas—surely a unique attribute in the world of sport.) Cultural festivals may also involve sports—the various “Highland Games” events around the country include several unusual events involving feats of strength and timing. Although they are not exactly “cultural,” lumberjack festivals also feature uncommon sports, some involving chainsaws. All of these activities give the thoughtful spectator an opportunity not only to marvel at the range of human ability to test ourselves but also to speculate on the nature of cultural difference and why certain kinds of activities appeal to certain people.

For many years ABC television’s bygone Wide World of Sports introduced viewers to sporting events of the sort we didn’t see every day. Fortunately our increasingly diverse society and the proliferation of ethnically focused cable television channels can fill the void left by the cancellation of that show. (ALSO: Sports, Fitness, and the Great Outdoors)
A Cheer for Global Festivals of Sport

Every two years the Olympic Games, winter and summer, live near the top of both news and sports broadcasts; the Olympics, with their subtext of international competition (as important to some news media and many spectators as the competition between athletes) are always news. It’s worth remembering, too, that the Olympic Charter specifies that “The Olympic Games are competitions between athletes in individual or team events and not between countries”—a concept that many jingoistic commentators would do well to remember.

The Winter Games, which tend to occur during weeks when school is in session in North America, can have a special appeal to the interested child. Replete with unusual sports, complex scoring methods, and athletes from nations—think Liechtenstein—that tend not to be in the news very much, there’s a great deal to pique a young person’s curiosity. Plus, of course, the sports are just fun to watch, from the grace of figure skating to the anxious precision of curling to the sheer speed of alpine skiing, not to mention the seemingly impossible geometries of snowboarding and freestyle skiing.

The Olympics always provide lessons in geography and culture as well as the human interest of tight competition among athletes at the peak of performance. The opening ceremonies are artistic extravaganzas, and the pride and excitement of the athletes entering in their team uniforms behind their national flags is palpable. Equally palpable is the joy and unbridled relief of the athletes at the closing ceremonies; watching medal winners taking pictures of the crowd on their phones as they grin and dance their way into the stadium is a reminder that this is a deeply human event, a coming together that fulfills the wildest dreams of the idealists who began the modern Olympic movement in 1894—truly, what founder Pierre de Coubertin called “a program of moral beauty.”

The Olympics receive massive coverage on live TV, streaming video, and wrap-ups and highlight shows. Just following the main Games comes the regrettably more condensed broadcast coverage of the Paralympics, in which disabled athletes compete in many Olympic sports in one of the most extraordinary affirmations of the human spirit and human possibility anyone is ever likely to witness.

Nevertheless, we at The Interested Child remain big fans of the Olympics and the spirit in which they were established and continue, at their best, to portray.
We urge parents, guardians, and educators to give consideration to the upsides of offering children plenty of opportunities to watch, learn from, and reflect on the educational spectacle that is the Olympics.

Although world championships are played off in many sports throughout the year, the grand-daddy of authentically “world” titles is of course the World Cup of men’s soccer, or what the rest of the world calls football. For several decades now there has also been a World Cup of women’s soccer.

Often World Cup seems especially charged politically, what with questions about the host country’s human rights record or spending on tournament infrastructure and the general ethics of FIFA, the international body that sponsors the event. Globally, men’s football is known for extreme fans whose behavior, sometimes tainted with racism, can give sports partisans in general a bad name. At least during the World Cup even “ultra” fans tend to be on their better behavior.

But in the end, we can reliably enjoy the spectacle of scores of high-quality games in which athletic and sometimes flamboyantly energetic young people will play their hearts out on behalf of their countries and the spirits of several billion(!) fans will rise and fall with the results of each game. If you enjoy soccer—the geometry, the energy, the cunning strategies, and the astounding skills of the players—the World Cup is pretty much guaranteed to please. And of course there will be controversy; disputed calls are always a source of global gnashing of teeth.

For the Interested Child, the World Cup tournaments offer lessons in geography, vexillology, culture, and of course the sport itself. Soccer itself spread across the globe with the British empire and was then adopted by populations far removed from British influence. The teams themselves, often very diverse, also offer little object lessons in both the history of imperialism—African players with surnames of European origin, for example—and recent and contemporary demographics; think of the many European and American (North and South) players whose surnames bespeak the waves of emigration and immigration that are changing the face of many of the world’s more prosperous nations. The players may be wearing the uniforms of just 32 nations, but this truly is a World’s Cup.

Geographical and climatology offer their own points of interest: in 2014 the U.S. men’s team traveled nearly four thousand miles just to get from venue to venue in its first three group games in Brazil, from coastal Natal to Amazonian Manaus and back to coastal Recife. People looking at maps of the tournament
cities were often surprised by the size and geographical extremes of Brazil. And some of the new-built stadiums themselves are architectural marvels, aesthetically exciting structures with breathtaking tensile roofs above the stands and open space above the playing surface, or pitch.

The child interested in numbers and statistics can also find a world of data to record and parse, and, thanks to the prevalence of gambling across the world, it’s not hard to find odds (ratios of probability, of course) and other measures relating to teams’ chances and overall outcomes.

And even if the politics or the big business side of the World Cup make it different from the Olympics, the tournament still marks a few weeks in which we can contemplate the idea that, with all our differences, we are one species and one planet, a great many of whose inhabitants seem to be fans of the sport of soccer. Or football—take your pick!

In all events (pun intended), we are fans of these global festivals of sport and the spirit that sparked them into being, and we encourage interested children and their families to enjoy these extraordinary celebrations of the human spirit.
SERVICE AND HELPING OTHERS

Volunteer service is all the rage in certain educational circles these days, for good reason. Few activities combine the doing absolute good in the world with the chance to make genuine human, cultural, and even political connections. The difficulty is often in finding a particular service activity that suits the inclinations and personality of the person doing the service, and there always exists in many kinds of service activities the possibility that the doer may so represent the service as to seem condescending or even insulting to the recipient. Gone are the days of noblesse oblige, when it was acceptable for the affluent of the world to find it in their heart and their schedule to take pity on others and perform some sort of charitable service, largely for show. While the world’s needs have not diminished, our understanding of the dignity of all people requires that service in our time involve real sophistication.

The suggestions in the SERVICE AND HELPING OTHERS category certainly encompass traditional “soup kitchen” service opportunities, but it is our hope that such activities would be seen as a starting point from which young people can explore their own interests to discover the places where their strengths and proclivities can truly contribute to fulfilling the needs of others—including the planet itself.

It must be pointed out that many service venues have strict age limits or other restrictions on who can perform what sorts of service. These activities may require an extra measure of adult guidance in helping to find appropriate and rewarding service work.

IDEA #17. There are thousands of agencies and organizations seeking volunteers—find some by

- Going to a local town or city hall or community center or library; ask someone, read the posters on the bulletin boards
- Checking out volunteer needs at a place of worship
- Asking friends and family members
- Going on line and search under “volunteer opportunities [yourtown]”

When you have found something interesting, sign up to help if you can.
Of all the suggested activities in this book, this may require the least explanation. The world is full of need, and most often this need is well advertised, if one knows where to look.

It is likely that there is a community or neighborhood organization that serves if not as a clearinghouse for volunteer opportunities, as a bulletin board. Try the town hall, a library, a post office notice board, a public school guidance office. Expect minimum age limits and particular needs—a driver’s license, for example—but be persistent.

If political institutions yield nothing useful, try other community organizations, in particular churches, temples, or mosques. Many of these maintain their own service programs that might be looking for more help, and if not, someone at such a place may have other leads.

When all else fails, look close to home: Are there specific needs that can be seen in the neighborhood that a young person could begin to meet on his or her own initiative?

And if the technology is available, try an internet search for “volunteers needed” situations, focusing on your area. The search may need some refining, but stay with it.

If the idea of service does indeed make the youngster smile, keep looking. Something is sure to turn up.

**IDEA #18. Go to the offices of your most local newspaper, and see if there is anything you can do there as a volunteer. Hang out and be helpful, if they'll let you. The more polite and positive you are, the better your chances.**

The heart of public discourse in our nation has always been the newspaper. Although the number (and page count) of great city dailies continues to fall, many communities continue to depend on a local newspaper (or two) to chronicle local events and local issues. Display advertisements draw citizens to local businesses, classifieds keep jobs and personal goods in circulation, sports pages and education features herald the triumphs of local youngsters, and editorial pages (especially those renowned for courage or contrariety) lead and model public discussion on issues both great and small.

Newspapers come in all sizes, from city dailies with legions of writers, printers, and delivery drivers to one-person small-town weeklies. Many of the
larger papers have internship programs, some quite formal and reserved for journalism students and others less so. Smaller papers may either want or resist a helping hand, even that of a volunteer, depending on circumstances.

Perhaps the aspirant can approach a particular office at the newspaper and inquire about volunteer opportunities. At the very least, ask if someone might be able to show the younger around; larger papers may even have scheduled tours. If there are opportunities to become involved, take them, no matter how trivial they may seem. In earlier times, the newspaper business was often learned literally from the bottom up, with the young Benjamin Franklin inking type and pulling paper on his way to becoming the chief writer and publisher of the influential *Pennsylvania Gazette*.

For some people the figurative and even literal smell of printer’s ink has an irresistible draw, and young people who discover this about themselves at an early age may see a lifetime in the world of words and ideas beginning to unfold in the pages of their first newspaper. *(ALSO: Language, Literature, and History; Civic and Community Engagement)*

**IDEA #19. Go to a local cemetery and see if there is work you could do: cleaning up around the stones, picking up litter, or even making records of the people buried there. You may have to consult with local officials to find out what you can do. (Don’t try cleaning up the stones unless you are being supervised by a responsible adult, though; older stones can be irreparably damaged by attempts to clean them.)**

There are cemeteries that look like a millionaire’s front lawn, and then there are those that receive little to no attention. It is reasonable to assume that a cemetery that is well-kept, mowed and weed-free does not require volunteer assistance, but a graveyard that is overgrown and littered—perhaps because it is used as a kind of free-form park or even trash receptacle by neighbors, needs help.

If a cemetery rescue mission seems in order, the first order of business is to determine who is in charge. Sometimes it is a religious body or a town, but some cemeteries are privately owned and a few—particularly small, isolated rural plots—are even the property of a single family. The more intensive the level of work the young volunteer wants to perform, the more urgent is the need to establish who the controlling authority might be and to obtain
permission to conduct a clean-up operation. If the work is a matter of cleaning up litter—and the volunteer should be very wary of picking up even the most weatherworn flags and flower containers, no matter how unsightly they may be; if the litter consists of deposit bottles or cans, the volunteer can even establish a little fund to defray expenses.

Because a cemetery may look unkempt does not mean there are not those who love it and care for it, in their way. Cemeteries with particular historical interest need to be treated almost as archaeological sites, with a minimum of unsupervised work performed—no lawn mowers need to enter a cemetery without the express authorization of the management. It may even be the case that no one seems to know exactly who is in charge, which can turn the project into a research exercise.

It may also be that a small or old cemetery needs just the infusion of interest and energy that a young volunteer can provide. Perhaps a bit of interest will spark the management into organizing—or letting the volunteer organize—a “clean up, fix up” event, a nice way to bring resources to bear on what must be regarded as an important part of a community’s heritage.

And working around graves need not be morbid or scary. Such efforts are acts of respect and continuity, reminders that individuals, and times, pass on, leaving the living to remember and learn.

(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement)

**IDEA #20. Offer to help out for a few hours a week with an older or infirm neighbor or family member**

Sometimes pitching in when a neighbor or family member needs assistance is harder than volunteering “in the field.” When an established friendly or loving relationship becomes a matter of caretaking there needs to be space and a chance for the helper to process the experience; in a world with a graying and increasingly dependent population, this is true for people of all ages.

But often there is no kind of service more valuable than helping out someone close to one. Whether the assistance is direct—cooking, feeding, reading aloud, providing physical assistance with exercising or dressing—or indirect—shopping, running errands, making telephone calls, cleaning and organizing—the performing of essential tasks is critically helpful and can often make the difference between anxiety and security for the person being helped. Other family members or neighbors may also appreciate being spelled so that they can get to essential matters in their own lives.
And of course the person being helped does not have to be old or permanently disabled. A working mother may be looking for child-care or someone to look after a sick child for a few hours while she goes grocery shopping. Sometimes an extra pair of hands can be useful in a busy household trying to pack for vacation or clean up in anticipation of company. While these tasks typically fall in the category of odd jobs, such work does not always require pay; in older times, exchanging labor was part of the fabric of community life, and no one expected to be paid in cash. The young volunteer might just set an example here of a kind of neighborhood “help bank” that could pay off for many people over time.

IDEA #21. Take care of an animal—as a volunteer at a zoo, an animal shelter, or a veterinarian’s office. If you can’t find such an opportunity, put up signs offering yourself as a volunteer dog-walker or a pet-sitter for neighbors on vacation. It’s a big responsibility, though, so you must do it consistently and well.

Some children are drawn irresistibly to animals, and vice versa. For such fortunate children, service in animal care can be a natural match. What matters most of all is the ability to regularly assume responsibility for the health and welfare of other living things.

Some zoos, animal shelters, and veterinarian’s offices are happy to have volunteers who can come regularly to look after the basic needs of the animals, although there are often age limits; some clinics are uninterested in amateur help. It would be important for the young volunteer to have all inoculations up to date and of course for them to be able to commit to regular hours.

If making a long-term commitment to a zoo, shelter, or veterinarian is not feasible, shorter arrangements can often be made with neighbors who work or who are headed for vacation. An daily dog-walk or a week or two looking after household pets can provide owners with much-needed relief, and youngsters will enjoy building relationships with new animal friends.

Although pet-sitting and dog-walking often become paying jobs, there is no harm in the child undertaking some duties of this sort on a volunteer basis, at least as a first attempt; this might be especially true if the youngster’s reliability is not fully established. If more opportunities for this sort of work present themselves as time goes on, then it would be perfectly fine to go professional.
IDEA #22. Make a project of picking up all the litter on a single block of a street or section of a road every day for a set period of time. (Be careful of traffic, though!) If you want to make this into a science and math project, you could even keep a careful record of the weight of the litter or of exactly what sorts of things you are finding. Write an article for your local paper (or at least a letter to the editor) about the things people throw away carelessly.

Roadside signs across the nation proclaim that businesses and organizations are eagerly joining adopt-a-highway programs, but there is no reason that such arrangements cannot be scaled down. If the young person were to decide at “adopt a street” or even a block, there will no doubt be, sad to say, a steady supply of litter to be picked up; perhaps it might even be possible to engage a few friends in the activity, or even a school or youth group.

Selecting a place to perform this service may be a challenge, as a busy street or highway may just not be appropriate. There are obvious safety considerations here, and some adult supervision might be needed; at a minimum, bright-colored clothing should be worn. If no plausible place presents itself, perhaps a local hiking trail or park would be a worthy substitute.

Another safety-related issue has to do with sanitation, and this might well be an activity best done while wearing rubber gloves. Direct contact with litter should be avoided, as should contact with other roadside hazards—animal droppings or certain plants like poison ivy, which thrives on many roadsides all over North America. A good scrub after pick-up duties have been performed is highly recommended.

This activity can be done once, as a Clean-Up Day kind of event, or regularly, while walking a dog or just taking a stroll after school. A whole other issue is that of quantity of material to be picked up—some places may require multiple trash bags; perhaps deposit cans or bottles can underwrite the purchase. Even in no-deposit states, aluminum is recyclable and can be turned in to scrap metal dealers for a small premium.

For what it is worth, the study of trash and litter is actually a sub-specialty in the study of material culture, and there might be something to be learned from taking a systematic approach to collection and analysis. Counting cigarette butts or classifying beverage containers may not be everyone’s idea of fun, but the information may be of interest to some young people and perhaps of real interest or value to someone else in the community.
An excellent complement to this activity would be the composition of a letter to a municipal body or local newspaper, either decrying the behavior of the litterers whose carelessness one has learned about first-hand or urging broader community clean-up efforts.

(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement; STEM)

**IDEA #23. Think of something that you are good at and find someone you can tutor or teach—could be art, could be algebra, could be reading, could be basketball, could be …**

This activity begins with an act of reflection, a consideration of what the young person might actually be good enough at to teach. This might be more difficult than it seems, if for no other reason that some things at which they might be highly skilled are not of interest or use to others—or that the skill is so intuitive that breaking it down to be taught might be overwhelming.

But surely the youngster does possess a useful skill, and so the real problem becomes to find an audience. Perhaps a few flyers could be posted in central places in the community—try the bulletin board at a local supermarket—including a phone number. Perhaps an ambitious wannabe coach could announce a batting or shooting clinic at a such-and-such a time at a public park or court, or a less physical skill could be taught at a “seminar” at a public school or library (having of course obtained permission first).

Before any instruction begins, the young tutor should make an effort to break down the activity into intelligible and therefore teachable components or steps. A good teacher has a lesson plan, and so here a written outline or even a script would be very useful. Think about what the final goal or outcome would be, and “plan backwards.” Think about ways to make each step interesting or fun; perhaps a game would engage the participant(s) while also making even the “teaching” fun.

For one-on-one instruction, it is important that all aspects of the arrangement—goals, time, expectations, supplies and equipment if needed—be clear to all involved. A safe, appropriate, and supervised place is critical, although this could be a home. It is also important that the young tutor know his or her limits and that they be able to stop or end the arrangement if necessary.

The idea here is volunteer service, but the work here could evolve into a small business. While no one expects anyone endlessly to give away expertise, it is important for the parent or guardian to be ready to talk about the nature of
service and its place in the life of a young person, especially when it might seem time to put the instruction onto a different sort of footing.

(ALSO: Business and Entrepreneurship)

IDEA #24. Choose a household chore or responsibility to take on without being reminded or even thanked. This could be some form or repetitive daily drudgery—putting away the clean dishes, walking the dog, folding your own laundry—or it could be an occasional major task that you are willing to monitor and do when it needs to be done, like weeding or replacing the batteries in the smoke detectors. You could take this idea one step further and offer to do these for an elderly or infirm neighbor.

Along with making sure that needed work is done, the development of dependable habits of mind and action is a main goal of assigning household chores. Doing household work without having to be asked or without the expectation of reward is, in many families, not only an obligation of membership but also an important learning experience. If this is already the case in your home, then perhaps adding still another chore to the child’s list is unnecessary, although experience suggests that there is usually time for one more thing and also that an important alternative goal to just getting things done is simply to wean the youngster of the need to be reminded to complete the task.

Whatever chores are assigned, it is important that they be developmentally appropriate and do-able by the child, although the historical experience of farm children suggests that even eight- or nine-year-olds can accomplish almost anything with a bit of instruction. The child who invokes child labor laws as an argument against doing chores should be referred to some of the literature on young workers in nineteenth-century coal mines of factories, an instructive research project that could provide useful perspective on the relative difficulties of cleaning up one’s room or vacuuming the living room as opposed to working twelve-hour shifts underground.

The child who is already an exemplary chore-doer at home might be encouraged to find an opportunity to perform some regular household service for a neighbor or relative in need. Help of this sort is always much appreciated, and the chance to develop a new relationship is itself always a positive learning experience.
ESSAY 3

Issues of Security and Privilege for Interested Children
The Interested Child proceeds from a number of assumptions, but then so does the way we speak of childhood in our society. “We believe that children are our future,” we sing, and we like to believe that this belief is common across the spectrum of humanity, especially in the industrial democracies that have defined the world we live in and shaped the way in which we envision childhood. Children are special, are learners, are to be protected and nurtured and looked after as they make their way through an educational system designed to prepare them for the world they will inherit as adults.

But the fact is that not every child in our society is on this path. Millions live in poverty and attend schools that are underfunded and underappreciated in every way. Segregation has returned to the American public school system, holding hands with an over-reliance on standardized testing and an under-reliance on the good will and dedication of teachers. We are gripped by reports of events in which young people, in particular young men of color, are gunned down by forces allegedly representing law and order while going about their business, unarmed and unprepared for the swift violence that escalates in the blink of an eye to end their lives.

When I used Facebook some of my friends there used to tell the story: How as parents of color they feel increasingly insecure allowing their children out in the world, how every parent of an African American male must have “the talk” with their son about how to comport himself when confronted by official suspicion, how to channel, nearly 60 years after Number 42 took the field for the Dodgers, the patience and resilience of Jackie Robinson when stalked or harassed or accused. While self-deluded reactionaries congratulate themselves on living in a “post-racial” society (whatever that even means), people on the front lines of building a multi-racial society—parents, teachers, children—know that the struggle for equal opportunity and equal rights continues undiminished.

At the heart of this struggle lies the matter of privilege—call it race privilege, skin privilege, whatever. It may be distressing to have this brought up on a blog site devoted to developing the curiosity and intellectual and creative passion of children, but too many current events regarding (in particular) violence with racial overtones, including that committed by law enforcement, remind us that interested children, even if they may be created equal and endowed by their creator with inalienable rights, are not always treated equally. It’s far too complex a topic to address here in great detail, but parents
of the economically and socially dominant races and classes owe it to themselves and their interested children to take up the question of the unearned privilege that comes with race and class, privilege that many us of gain only by accident of birth and lineage.

Part of the recognition of what this unearned privilege means is an acknowledgment that not everyone has it, and that the assumptions and presumptions that we make about the world and how it works do not apply to everyone. To teach a child this, to help them develop the humility and circumspection to move through the world fully invested in and open to their own experience as well as the experience and perspectives of others, is to give a gift of inestimable proportion.

It must not go unsaid here that gender conveys privilege, as well. The #MeToo movement has been reminding us, painfully, of the dominance that men have imposed on women by every means from sexual innuendo to assault to unequal pay for equal work to disproportionate access to “air time” and even space in classes and offices—“man-splaining” and “man-spreading,” if you will. Forward-thinking families of all races now feel the need to have another version of “The Talk” with their sons: that no means no and that being bigger or just being male does not mean being more entitled to attention in all its manifestations.

Some readers will take offense at this suggestion, I am sure, but what better way to help a child develop the habits of mind and soul to navigate and appreciate the many cultures and possibilities of this earth than by opening his or her mind to the idea that not everyone does or can expect the same things of life, regardless of their intelligence or interests or will? What better way to help a child develop the empathy and understanding that can help them contribute humbly and fully through a lifetime toward making this world a better, safer, and even more wondrous place?
THE ARTS AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION

The purveyors of popular culture have done a spectacular job creating a version of American youth deeply connected with “the arts”; children and teenagers spend billions of dollars each year on films and music.

Mostly, however, this connection with things “artistic” is purely an economic construct. Rather than an imaginative exploration of a created universe, most of the consumption of cultural products by young people in the industrialized world is the result of exhaustive market research and targeted content packaging. The mechanism is a brilliantly conceived convergence of a relatively affluent demographic (kids) with an ever-evolving cornucopia of designer products—boy bands, rap stars, action films, gadgets to play the songs, feature-rich smart phones, and even clothing and personal-care items—that are essentially fungible commodities whose purpose is to separate customers from their cash. Rather than a free market, this convergence can be seen as a rigorous development of data-driven merchandising that can entrap less-than-independent-minded young people in a consumer niche from which there is no escape—nor even a felt need to do so. The niche becomes a comfort zone in which a never-ending cascade of what an earlier generation called “mental pabulum” ensures that the consumer is never discomfited by intellectual challenge or even by much in the way of variety—the latest hit or must-have product is simply a pricey reiteration of the last.

While this trend may drive a thriving economy, it also provides a wall of cultural static that effectively obscures both a whole other world of non-consumer-driven arts production and also the creative potential of each individual. Where there is non-stop hip-hop there is little need for the average child to sing tunes of their own devising, and young people in the United States make up a tiny proportion of fine-arts consumers or even aficionados.

Suggestions in THE ARTS AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION category are designed to develop the child’s understanding of and appreciation for artistic expression, both as something that might do on one’s own but also as a broadening context that includes media and forms beyond the familiar.

IDEA #25. Buy (or go to a library) and read from cover to cover a magazine about the arts. Try Downbeat, Art in America, Dance, American Theatre, Aperture—there are many, many more. Find an artist or performer whose work interests you, and then look for
more of her or his work in a gallery, in performance, or on the internet.

If one is not fortunate enough to live in a community with a “vibrant arts scene,” it might be difficult to imagine the extraordinary quantity and variety of output from the global creative community. The many arts magazines currently published not only offer a taste of what is available but also serious inspiration to young people who might have imaginative yens of their own. Whether the art form be music, painting, dance, or theater, magazines can give the reader a sense of who is creating what, how the critics feel about it, and how the complex marketplace for the fine and imaginative arts works. Many magazines also carry regular “how-to” features that illuminate particular techniques, along with interviews and biographical articles offer insight into the hearts and minds of a range of artists.

In itself, a magazine probably will not inspire the next Jackson Pollock, Richard Avedon, Charles Ives, or Twyla Tharp, but it will at least serve as an introduction to the nature of the creative life and contemporary art. A hard reality in our society is that new audiences for art (and this includes non-blockbuster cinema and music that doesn’t make the Top 40) are not being well trained except by happenstance; relatively few young people are even aware that there is an arts scene, and fewer still have even the faintest idea of how to access it in search of interesting things to look at and experience. Publications make a great entrée into the world of the arts, and furthermore they are themselves often beautiful things to look upon.

IDEA #26. Spend an hour a week creating a painting or sculpture; keep improving it—or create a whole collection. Ask some friends, or maybe your art teacher, to come by for your own personal “gallery opening.”

This is as broadly open-ended as any suggestion we will offer to the interested child, and the intent here is to encourage the young person to take an intellectual and creative risk—to try something new, and perhaps to attempt to produce something in a medium or genre that is completely unfamiliar.

The work could be a simple papier-mâché figure or object, perhaps built around a frame of bent coat-hangers. It might be a watercolor painting or even a “mixed-media” piece in crayon, marker, and paint. The medium does not matter, nor does—and this must be emphasized—technical prowess.
What does matter is the idea of continuous improvement, that taking the time to reflect on a work in progress and then re-do, re-touch, or even re-conceptualize is an important, even essential, part of the creative process. A work begun, set aside, and then returned to at a later time, with a fresher mind and spirit, will naturally evolve in ways that the creator could not have imagined when the work was begun. For the child to see and experience this—and then to explain the process to viewers when the work is “unveiled”—is an important exercise in creative self-discovery, metacognition, and self-expression.

And make the “gallery opening”—or unveiling, or simply the viewing—an event to honor both the effort of the creator and the learning that has been occurring.

IDEA #27. Keep a sketchbook in which you record and illustrate your observations, thoughts, feelings, and experiences
The sketchbook has been around since at least the European Middle Ages, and much of what we know of the feelings and thought processes of our forebears comes from the combination of their words and their visual ideas their sketchbooks demonstrate.

Any blank paper—a diary, a purpose-made sketch journal, or even a pad of lined notebook paper—will do. The young person can be encouraged to jot down a few ideas each day or to make a commitment simply to drawing something—and technical proficiency is beside the point. The subject could be a piece of toast or an idea for a new spaceship; it does not matter. The point here is for the journalist to work at interpreting his or her own ideas or experiences visually, to keep a record over time not only of how once sees the world but of how one thinks about it. The individual who is comfortable representing sensation or thought, no matter how poor the product might be from an artistic standpoint, will in time become adept at making explicit connections between disparate realms of ideas and at seeing the world ever more clearly and independently.
(ALSO: Language, Literature, and History)

IDEA #28. Watch a silent feature film from start to finish without stopping it, and discuss or write down your thoughts on the experience
The idea of watching a two-hour film without spoken dialogue is shocking to many young people. Accustomed as they are to having the plot carried
forward by word, young audiences of today are actually often resistant to the concept of the “silent” film—and of course the fact that virtually every minute of surviving silents is in black and white robs them of even more prospective appeal. All young people can imagine are scratchy figures jerking across a screen to the remorselessly insipid accompaniment of a tinny piano.

But yet, there are any number of powerful films made before the age of talkies that can still compel a room full of twenty-first-century adolescent viewers. Chaplin’s features, especially *Modern Times*, can win over an audience today every bit as effectively as they did nearly 80 years ago, and such archetypal “horror flicks” as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu* still chill the spine. Other classics—Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* or D. W. Griffith’s epics like *Intolerance* or *Birth of a Nation*—remain compelling and even controversial—especially *Birth*, which is still best viewed, if viewed at all (some would say not to, ever, because of its racist content) with some strong caveats and much historical context supplied. Other genres, including even the better of the Griffith weepers—*Orphans of the Storm* or *Way Down East*—can hold their own, as well. In 2011 there was even a successful attempt, *The Artist*, to create a “modern” silent; it won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

What often comes as a surprise to contemporary viewers is that the silent film actually has a very clear narrative structure, helped along by title cards, exaggerated facial expressions—the “over-acting” that can look so dated in out-of-context clips of these old films—and musical sound tracks that, if played by a master and not just dubbed in with no attempt to match the story, effectively cue the audience as to the mood and tempo of the action. If the young viewer should see one of these films at one of the many revivals or festivals that feature serious artists performing the musical accompaniment, the effect is every bit as powerful as a contemporary film. The black-and-white issue soon fades; it might even be suggested that “cultural literacy” in our society includes a familiarity with some of the classic sound films of the pre-color era as well as silents.

By all means, encourage the young viewer to figure out the narrative techniques militated by the medium and find ways for them to share observations—perhaps in a school newspaper review. And why not encourage a language arts or social studies teacher to screen a silent film as part of a class or as an out-of-class treat—to spread the gospel?

*(ALSO: Language, Literature, and History)*
IDEA #29. Visit an art museum or gallery and write down some of your thoughts on the visit

Like the sketchbook suggestion in #25, this suggestion is designed to help the young person make and deepen the connection between experience—in this case, close observation of specific paintings or other works of art—and words.

The art of seeing art does not have to be developed in gallery space. In a world in which images fly past the eye, learning to look for patterns and harmonies requires first of all the ability to look with a careful and unanxious eye. No one can enjoy a museum or gallery who feels the pressure to “appreciate” all they see; the stereotype of the boring, knowledge-spouting “high-brow” is among the most powerful cultural deterrents in our society. The skill, the art, is to learn to look at and reflect on those things to which the eye and mind are most drawn, whether they are masterpieces or not.

Even if the site visited is modest in scale—a small local gallery, perhaps—and the works viewed less than Old Masters, the young person is also working here at developing skill in expressing a response to such an experience—and it must be emphasized here that there should be no expectations in terms of quality or quantity other than a good-faith attempt to elicit something more than monosyllables.

By way of motivating suggestions or topics, even such hackneyed prompts as “My favorite sculpture was” or “The part I liked the least was” might be offered. The object is not to present merely an “answer” but to develop skill in the presenting evidence both from the experience and from the child’s thoughts and feelings that will effectively support the assertion. The word Why? is always more important than What? and this is especially true in matters of opinion. (And, it should be added from this educator’s perspective, in a world in which simply having an opinion—see any cable news channel—seems to be valued for its own sake, the student who has internalized the habit of presenting evidence to support a point of view is light years ahead of most of their peers.)

The audience for the written response might be the child themself—just a private journal or diary, maybe. If a relative, guardian, or friend should offer service as a reader, let this reader be gentle and positive only. A critique of what has been done rather than friendly encouragement toward even more will quickly defeat the purpose of this exercise.
IDEA #30. Go to a play at your local high school or community theater
If you are already performing in or are part of the stage crew of your school play, you are already attending, but for the rest of the community, school or locally produced and cast plays are an easily accessible cultural event as well as an affirmation of the creative spirit of a community.

Whether the play of the moment is a musical—these tend to be popular in the spring—or a drama or comedy, it is probably based on a script that is familiar, even iconic, in the history and world of theater. What better way to add to one’s stock of cultural knowledge as well as to appreciate the enormous effort of the cast, crew, and staff who have spent months putting the production together?

Purchasing a ticket and sliding into a seat for an evening’s or afternoon’s entertainment is not just about enjoying the show, which is bound to be impressive even if it’s not Broadway or even the bus-and-truck companies that roam among city theaters large and small across the country. Attending a school or community play is a way of acknowledging and applauding, literally, the long hours of rehearsals, interesting technical challenges analyzed and resolved, and all the joys and occasional frustrations that go with being part of a collaborative team—an ensemble. The students or your neighbors have worked hard, with late nights even as they begin to finish up the term’s academic work, and those overseeing the project have put in their own blood, sweat, and occasional tears.

So, whether they’re for *Grease* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *You Can’t Take It With You* or *Macbeth*, watch for the posters for your local high school’s spring play to appear in local shop windows and make a plan to see the show. The interested child may be inspired, and at the very least they and any adult companion who happens to go along will be well entertained.
*(ALSO: Language, Literature, and History; Civic and Community Engagement)*

IDEA #31. Go to an arts or music camp for a week; fine-tune some skills and make some new friends
*(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)*
This is one of the suggestions that sounds as though it might cost some real money, but many communities and non-profit organizations sponsor arts programs for young people at little or no cost, and even the more expensive may offer some form of financial aid.
Here is an opportunity for the young person to immerse themself in the creative process for a period of time, and to do so in the uninhibited presence of others. Local museums, art schools, and even colleges often run these programs, either as summer programs as implied in the suggestion or as Saturday morning classes; many programs will accept older children or teenagers into adult sessions. It makes little difference who runs the program or what the focus is, as long as the student is interested and excited about being a part of it.

“Music camp” often presupposes some knowledge of an instrument, but this is not always the case. In any event, most human beings are possessed of at least one natural instrument, the voice, and skilled teachers can turn even the froggiest of children into passable singers in a surprisingly short period of time; the will to sing can conquer all but total tone-deafness. The drum can also be picked up by aspiring musicians on the spot, although not every family will welcome their young drummer home again.

Programs in the visual arts usually focus on a particular medium, with courses leveled based on experience. Of these, courses involving technology—photography, film-making—may have associated expense, and a developed interest in ceramics may involve access to a potter’s wheel and a kiln. But cross such bridges as you come to them.

IDEA #32. Find someone in your community who makes art or high-quality craft objects, and ask if you can just hang out for a while and observe. Ask if there is anything you might do to help out.

Every town or neighborhood has its artist or craftsperson. Even if the person is not “public” with his or her creative enterprise, chances are someone knows about it, and it may be that they would welcome a suitably quiet and respectful audience or even, depending on age and other factors, a helper.

Long gone, for the most part, are the days when apprenticeship was the path to expertise in the arts, just as it was in most other fields. School arts programs—or what are left of them in an age shrinking school resources—provide students with few opportunities to watch someone else’s creative processes at work. While good arts educators emphasize that creation is largely a process of problem-solving and decisions, our culture’s obsession with product (and often with genius, as if Picasso or the Beatles had somehow been exempt from the “one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration” rule, which they were not) often obscures this. For a young person to observe at close
hand the act of creation—of false starts and re-tries, of reflection, of consciously altered perspective—is to learn that craft and polish proceed from effort and deliberation.

The artist or craftsperson who is willing to model this for a young observer is performing a service that is an age-old part of the human condition as well as a sophisticated educational act. Where else can a young person see the extent to which technique—even of the most subtle and expert sort—is above all the servant of thought and imagination?

If there truly are no opportunities of this sort close by, an alternative is to find a museum or some other site that specializes in historical reenactment; even a large craft fair could suffice. Look for the people weaving, or making brooms, or blacksmithing, and have the child make a point of watching for a long time, and of asking questions. Observe the motions needed to produce the object, yes, but take account of the pauses, the minute examinations, the deep breaths as well. Even the act of turning a bar of iron into a coat hook, while the smith may have done this a hundred times, requires attention, judgment, and reflection—habits of mind that will serve in every circumstance.

(ALSO: Service and Helping Others)

IDEA #33. Shoot a series of digital photographs (or a roll of film!) with the goal of capturing one wildly beautiful image of something (or someone).

Any camera, from a cellphone digital to a single-use disposable camera (although the combination of initial cost and film-processing fees can run up a significant tab) can be used to take award-winning photographs. If the youngster has little experience in the visual arts, the first step might be for them to simply become accustomed to looking at the world through the viewfinder, not snapping pictures but getting used to the idea of the visual world broken into smaller units, framed.

Another first step might be to look at great photographs. Any issue of the National Geographic magazine is a miniature museum of photographic excellence, and many art galleries display photographs. The public library should have photography magazines as well as books of photographic art. Simply looking at beautiful photographs is a wonderful way to begin to understand the potential of the medium to do more than record snapshots of friends and relations.
Landscapes, candid, portraits, close-ups—all kinds of subject matter lends itself to beautiful, even moving photography. The child may want to ration the images they create (especially if a film camera is involved), or perhaps the exercise of taking a series of photographs of a single subject would be worthwhile. A photodocumentary, although not quite fulfilling the notion of a single beautiful image, could also be a great project—a series of photographs or friends at play or of a neighborhood activity, or a family portrait gallery showing relatives at work.

If the child has access to a digital camera, which of course includes any “smart” phone, the ability to capture a huge multiplicity of images can be used to help the child develop an “eye” through self-critique. Which images “work,” and which do not? What are the elements of a great photograph?

When in the end the beautiful photograph has been made, the final and perhaps most satisfying project will be to decide where and how it will be displayed, or to whom it might be given. (And do not forget that there are any number of photographic competitions in which to enter the image. Some are even for young photographers only.)

**IDEA #34. Learn to play a new musical instrument. You don’t have to be great—you just have to have some fun doing it.**

There are so many musical instruments from which to choose: obscure, ethnically specific, loud, soft, heavenly, harsh. Why not give one a try, even if you regard yourself as a complete musical incompetent?

It seems that there is almost nothing so central to what makes us human as our ability to make and enjoy music. The simple kazoo or any sort of drum can satisfy this inner need, but so can bagpipes, a didgeridoo, a gamelan, an Appalachian dulcimer, or a bassoon. Music lessons are everywhere these days, from the internet (try *YouTube*!) to a surprising number of expert teachers in nearly every community. One can choose one’s instrument for reasons of cost, portability, family heritage, cool sound, or any other reason.

Although virtuosity may lurk just beneath a heretofore unmusical skin, the development of musical skill might well be described in the words of G. K. Chesterton, who maintained that “A thing worth doing is worth doing badly.” (See Essay 1 in this book, “On Doing Things Badly and the Cult of Expertise: The Interested Child Mindset”) In other words, if the activity brings pleasure and satisfaction, it does not matter whether the young musician will ever be ready for Carnegie Hall—the pleasure is in the doing,
and half of that in the struggle to make something that sounds even half-good on a difficult instrument.

Of course, if the mastery of the instrument also involves learning to read some form of musical notation (and along with the familiar Western scale there are many others from other cultural traditions or that respond specifically to the needs of a complex instrument or musical genre) the benefit is multiplied many times. To sight read is to be literate in a whole new language, a language that may be as beautiful and important as one’s native tongue.

The musical urge may be a passing fancy or a lifelong passion; it does not much matter. But for the time in which the child of any age from three to 93 gives themself over to learning the instrument, the lessons of concentration, mind-body coordination, perseverance, and musical understanding will lay behavioral and neural foundations of lasting value.

**IDEA #35. Attend an art event: a festival, the opening of a gallery show, or even a play or concert**

Arts events and gallery openings are significantly different from museum collections in that they offer the suggested and often physical presence of the artist. Such events are celebrations of someone’s creative spirit, and even if the someone is long dead, the connection between what is viewed or heard and an individual’s creative spirit becomes palpable. Moreover, such events are often designed to encourage conversation or interaction between audience and art (or at least among the audience), making them into more than just passive viewing or listening experiences.

It would be great if the child could attend the event with a friend or anyone with whom they can actually talk about the event, and the art, as they experience it. What is on display, or what have you seen and heard? What is the artist’s intention? How does the work make you feel? What does it make you think about? How is it like or unlike other things that you have experienced? How do viewers agree or differ in their responses to the same piece of work? If there is an opportunity to speak with the artist, what questions are important to ask, and how satisfying are the answers?

If nothing else, arts events can catalyze both the development of taste and an understanding of the ways in which people’s response to art can vary. Furthermore, a well-organized event can also teach young audiences of the power of the arts to create, sustain, and even deepen community through shared experience.
All of this is of course equally true for almost any theatrical event or performance, and it might be worthwhile to remind the young viewer or listener to be on the lookout for signs that the audience as a whole has become bonded, for the moment, into a community through the shared experience of the performance.  
(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement; Language, Literature, and History)

**IDEA #36. Create a scaled-up version of some simple object—say, a six-foot lollipop.** Find a place to display your giant something. Keep a blog or journal of the creation and the experience of people’s response. In the 1960s outscale representations of everyday objects became a particularly entertaining sub-genre of the Pop Art movement; Claes Oldenburg’s giant sculpture, “Lipstick on a Caterpillar Track,” was part of the vista from my college dormitory room. More recently a student at a school where I worked constructed a giant pencil, realistically broken, that occupied the margin of our baseball field; we don’t know what our opponents thought of it, but the combination of whimsical imagination and solid craftsmanship always pleased us.

The design challenge is of course the scaling-up, a fine mathematical exercise involving accurate measurement and an understanding of proportion. Any object will do, of course, the more unexpected the better.

Masonite or other relatively workable building materials can be formed around wooden frames to produce most non-curvilinear forms, and fiberglass and other plastics are almost infinitely shape-able. The greatest challenge in the end might be to find a suitable, and secure, place to display the work. Municipal public spaces or schoolyards might do, or perhaps a local arts organization has a spot available. Although we hesitate even to mention it, there is a fine and lively tradition of “guerrilla” public art, with pieces suddenly turning up in the most unexpected and amusing places—if a work is neither offensive nor dangerous, perhaps the young artist could quietly arrange for an unveiling in a place calculated to surprise—and to entertain, safely. However, there may be unforeseen consequences, so proceed with extreme caution and circumspection. It would probably be best to start by asking permission of those in charge of likely display venues.

The response is the thing. A large and unexpected object will raise a smile on most people’s faces, and the young artist should take pride and pleasure in
observing how viewers react. If there is indeed an art teacher somewhere in the young artist’s life, that person will very much enjoy hearing all the details —food for further discussion about the creative process and the nature of art, as well.

(ALSO: STEM)
ESSAY 4

School and the Interested Child
As each school year begins, some children experience a period of dissonance in the transition between the relative freedom of summer break and the regimentation of the school year. Even for home-schooled or un-schooled students, life in the months that comprise for others the academic year is probably more scheduled and more circumscribed than vacation time.

We are a family of schoolteachers, and so for us it is not an article of faith that school is a place of oppression and stultification where rote learning and dreary routine either squelch intellectual curiosity or kill the young soul. As independent school folks we aren’t bound by the kinds of state testing regimes that can truly impinge on the freedom of public school teachers and students, but we do answer to our superiors and our marketplace. Nonetheless, we believe in school.

Some years back I was contacted by the parent of one of our children’s classmates. She was concerned—upset, even—that her daughter was completing her assigned work with time to spare each evening. What did I think of this, and what did we do about it at our house, where the same situation, she was sure, obtained? (And it did.) Among independent school parents in the Boston area, as in most ambitious urban and suburban communities, a nearly unendurable homework load too often regarded in the bourgeois parent community as the sign of a righteous—that is, rigorous—and worthy education, a key marker of “a good school.”

I’m afraid I gave the wrong answer, which was that we were delighted that our child had extra time in the evening to be a part of our family and to pursue his own interests. How great that he could be a kid, sitting in the living room and chatting as we watched television, and that he could consume the books he was taking out of the library by the bagful. The conversation soon ended.

In our household we decidedly not been fans of extreme homework ordeals, although we were not entirely unhappy when they occurred for our children on infrequent occasions (sometimes as the well deserved result of some inattention to assignment sheets), and we were (and I am) especially not fans of homework that is repetitive or assigned simply to be homework. We sincerely hope that your child doesn’t have much of this, and we urge families to be assertive with teachers when homework loads are oppressive and destructive to family values and student confidence and happiness. Research
suggests that excessive homework, or even homework at all, is a poor learning tool, but this notion is so counter to prevailing cultural beliefs that it’s a tough position to defend. Few schools have the courage to embrace the principle of diminished homework.

We are fans of the idea that children should be allowed the space and resources to be interested in the stuff of their own lives their even amidst the exigencies of a busy school year. It can be difficult, but we urge families and children alike to make a priority of carving out time, a few minutes a day even, to pursue personal interests, hobbies, and areas of curiosity even against a backdrop of homework and schedule of classes and extracurricular activities. *(And let me add, as a former college counselor, that the “extracurriculars” that matter are those about which a student can speak and write with honest passion. The “best” activity is the one that most engages and inspires the student; for the child with real interest, there isn’t any hierarchy of activities, most-impressive-to-least. Don’t believe your neighbors or the cocktail party “experts” when they try to tell you there is.)*

We also offer this tidbit, based on sixty-plus years of observation in classrooms: The most successful students are actually those who are able to look at the material they are studying and find in it—in each topic, and even in each assignment—something that piques their interest, that allows them to bring their own personal curiosity to bear. This can be a stretch (“Do problems 1–17, odd” may not exactly set a child’s mind on fire), but somewhere in every topic and every task many students are able to find some tiny (or larger) nugget of interest, something to spur engagement and even original thought, and this engagement and originality are the hallmarks of a successful student.

It may be axiomatic in some quarters that school is a drag, a damper on the spirit, but it doesn’t have to be. Just as we urge the Interested Child to engage with new activities and new ideas, so do we urge them to engage with school—at the same time as they continue to engage with his or her own continuing exploration of the world and all that it offers.
This may be the most varied—to the point of confusion, perhaps—category in *The Interested Child*. To a degree this category is something of a catch-all for suggestions that also relate to topics like civic engagement but also geography and rhetoric. This is also where general “educational activities” live.

In an idea-driven society words are the coin of the realm. What the College Board used to refer to a “verbal aptitude” and what educator and originator of the Theory of Multiple Intelligences Howard Gardner calls “Linguistic Intelligence” is all about fluency with words, language, and the way these can convey complex ideas.

It’s a given that truly great students are often also great and voracious readers, kids who inhale words and the ideas that go with them. They also tend to be kids who can listen eagerly and carefully to complex conversations and presentations. Many are also fluid writers for whom turning their own ideas into words, sentences, and stories is as much a part of life as breathing.

Most educators will tell you that the best preparation for almost anything in the academic sphere—and for life in the Information Age—is read, read, read!

To which we would add: Listen, listen, listen! and Write, write, write!

This section is also about the art of looking around and noticing things about the world one inhabits. As a parent and as a teacher I have always tried hard to encourage the young people in my world to be observant.

And perhaps above all: See, see, see!

**IDEA #37. Listen to an entire episode of This American Life on National Public Radio and then e-mail your thoughts on the experience to someone.**

Listening well is not quite a lost art, but ever since the Golden Age of Radio was done in by the television, good radio documentaries have been hard to find—except on public radio. *This American Life* has been a fixture on National Public Radio’s weekend schedule for years, and each week the show features three or four longish—10–30 minute—segments and often a few shorter ones on a particular theme. The themes and the segments can be sad, provocative,
poignant, nostalgic, annoying, and frequently very funny, and the writing is intelligent and witty.

Sometimes the theme will not hold much interest for younger listeners, and occasionally the content requires a certain maturity, but more often than not the show’s appeal (part of which is the low-key narrative by creator Ira Glass) is considerable to anyone willing to give an attentive listen.

Since imitation is the highest form of flattery, perhaps the young listener could even imagine and create his or her own segment of an imagined This American Life show. It is even possible to submit segments to the show; guidelines can be found on the show’s website, www.thislife.org. All it takes is a voice recorder and a great story idea!

(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement)

IDEA #38. Imagine getting hold of an RV and driving across the country. Send each of your teachers a postcard from someplace interesting. Keep a journal. If the RV is too much, take a car and a tent. If cross-country is too much, visit a state or two that you’ve never been to. Don’t forget the postcards!

(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)

Not for the faint of heart or the short on resources, this was once the ne plus ultra of educational vacation ideas. Cross-country travel has been the iconic American experience since the days of the Forty-Niners, but in recent years the ease of air travel has induced more and more vacationers to eschew the highway and turn much of our nation into “fly-over” territory.

But the recreational vehicle (RV—those bus- and trailer-like vehicles with brand names like Winnebago that provide many of the comforts of home for families on the move) has also grown, and more and more families are electing to pile aboard to explore the highways and sights of America. Not only are there things to be seen along the open road—especially if the travelers avoid the interstates—but there are also big lessons to be learned about living in close quarters when underway for a few weeks at a time. (By contrast, the squeamish or claustrophobic might consider the journey of the Mayflower, into which a hundred travelers were packed for weeks without access to laundry or any but the most crude bathroom facilities. And the Mayflower was just a bit larger than a really big RV.)

If the notion of RVing from sea to shining sea is too much—and those who would have to drive need a stout heart and a strong commitment to the
enterprise—it is also possible to travel around a single region. Car camping with tents and sleeping bags from campground to campground is also a time-honored way for Americans to get around, removing the need for a driver to be comfortable manhandling thirty or more feet of vehicle but also compressing the travelers into an interior only slightly larger than that of a Wells Fargo stagecoach; the enforced intimacy is not to everyone’s liking, but a pile of books on CD or, in the worst case, personal music players with headphones, can make the hours pass smoothly.

How you travel is a great deal less important than where you go, what you see, and above all how you look at and talk about what is observed. It is possible for a car full of people to travel many miles with its occupants contained within a cultural bubble impervious to outside influence, but a truly valuable journey must be made with eyes turned outward and minds wide open. Begin by carefully and practically planning the journey, which should be a relatively democratic process, and make sure that dialogue continues as the trip takes place; journal-keeping is also encouraged. Rather than merely sightseeing, a trip of this sort should truly be (with a tip of the hat to the organization of this same name, referenced in Essay xx of this book) an odyssey of the mind.

(Also: STEM, Civic and Community Engagement)

**IDEA #39. Write a children’s book, illustrate it yourself, or ask a friend to help. Field test your book by reading to children of the right age; ask them for feedback, and make changes until you have a book that kids really like. Once you know have written something appealing, try to find someone to publish your book.** What was your (or your children’s) favorite children’s story? Do you still have a copy around? There is no better place to start imagining writing one’s own children’s book than by carefully examining the form and structure of another.

The secret to most great children’s books is that they combine a great simplicity of form—relatively few words to a page, short sentences, few characters—with a wonderful complexity or open-endedness. The book suggests or evokes rather than spelling out aspects of the character or the story. *Goodnight, Moon*, for example, provides a prop-filled setting but almost no context; the story could be about, and for, anyone, and thus nearly every child—and every parent—feels included in the narrative, even if the great green room does not look much like home.
The next *Goodnight, Moon* might be a bit much to hope for, but creating a storyline and illustrations that might entertain a young sibling, neighbor, or cousin is simply a great way to harness imaginative power. Which comes first, the pictures or the text, makes little difference, but the story should above all appeal to the writer, and if there are opportunities to introduce whimsy or humor—even irony—by all means take them, as even toddlers know a good joke when they hear it.

Reassure the young author that the illustrations do not have to look professional—even many published children’s books are a bit rough in the visual department, as evocative can be even more effective than precisely representational in the realm of children’s literature. An important physical characteristic for a children’s book is that it can be seen by the listener even as it is being read aloud—larger drawings are better than smaller ones, although some detail is always welcome.

The proof of the pudding, so to speak, will be the first time the story is shared with a young listener. Think of the first audiences as being like focus groups—gather feedback, and make changes as necessary, at least up to the limit of artistic integrity. A final, presentation copy can be made as a gift for a young friend, although the author may want to run off a color photocopy (although this can be expensive) to keep—or to submit to a publisher!

*(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression; Service and Helping Others)*

**IDEA #40. Take a course on a college campus**

*(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)*

While this could indeed involve finding a suitable course and setting off for a far-off destination, this suggestion could also involve something as modest—and as relatively affordable—as enrolling in a course in a nearby community college. This is probably a suggestion suitable to high school students, but some colleges have ongoing programs or even special events—MIT’s annual SPLASH program in Cambridge, Massachusetts, draws kids from all over the country—specifically aimed at students as young as upper elementary

This should not be done for any other reason than that the student is interested in or curious about the subject matter. If indeed the course is part of a summer residential program, then it requires a serious commitment of time, energy, and intellectual curiosity—as well as money. The student needs to be ready to work hard to make the most of the opportunity.
This is the time for a strong, even stentorian, caveat: The world is full of ambitious high schoolers busily padding and polishing their c.v.’s by amassing college courses and summer programs set on college campuses. While such activities may have educational value for participants along with whatever luster they might add to a college application (and college admission offices are quite good at distinguishing expensive résumé-building from authentic learning), they are generally regarded by participants only as mildly—or more—distasteful rites of passage, a summer of nights spent fulfilling an obligation.

The kind of college course that the provocative parent offers to a child will be one in which the child is genuinely interested without its having any particular instrumental value in making the student look good; if a record of the course makes the curious student look curious, that is all right. Let the student really look for something that they regard as intellectually fun, even if it bears no relation to any category needing fulfillment in a list of graduation requirements. And let the student work hard because the material is engaging and not to earn yet another accolade. The thinking child will acquire plenty of those in time, and they will be accolades with real significance. 

(Also: STEM; The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #41. Assemble your own personal book of quotations. As sources you can of course use favorite books as well as library and internet resources, but don’t forget the favorite sayings and wisdom of those closest to you. If you have a friend or relative who has a special quotation, try making a beautiful copy of it and giving it to them, framed; you can even make the frame yourself.

The internet is full of great quotation sites, and any library will have at least one exhaustive collection of great quotations. For some young people, finding the words of famous men and women that resonate with their own ideas about life is an extremely important affirmation—especially when the child might not feel as though his or her own point of view is quite like other people’s.

School yearbooks often seem to trade on quotations, and student pages are filled with the words of rock stars, television characters, and other popular figures. Many of the lines chosen by students for inclusion on their yearbook pages are more than familiar—they are clichés and catchphrases as much as significant commentaries on the human condition. While there is nothing
wrong with this—indeed, cultures thrive on shared knowledge of just this ephemeral sort—it is worth the trouble for the student to dig more deeply into history’s store of apt observations and pointed witticisms.

Some young people find that this exercise itself resonates with their own need to find validation in the words of Churchill, Thoreau, Lao Tzu, or Dorothy Parker. They become quotation or aphorism collectors, digging into volumes of familiar quotations and roaming the internet for just the “zinger” to take as a personal motto or e-mail signature line. There are ways to search quotations by individuals with whom one shares an important interest or characteristic, or ways track and sort all quotations on a particular topic. The point is for the young person to explore the ways in which people can use and have used language to precisely frame a viewpoint or a judgment.

It is also important for the quotation-seeker to look close to home. There will no doubt be a family member, a friend, or even a teacher who is locally famous—or notorious—for a particular turn of phrase, and what better way to celebrate that individual’s take on life than by crafting a “suitable for framing” version of that phrase.

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)

**IDEA #42. Write a script and then make a storyboard for a film you would like to make: create the dialogue and the settings, then draw pictures of each scene with the dialogue that would go with it. If you feel ambitious, you could even borrow a camera and start filming; at least, you could make the trailer for your own “blockbuster” movie idea.**

The imagination of the young runs to story-telling, but here is a way to attempt to set a narrative out in detail. The script is important, and the storyboard, a film-industry tool in which the director lays out the narrative with scene-by-scene sketches as visual accompaniment, is in itself a powerful story-telling medium; it also enforces a strong discipline of sequence and causality. Most storytellers find it a challenge to begin an elaborate story and actually work it through to a conclusion, and so storyboarding provides a neat and tidy technique for working through imaginative hurdles.

As in so many ideas involving some form of visual representation, the quality of the actual sketches is less important than the narrative structure. For this reason, the budding director might want to begin with a modest project—a documentary on a common activity, perhaps—rather than a full-blown space
epic. Such story elements as beginning, middle, climax, action–reaction, conclusion, setting, and character all take on a significance even more stark than when one is writing a short story, and the addition of even the crudest visuals underscores the need for a strong point of view and a clear storyline.

And if the young director can acquire the tools to make a rough-cut of the actual film, all the better! It might even be possible to find some instruction in filmmaking as well as access to the tools of the trade through a local school or public access television station.

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #43. Go to a library and read from cover to cover a general magazine about society and culture, like *The New Yorker, The Atlantic,* or *Harper’s.* There are others. Pat yourself on the back if you feel like writing a letter to the editors in response to something you read. If your letter is published, get someone to take you to dinner in celebration.

A surprising amount of the world’s intellectual discourse continues to take place in the pages of magazines frankly targeted at the affluent and educated—and influential. In articles, reviews, and opinion pieces, major topics of concern are introduced, defined, and debated, and anyone wanting to understand the nuances of the issues of the day ought to be familiar with the way in which the “national conversation” takes form at a higher-than-network-television-or-even-cable-news level.

Most public libraries will subscribe to several of these magazines. *The New Yorker* is notable not only for the high quality of its non-fiction and fiction content but also for its sophisticated cover art and cartoons; in recent years the magazine has broken important stories on aspects of American foreign policy as well as on human rights issues and domestic policy. *The Atlantic* and *Harper’s* tend to have a bit less variety (but more illustrations, some in color), but they regularly feature articles by serious “opinion makers” as well as book, film, and even food reviews. The conservative *National Review* and the more liberal *New Republic* and *The Nation* tend to focus more on political issues, including elements of American culture that have become pressure points in liberal–conservative disputation. *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone* are the village elders in a related genre of magazines promoting a particular kind of “hip”-ness; many of these are devoted to a serious analysis of popular entertainment, although the range of topics covered runs from outdoor
adventure (and gear! Outside is a leader in this area) to alternative politics
(Utne Reader and Mother Jones, for example).

There are numerous smaller magazines of opinion and culture, some with explicitly political agendas and others that cover arts and entertainment from an intellectual standpoint. Left alone in a library or bookstore, the curious young reader can become familiar with any numbers of such publications and, more importantly, become familiar with the ways in which writers with cultural influence frame and express their arguments. At the very least, the young reader is likely to be mildly amused by The New Yorker’s cartoons (although some might be rated PG-13).

Here as always, it’s important to understand that mainstream magazines of the sort here referred to often represent the voices of traditional power elites, and that much content may implicitly or explicitly be based on assumptions strongly flavored with elements of class or educational-attainment bias. (ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement)

IDEA #44. Challenge an adult in your household or immediate world to a formal debate: choose a topic, set a date, and prepare, prepare, prepare. Then have at it! (Maybe this could become a weekly or monthly event—with a great dessert.)

Nothing makes a young person feel more grown-up than having his or her ideas and opinions taken seriously by other adults, and this interactive activity—and the adult should plan on doing some serious preparation as well—will provide the youngster with both a reason to think seriously and logically about a particular issue and a chance to strut his or her stuff in an adult fashion, with an adult audience/opponent.

A formal debate should have rules, but there is no need to follow any of the many competitive debate structures. Even so, the topic should be clearly defined: “Resolved: That the lawn needs to be mowed only once a month,” or “Resolved: That the United States should devote as much money to solar energy as it does to military spending.” A few minutes of opening statements, a minute or so of rebuttal time for each side, and some time for closing arguments would suffice—equal time for each participant. Time limits, as set forth by a designated timekeeper, should be observed quite strictly so as to keep things fair.

Of course, a debate is not a debate without an audience to convince, and in this case at least a couple of audience members should also be judges—
perhaps distributed equitably by age. The point of a debate is to assemble a logical and factually thorough argument that supports the side of the argument represented by each side (known formally as “Affirmative”—in favor of the statement in the resolution—and “Negative”—against the statement), and the categories for judging should be about the quality of the argument, the use of evidence, and the quality of the speaking and presentation.

Regular family debates could even be used to solve ongoing issues (such as the frequency of lawn-mowing) or making household decisions. As participants become familiar with the form, they are likely to grow better and better at it, so watch out!

(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement)

IDEA #45. Take a ride on any form of public transportation. Watch where you go, and keep a good mental record of what life looks like through the window of the bus, ferry, train, or trolley; if you have a camera, take some pictures of what you see. (Of course, if you’re on a subway, you may need to just take photographs of stations or their entrances.)

While in some parts of the country this may be a near-impossible challenge, in others it should be a piece of cake. Most communities have at least some form of public transportation, either connecting them with other places or, in larger towns, to help residents get around.

One interesting way to try this idea might be to ride the full length of a bus, trolley, or subway route, stopping along the way to check out the neighborhoods through which the line passes. How does the scenery change, and how do the demographic patterns of the community change? What factors seem to be behind any changes that are observable? To what degree do communities along the route seem to be dependent on public transportation?

In most urban areas the settlement patterns are fairly clear; in suburban, exurban, or rural areas they may be less so. A century ago public transport systems threaded through many areas that are no longer served by buses or trains, and riding a trolley or an interurban car was a part of the common experience of growing up in America. A part of the challenge in this activity is to develop an eye for holdovers from those days, even when one is traveling by automobile, bicycle, or foot: station-stops converted to other use, the
outline of tracks showing through the asphalt pavement, divided boulevards whose center spaces were once rail or trolley right-of-ways.

It is an unfortunate fact that parents and guardians may be concerned about the safety of public transportation in general or of specific routes or the neighborhoods through which they pass. This might be a good family activity, especially if there is a destination (a park, an ice-cream stand) at the far reaches of the route being explored. Cost, too, may be a factor; while city routes may be relatively inexpensive (and many offer reduced rates for students), bus, train, or commuter rail might make this activity better suited for a truly special excursion.

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #46. Find and read the book that is the basis for a film that you have liked. Find someone else who has read the book and engage them in a serious discussion about the differences between the book and the film; it’s not just about which is “better.”

It is no secret that many popular films are based on books, but in a surprising number of cases the books tend not to have been best-sellers, even if the movies become blockbusters. Or the books may be “classics” that have attracted the creative imagination of a director.

In all events, if you saw and enjoyed a film based on a book, why not pick up and read the book on which it is based? Film series have been based on the fantasy novels of J. R. R. Tolkien and J. K. Rowling, for example, and anyone who has not ventured into The Lord of the Rings or the Harry Potter stories will be well rewarded. In these cases book sales have benefited from the films’ popularity, so the reader will be able to find plenty of fellow-readers with whom to discuss the books; happily, this sales synergy between film and book often occurs.

The differences in story-telling technique between book and film are of course a subject in themselves. Not only do length, scope, and number of characters play a role, but sometimes a filmmaker will choose to take a point of view in the telling that may differ from that of the author of the book. (Such differences sometimes create real friction between writer and director, but for audiences these differences can be a source of interest.) There are examples of short stories expanded to full-length films and lengthy novels compressed to a couple of hours, often with vast amounts of plot stripped out for brevity’s
sake. Both art forms, film and writing, impose certain disciplines on artists, and it is in reflecting on these disciplines and how they manifest themselves when a book is adapted for film that the young viewer can sharpen analytical and critical skill.

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)

**IDEA #47. Go to a library and read from cover to cover a poetry or literary magazine.** *Granta* would be a natural choice, but there are hundreds “little” magazines, some “important” and others less so, that publish poetry and short fiction, sometimes along with photography and other visual art. If you want to submit something that you have written or created, pat yourself on the back. If it’s accepted, get someone to take you out to dinner in celebration.

For all that we read that the people of the United States are low on literacy and debased in their cultural interests, the fact remains that Americans are a manically active people when it comes to writing and publishing poetry. Many universities publish august “reviews” containing poetry, prose, and literary commentary, and a glance at the section of poetry magazines on the shelves of any large bookstore reveals many, many independent reviews, poetry magazines, and literary quarterlies. Poetry is being written, and poetry is being published.

For the youngster with an interest in poetry, the discovery of these magazines can be a revelation—a window into a world of creativity and verbal dexterity and, more importantly, a whole choir of new voices to be heard. A typical periodical—and *Granta* is among the better known—rewards a slow and careful reading, with some contents requiring deep and immediate concentration while others can be set aside for another time. Even the little biographical blurbs on the writers can be of interest—who are these poets, and where do they come from?

While it is true that many published poets are university-affiliated academics, there are enough unattached citizen-poets to remind the reader that poetry has been a popular and democratic art form since the days of Homer. A number of the smaller of the “small” magazines that specialize in poetry are themselves distinctly demotic in form, with production values taking a back seat to the sheer cramming in of contributed work. Here is poetry at its most raw, and here might lie the opportunity for a young poet to take a first step into the world of the aspiring poet—to complete the “final” draft of a poem or two.
In the past and still in a few cases, the poet’s next steps were to write the cover letter, to fold the obligatory self-addressed stamped envelope, and to stuff them all into an envelope in the form of a submission. Nowadays most poetry magazines solicit and receive submissions via email; it’s even fair to say, despite the “hands-on” urgings of this post, that there are even more online poetry and literary ‘zines than there are ones still in print.

The fortunate young poet will receive the overwhelmingly gratifying news that a poem—or two, or three—has been accepted for publication. As anyone who has ever read a literary autobiography knows, the arrival of one’s first acceptance is often the event that inspires a career.

It might also be happy case that the young poet’s school sponsors its own literary magazine, creating the opportunity not just for submission and publication but also to engage in editorial work—selection and curation, copy-editing, and preparation for press. Many famous writers got their start by publishing in and then working on school and college literary magazines. (*ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression*)

**IDEA #48.** Find a presentation or lecturer at a local college or university that might be of interest

A local college or university is likely to be a fountain of opportunity to hear accomplished people talk about their fields of expertise, an art that once upon a time had the popularity of prime-time television and major league sports rolled into one. When popular lecturers—think Mark Twain or Charles Dickens—roamed the land and when the Chautauqua circuit brought experts, entertainers, and charlatans alike from village to village across America, the arrival of an itinerant speaker, on whatever subject from spiritualism to the pyramids of Egypt, was an eagerly awaited phenomenon.

Although the opportunities still exist in popular culture cable news talk shows, the History Channel—to hear bright speakers strut their stuff, there is nothing that can compare to the immediacy and power of a live lecture delivered before a bright, eager audience. Listening to such people speak truly can “elevate” the mind (another old-fashioned concept quite apropos here), even when the subject matter may be obscure and the speaker less than Churchillian. (For this reason it may be worth introducing the youngster to one of the “lecture circuit”’s more charismatic or timely characters.)
We would add here, Ask a question in the customary Q & A period after the main presentation. Make it a good one, and pay close attention to the answer, even if it is not the one you had hoped to hear.

This activity can be made interactive by having the interested child initiate a conversation about the presentation with a knowledgeable or engaged adult—a relative or teacher. Or better still, follow up with a question to the speaker themselves, via email; even “famous” people can usually be contacted via their institution, speakers bureau, or website. *(ALSO: STEM; Community and Civic Engagement; The Arts and Creative Expression)*

**IDEA #49. Write seven poems. Six just aren’t enough. Go back and revise them at least once a week for a few weeks, at least. Do they get better? Submit your favorites to your school newspaper or literary magazine.*

Committing oneself to write a series of poems has the effect of committing oneself to be, at least for a time, a poet. Half a dozen poems or more constitutes a serious endeavor, with the attendant issues of both content and quality.

There is no reason that the poems could not consist of a series on a particular topic, for example, or a group of portraits of friends or family members, like the *Spoon River Anthology* of Edgar Lee Masters. The poems could even, together, form a single narrative. While poems tend to be taught piecemeal to students in school, as if each were unconnected to any other, poems are often grouped around certain themes when they are collected by their authors into book form, and the aspiring poet might turn not just to Masters but to Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* or Robert Frost’s early *North of Boston* collection by way of inspiration.

Much of the exercise here is not just the writing but also the continuous editing and polishing that poems require. One poet of our acquaintance refers to his collection of poems in progress as his garden, always in need of pruning or other care, sometimes ready to bloom in publication but more often requiring more work before being set out before the world.

Should the young poet complete the poems and find the enterprise congenial, perhaps a poetizing tendency may take root. At the least, the poet should try to submit the work to whatever publications are handy, usually through a school but sometimes through a local or even national poetry contest. Beware,
however, any poetry “contest” that offers publication for payment. While most are legitimate in their way, some are scams, and to be truly a “published poet” one should not have to pay for the privilege.

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #50. Turn off the television and the rest of your screens for a week (or a month); consider that a billion people on this planet have no access to television at all. Do it right—no computer streaming, no videos, video games, or DVDs, either. Try reading aloud as a family or playing some of those board games stashed in the closet. You may find there are plenty of ways to keep yourself and your household entertained without what some people used to call The Idiot Box.

Advocates of this activity, which even has a “National TV-Turnoff Week” (usually in early May) cite benefits ranging from nutritional to mental health, but a more profound reason to shun television is simply that the thinking, curious child should be able to make the transition to TV-free life without much fuss or bother. Rather than presenting the absence of television as a sacrifice that is somehow “good for” kids, like castor oil or standardized tests, it might be better to plan television-free time as part of a broader program of alternative experience—a hiking trip, a visit to a relative, or something closer to home like a family chess or Monopoly tournament or a communal read-aloud of a favorite Harry Potter or other young adult book. In other words, plan on doing something so that the absence of television is not the focus but rather a natural byproduct.

Admittedly, this may be easier said than done, especially for children who are dependent on television or other video-based entertainment as their primary form of recreation. If it has to be a battle, going television-free is probably not worth it, although a moderate level of reward for compliance is not an admission of bad parenting.

We would go out on a limb here so far as to suggest that families who make access to video entertainment too easy or too ubiquitous a part of their children’s lives (in-car television and movies come to mind here) give up a tremendous amount of ground in the struggle to turn their children into observant, thinking beings; we always wonder what a child engrossed in a video in the back seat misses by way of watching the world or of actual conversation, even on the most uninspiring of commutes. While there is nothing wrong with watching television, movies, or playing video games, too
much of these activities unmediated by either more active forms of entertainment or critical reflection engenders, we believe, a cognitive sacrifice from which it may be very difficult to recover.

So turn the television off for a week, or a month, or a couple of days not as a punishment or a cold-water cure but because the child, and preferably the whole household, might have better and more interesting things to do.

**IDEA #51. Watch The PBS NewsHour on your local public television station for entire week. Do you miss the commercials? Share your thoughts with an interested adult or perhaps your school social studies or history teacher.**

There are many positive aspects to engaging with public radio with regard to news and opinion, and the commercial- and sponsor-free national nightly news on the Public Broadcasting System is yet another source of information and ideas. Eschewing sound bites and short clips for extensive reportage on relatively few main stories each evening, *The NewsHour* fills its time slot with thoughtful reports illuminated by expert commentary, often from sages representing several sides of an issue. While a *NewsHour* viewer may not know the latest on the south-side warehouse fire or the rollover on the freeway, they will likely have watched both Republican and Democratic leaders weigh in on the latest foreign policy proposal or have seen industry spokespeople and environmentalists debate energy issues. Like public radio, PBS news likes to keep the level of discourse high, and full appreciation often presupposes an ongoing knowledge of many issues. Fortunately, this knowledge can be acquired by regular viewing.

Unique to public television news is the absence of commercials. It often comes as a disappointing shock to students to learn that commercial television and radio news are driven, just as entertainment programming is, by the need to keep listeners and viewers from switching the channel—that in a sense, the commercial network news programming is aimed at sustaining viewer interest between commercial breaks, since the sale of commercial minutes to advertisers is what pays the station’s bills. In other words, entertainment decisions determine what is shown on the commercial news and the kind of attention a particular issue receives. By taking a look at commercial-free news, the young viewer can compare the money-making approach with the informational approach.

Here is a great chance for the young viewer to begin a dialogue with a trusted adult about the nature of news and the nature of information in our society. It
IDEA #52. Read a number of books by the same author. Start with Mary Pope Osborne or J. K. Rowling or Rick Riordan—or Toni Morrison, Avi, Emily Dickinson, Gary Paulsen, Tamora Pierce, or Shakespeare.

The youngster may be a reader and already inclined to inhale the entire oeuvres of many authors, mowing down whole library shelves like an avenging angel of literacy. But if the inclination to read is modest, or if the young reader has difficulty finding books of interest, this activity might be one way to discover a passion.

The hard part, of course, is finding an author enough of whose output is appealing enough to make pleasing the prospect of reading even more. It might be that the work of an author enjoyed while much younger—even the illustrated “read-to” books of early childhood—might serve as a starting point; one thinks of *Blueberries for Sal*, whose author, Robert McCloskey, wrote and illustrated many books, not all of which are as familiar as *Sal* or *Make Way for Ducklings*. Many authors of children’s books have also written for older readers, and so the reader who loved *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L’Engle might find a foray into her Crosswicks Journal Trilogy of some interest.

Poetry, because the “units of production” are shorter and less intimidating, might also be worth exploring. Some “children’s poets,” like Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky, are quite prolific and endlessly entertaining, while older readers may want to take on the likes of Dickinson or Robert Frost or the very accessible Billy Collins, a past U.S. poet laureate.

Series books are another way into this project, and the literary quality of the works does not have to matter. Any number of accomplished intellects have cut their teeth on the Hardy Boys or Nancy Drew or the Boxcar Children. We want our children to know that between the covers of books we can find satisfaction and pleasure and examples of people solving problems with optimism and confidence, and series characters do the latter book-in, book-out. Not Shakespeare, perhaps, but entertainment for the mind and medicine for the soul nonetheless.

And here’s the thing: Authors write to be read and enjoyed, and most do not write just so that scholars and schoolchildren can spend endless hours in
detailed analysis. The point of this suggestion is not just to develop breadth and skill as a reader but also to broaden taste—to learn what one likes to read. The focus should be kept on the doing and not on the debriefing. (ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #53. Find a hardcover book that is about to be thrown away and very carefully disassemble it. Figure out what the physical parts are of a hardcover book; see how the cover is made, and how the pages are held together. Look up “bookbinding” online or in an encyclopedia and learn as much as you can about the process. If you are inspired, try building a blank book of your own, with a beautiful cover, to give to a friend or loved one.
This may seem distinctly sacrilegious to committed bibliophiles, but for a young person with an interest in books this can be a solemn and significant act, like a medical student dissecting a cadaver.

The printed word, they say, is on its way out, and yet physical books persist and multiply. There is something elementally satisfying about handling a book, and for many the feel and smell of a book can be in themselves pleasurable. Young people do not always realize the power of scent, but in later years the smell of an old book that has lain on a dry and dusty library shelf or that has gently mildewed in a seaside home may bring back rafts of memories. Books as objects are a medium in themselves.

Simple curiosity might motivate the careful deconstruction of a physical text. The act itself might inspire some research as to the parts and terms of the publishing and printing worlds—the meaning of endpapers, half-titles, front and back matter, and signatures. Each book, even a paperback of the meanest sort, has been designed, not only in the cover design, but in the choice of paper, font, illustrations, and textual organization (forewords, acknowledgments, prefaces, bibliographies, notes, afterwords, and so forth). Imagining why the choices were made that resulted in the finished product can also raise questions about the appropriateness of the choices or about the interests and backstories of those who made them.

The deeper structure of the physical book will reveal hidden complexities—stitchings and gluings invisible to the reader. The dissector may be inspired to do some research on the bookbinding process—and all the elements of bookmaking, from papermaking to printing to design and binding, are in
themselves highly developed crafts practiced by professionals and amateurs alike. The project might inspire a visit to a printing shop or a bindery, or at least to ask the local library how it prepares and repairs the books in its collection.

The reader comfortably familiar with the nature of a book as a made object will carry with them a deepened sense of the significance of text—and this reader will always be one more voice raised in defense of the book against the inroads of whatever technology is next ballyhooed as portending the death of the printed word.  

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression; STEM)

IDEA #54. Find an old or historical map in a book or at a museum or library and spend some serious time studying it—then compare it with a modern map of the same place. What features do you see? How has the place changed over the years? What theories can you come up with as to why these changes have occurred?

Maps are not only informative but also beautiful, and old maps, especially those made in the days before modern printing technology replaced the human mapmaker’s steady hand and designer’s eye, have a seductive force. A map is above all the graphic representation of a place, and fine ones can evoke that place through detail and color; even a modern highway map has the power to suggest both flow and movement and the nature of human settlement patterns accommodating themselves to nature.

A good library will have plenty of atlases and other books containing maps, and some may even have a separate collection of maps. If no hand-drawn antique is available, find a pre-World War II National Geographic Society map and enjoys its wealth of detail as well as the extreme clarity with which the makers assembled the many elements into an information-rich thing of beauty. A modern map, even from the same source, is likely to show differences. Europe, for example, will have different borders and country names and even city-name spellings, while a map of your neighborhood or county will show new streets and roads at the very least. The force of history—the number and location of rail lines, for example, or the appearance of limited-access highways—will be clearly evident.

To use maps comparatively in this way is to understand how humans perform one of our elemental acts: interacting with land. Since the beginning of history
humans have felt a need to represent their presence and the presence of things they have created on the land. In addition, maps have always portrayed the resources humans need—rivers, oceans, forests—as well as the obstacles to the realization of aspirations—those same rivers, oceans, and forests as well as mountains and, since the rise of empires and nation states, borders. On a community or regional scale, a topographic map may explain why Main Street has such an odd kink or why the Center Line Road has such a prosaic and puzzling (center line of what?) name.

Of course, any comparative analysis also expands map-reading skill, an essential ability even in the age of Global Positioning Systems. The individual who is able to make the leap between understanding two-dimensional representation and three-dimensional reality will always, literally and figuratively, know where they are, and, given a few clues from a map that correspond to what can be seen, they will be able to find the way home—even across boundaries of time and history.

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression; STEM; Civic and Community Engagement)

IDEA #55. Read a book in translation from a language and/or culture that you know relatively little about. You could even try a graphic novel or a comic book.

A good many of the books that children in Western society enjoy these days started out in languages other than those that dominate, and in recent decades publishers seem to be falling all over one another presenting collections of folk tales for children from cultures around the world. This kind of introduction to multiculturalism may inspire a larger world-view, but it order to sustain that view it is necessary to continue to feed the mind with even more words and ideas whose place or origin is unfamiliar.

Fortunately publishers and librarians have seen the need, and so there is a broad choice of works in translation for readers of all ages. That said, two trends in contemporary book publishing may have at least in part the effect of negating their own multicultural benefits.

One is a focus on the “exotic” that can have the effect of representing unfamiliar cultures as so “other” or alien as to be unknowable—or worse, somehow less “sophisticated” or even capable. This can be downright dangerous, as it can support stereotypes that drive wedges between cultures (and present some as “less” than others) rather than underscoring the commonality of the human experience. The point of this exercise is to
underscore the richness in the varieties of ways that peoples have responded to the natural and political circumstances of their time and place. Translated and published properly, the literature of an unfamiliar culture can be illuminating in multiple ways. Done badly, the opposite is true: a poor version of *The Odyssey* can make even the ancient Greeks look silly.

A second trend is the focus on the lurid and the violent, particularly in some of the “graphic novels” from Japan that are increasingly prominent in American bookstores. These extended comic books, called *manga* in their more popular forms, can be playful, amusing, and even instructive (for one thing, many editions are direct translations, and the panels and pages read from right to left, a cross-cultural delight in itself). Some series, however, focus on conflict and antisocial behavior that may give the wrong impression of another culture to younger readers. As in all cases where a youngster is venturing into cultural unknowns, parental guidance would be in order here.

If, however, the reader is simply discovering the joys of literature in translation—many mystery series, for example, have come into English from other languages—let the enjoyment and the pleasurable immersion into other ways take their course.

(ALSO: *The Arts and Creative Expression; The World and Its Cultures*)

**IDEA #56. Explore a museum or cultural collection at a local college or university**

Your local college or university may in fact have the superb art gallery you have already explored, but perhaps it has other collections that are more esoteric or more modest. These collections may pique or inspire new interests, and a visit may hold many surprises.

The first order of business is to determine what is there. A search through the college department listings on line may turn up a “museum” or “collection” of whose existence you had been unaware, or perhaps the college library has information. It is possible that the facility you seek has limited hours or limited access; you may even have to throw yourself on the mercy of a librarian, curator, or docent for permission to view and explore.

In the aggregate, America’s university collections of cultural and natural objects dwarf those of the Smithsonian, and locally you may find yourself gazing at birds’ eggs from the Arctic or ethnographic relics from nineteenth-century journeys to the South Seas; maybe you’ll even find dinosaur skeletons. You may come across surprising and delightful troves of material from your
own community’s human or geological past, or the papers and possessions of a well-known graduate of the school. Perhaps there is an arboretum or a special garden or greenhouse.

The actual content and size of the collections do not matter in this activity. The object is to explore the ways in which other minds have worked to order knowledge and experience for the use and edification of others and to let oneself be captivated and inspired in the process.

(Also: The Arts and Creative Expression; STEM; The World and Its Cultures)

IDEA #57. Find a language-learning website or acquire (at a library, maybe, or a garage sale) a set of teaching CDs (or even cassette tapes) for a language you’d like to start learning—maybe the language of some of your ancestors, or just a language that has been of interest. Learn at least a little bit—even just enough to say “hello,” “my name is,” “please,” “thank you,” and count to five or 10.

There are few things more satisfying than having even a smidgen of another language under one’s belt, and school and public libraries are great places to look for computer- or audio-based language-learning programs. (Other great places to look for these are library sales, garage sales, and flea markets; it seems that a great many people in our world intend to master a new language or two, but few sustain that interest, and so there is a surplus of language-learning materials for sale, cheap.)

The goal here is not necessarily fluency, although that would be a worthy objective. Rather, the point is to explore the language and learn a bit about how languages are taught and learned and above all to enjoy the process. To have mastered a few conversational gambits (“Where is the pen of my aunt?” “Here is the pen of my aunt.”) or to know how to greet a person in another language is not only modestly empowering but just plain fun. To know how to count a bit is equally so.

Educational psychologists tell us that the younger a child begins to learn a new language, the more easily they will learn it, but in general the only way people of any age really master a language is by immersion. So in this case, since even the best systems fall well short of being truly immersive, the child should just delve deeply enough into the activity to keep having fun. A sustained interest may in time lead to interest in study abroad or in a domestic community of users of the language.
And there is no reason to limit this activity to a certain level of mastery of a single language. It is fun to imagine a child’s room with boxes of tapes for learning a number of languages littering the floor.

It’s also worth noting, strange as it seems, that several fictional languages—examples are Elvish, from J. R. R. Tolkien’s Hobbit and Ring novels, and Klingon, from the Star Trek television series—actually have well developed user communities that can be discovered online. Similarly, there are several “universal” languages—Esperanto and Interlingua are the best-known—that have significant user communities. All of these might lead the interested child a step further into the arcane world of “con-langers”: individuals who enjoy constructing their own languages, either based on existing language families or utterly new.

Elsewhere we take up another kind of language learning: computer programming, or coding.

(AlSO: The World and Its Cultures)

IDEA #58. Find your oldest living relative and ask them to tell you stories. Write them down in “nice” form and give copies to other family members.

It is hard to imagine a more pleasant or interesting pastime than this activity. All families have stories, short, long, funny, sad. Too often, these stories are only told as half-remembered anecdotes at wakes and funerals, when the actual participants and original tellers are no longer around to give them context, richness, detail, and meaning.

A number regional and national projects currently exist for the purpose of collecting family narratives, and some, like Storycorps, even go so far as to provide equipment so that the stories can become part of the rich fabric of American oral history. For families who can take part in such projects, the satisfaction of participation must be enormous, and their addition to the national treasury of memory rewarding in all respects.

But such work can begin on a much smaller, more personal scale. A child of almost any literate age can sit at the feet of a grandparent, aunt, or uncle and take down an anecdote or short reminiscence; computers and smartphones can also be used to record video or even just audio for later editing and transcription. Perhaps with the editorial guidance of an older hand, this narrative can be transcribed and improved into a final draft and then bound or even framed accordingly. (We would warrant that there would be some
The child who begins to focus on the nature of his or her family stories will, if nothing else, connect more deeply with those who tell them. In time, perhaps, the child will even take on the responsibility of family archivist or griot. One imagines that more than a few professional authors began in just this way, and the family reminiscence is a structure that has served many novelists well.

And think of the appreciation from other members of the family, including the teller.

(ALSO: The World and Its Cultures; Service and Helping Others)
Emergency Closing Day Thoughts for Educators—and Families

It was not an infrequent occurrence in our household. The phone would ring at 5ish in the morning, and one of us would probably keep right on sleeping. But sooner or later the other would answer and either listen or hand it to the sleeper so that they might receive the news that they could go back to sleep. School was closed. On a good day, there would be two calls. Otherwise, one of us would rise and grouse, quietly, at our unequal fates.

“School Closed” is getting to be a common scenario all over North America. Extreme cold, wind storms, fires, snow, ice—weather-related events have been closing a lot of schools. And everywhere educators are struggling with the obvious implication of all this, which is that students don’t learn much when they’re sleeping in or planted in front of glowing screens instead of being in school. What to do?

Some schools, presumably those with pretty well developed cultures and capacities in the areas of online and blended instruction, simply “flip” their programs and ask students to wire up for Google Hang-outs or Skype chats or asynchronous instruction. It’s like school, only at home. It’s a stop-gap, but it allows teaching and learning to go forward in ways that at least allow the schools not to feel remiss.

A friend’s children attend an independent school in Atlanta, where even they sometimes get to explore nature’s extremes in depth (although my Buffalo upbringing makes me secretly scoff at their idea of depth), and their school has a kind of sensible approach to the snow-day problem. Teachers post work assignments on line by the normal start of the school day, and kids check in a couple of times later on.

I was really excited to learn that on one snow day one of my friend’s children’s daily assignment was, “Build a snow fort, sit in it for a while, and write about the experience.” As it turned out there was not enough snow for forts, so my friend’s daughter built her fort out of blankets and bedroom furniture. I know you couldn’t do that in places with sub-Arctic wind-chills, but I just kind of loved this assignment: embrace the exciting thing that’s happening, experience it, make something, and then reflect on the experience—just what I think I’d have wanted my kids to be doing back when they were home for snow days. (One of ours learned to cross-country ski on a snow day; to date he has only ever skied on snow-covered streets and campus pathways as blizzards rage.)
There’s an analogy here to summer reading, I think. It’s all about time out of school, and learning. If you, Gentle Reader, happen to work in a school and were to send me a nickel for every minute you and your school have spent over the years discussing summer reading and the dreaded Accountability Question, I could comfortably retire. Snow days generate the same issue. I listened a while back to a radio interview with a school official somewhere who outlined his district’s great plans and snow-day assignments only to hear him mumble toward the end that the kids would actually have a few weeks to get the assignments done.

I offer up this idea to schools hung up on snow (or weather-related closing) days and the Accountability Question. Instead of focusing on barreling through The Curriculum, nature be damned, why not come up with a menu of developmentally appropriate general assignments that focus a bit of intellectual or creative exploration and some reflection? I’d even just go with one assignment per grade level; after all, the kids still have the discipline-specific homework they had for the snow day.

How about asking seventh graders to think and write about a hobby they wish they had time to take up, and why? What’s exciting about it? Or asking tenth graders to write a little op-ed on a current events issue, or something relating to healthy or safe living specific relating to teenagers? If your school is quick with technology, you could ask kids to tweet or blog their responses. Ask sixth-graders or seniors to write three haiku on their thoughts and feelings on the day. Make a piece of sculpture from things you find around the house—or a snow sculpture that you photograph. If you must have accountability and an audience, this is what advisors are made for—they don’t have to grade anything, just look, check off, and respond or give feedback if they wish.

(OK, I understand that this idea won’t serve if you’re in a school or district where state testing drives everything; every moment out of the classroom in some places, whether for hurricanes, blizzards, or recess, puts school and teacher performance—and even retention—at stake. Until more sensible minds are running the show, I get your need to keep hammering away at test prep. If your school lives and dies by AP scores, if you really believe it does, I guess you’re stuck, too. I would acknowledge, also, that many children do not live in connected households—and that power outages occur—and some children assume other home obligations on accidental “holidays;” schools can only expect what they can expect.)
Sometimes the doing of a thing is actually more important than receiving a grade, or even feedback, on it. Instead of turning the dining room table into a mini-classroom for the day (it’s already worn out from doing duty as such every evening), turn the house, the community, the world into a resource or a place of exploration; turn being snow-bound into an opportunity.

John Greenleaf Whittier made his long poem *Snow-bound* into an enduring work of art that is also perhaps an overly loquacious meditation on memory. Why not come up with a handful of weather-related closing “assignments” that give kids an opportunity to think about and perhaps even remember something as new and fresh as the white stuff falling from the sky? Or if what nature is bringing comes wrapped in terror, why not ask your school counselors or a friendly local therapist to help design assignments to help mitigate the fear through reflection or something else that might help unseat negative mindsets?
For many children it doesn’t take much to stir an interest in anything having to do with running around, and our society certainly has ways to reward those who become particularly adept at many kinds of sports.

But outdoor recreation and sports have a significant place in the history of American learning and American thought. Pioneers on land and sea were not only engaged in essential work but also in utilizing skills—hiking, hunting, sailing, canoeing, map and compass use—that we now associate with leisure activities. The rise of interest in team and individual sports as entertainment coincides with eras of settlement and the growth of working and middle classes with the time, inclination, and disposable income to enjoy rooting for a home team or playing a game of golf.

Sports and games involve the use of many cognitive skills, from the complex geometry of virtually all ball games to the quick thinking and decision-making required to set up an effective play. Listening and negotiation skills are the most important part of developing the rules and stipulations for even the most informal or spontaneous games. Team sports are based on communication, while success in individual sports stems at least in part from knowing one’s own strengths and capabilities. And the world of extreme sports (now a big business) grew out of curious and creative minds’ explorations of what simple machines and human ingenuity can do with the help of (or in opposition to) gravity and sometimes (to the outside observer, anyway) common sense.

Inasmuch as sports are important expressions of culture, the young person who chooses to explore the hinterlands of sport will also make interesting discoveries about the nature of the human experience. In the patterns of popularity of one sport or another may be found the faint traces of human history—cricket in the former British empire, for example—as well as unexpected evidence of socioeconomic differences.

In the woods and on the water the youngster will learn, along with self-reliance, about the interaction of man with nature as well as, perhaps, a bit more about nature itself. And in exploring all these areas they will enact old Roman dictum, *mens sana in corpore sano*—a sound mind in a healthy body—an ideal motto for a balanced life.

The suggestions in SPORTS, FITNESS, AND THE GREAT OUTDOORS run the gamut from action to appreciation, but the idea is to find fun and intellectual and spiritual stimulation in new places.
IDEA #59. Try a new sport in each of these areas: team, individual, land, water

Sports and games come in all sizes and degrees of complexity, from those requiring little more than a ball and some play space to those involving thousands of dollars’ worth of equipment. Whether the new activity is team handball or horseback riding, the point here is not only to acquire a few new skills but also to explore the breadth of this field of human endeavor.

Along the way, there are lessons to be learned—rules, procedures, stances, commands—that will inspire the thinking child to wonder at their origin as well as to find new areas in which these lessons can be applied. Until one tries archery, for example, one may never know which is one’s sighting eye, but that knowledge may also be useful in other arenas from painting to music. Handling a horse or a sailboat will make Westerns or sea stories all the more real, while the strategies of water polo may be of surprising utility in basketball (and vice versa). Tossing a javelin will involve any number of principles of physics and the mathematics of trajectories.

Any library will have reference material relating to sports and games, and it is likely that the youngster already has some ideas about things he or she would like to try. Finding ways to play a new team sport may be a bit more difficult, but perhaps a few friends could be enlisted to play a scaled-down version—think of the various ways in which baseball can become a two-person sport (Three Flies, Running Bases) and use the imagination.

Some sports or activities—especially those that might involve animals, the water, heights, projectiles, or vehicles—will need some thought given to matters of safety and even supervision. Enlisting an expert as mentor or coach would be a very good idea.

IDEA #60. Pick a minor league baseball team and follow its fortunes through the newspaper or on the internet

The Toledo Mud Hens might be an entertaining team to start with; they really are called that. You can also listen to streaming netcasts of the minor league games of many teams—check one out. And take this to the next level by learning to keep a baseball scorecard as you listen.

There is perhaps no activity in the American experience of sport more quintessential than following a baseball team. Baseball was the first team sport to be associated with a particular locale, and our home teams continue in some ways to define us—just ask anyone from Boston.
Before there was television, before the major leagues expanded coast to coast, and before the idea of large and small markets developed, Americans were passionate followers of minor league baseball. The minor leagues still thrive, in their way, in many cases showcased by new or refurbished “jewel box” stadiums and their games enhanced by inter-inning shows and promotion nights.

Even if the youngster lives in a major market city or cares nothing at all for baseball, immersing themself in the world of a minor league team can be an unrivaled experience in classic Americana. A look through the sports pages or an internet search will disclose the standings of teams in all kinds of leagues at many levels—single-A and triple-A being the most common—and provide a wealth of small town and small city teams from which to choose one to be followed.

Even the most minor of leagues and teams have websites, and so during the summer season it is an easy matter to follow the fortunes of almost any team. Moreover, local radio stations may carry at least the team’s home games (and stream these over the station’s website), or there may be a live-text play-by-play broadcast over the internet. (Baseball via radio or text feed, incidentally, recapitulates the fan experience of the Thirties and Forties, the Golden Age when no other sport so captured the American imagination—even though most fans had to depend on radio or newspapers for updates.)

Learning to keep a baseball scorebook is a subtle and complex art requiring attentiveness, knowledge of a number of complicated concepts, and a keen desire to recreate human experience in numbers, letters, and symbols. A knowledgeable fan looking at a thorough scorebook can practically visualize an entire game.

**IDEA #61. Acquire a good-quality compass and learn the basics of navigation**

Acquire a good-quality compass designed to be used in navigation and learn the basics of navigation using the compass and a map; there are online resources as well excellent books available in libraries to teach these skills.

Some outdoor enthusiasts will tell you that map-and-compass land navigation has gone the way of the dodo in the age of GPS, but when the batteries run out, or when the satellites are down (as they were for a period after 9/11/2001) it takes a magnetic compass and a good map to tell you where you are.
The location of north has been part of the human knowledge base for millennia, but understanding the magnetic compass gave medieval Europeans the ability to navigate precisely. Greater sophistication in compass design (and an awareness that magnetic north is not always true north) has made possible not only voyages of discovery but also more mundane activities such as land surveying.

Learning even the most rudimentary skills involving a compass—following a set course, for example—involves logical and mathematical thinking as well as sustained attention; lots of instructional resources can be found on the internet. Land navigation using a compass and a map is even more complex, involving visualization of landform and structure as well as an understanding of angles. Even a short journey accomplished by this method can bring a considerable feeling of accomplishment, and it is not then difficult to imagine how it might even be possible to cross a mountain range or a desert using just simple instruments.

A serviceable compass need not be expensive—adequate models can be had for under fifteen dollars—but it may be possible to find a local hiking or orienteering (a sport involving running as well as compass navigation) group willing to provide both instruction and equipment to an interested novice. Maps suitable for serious navigation can be located through the government—U. S. Geodetic Service topographical maps for land use and NOAA charts for marine use—or though stores specializing in maps or outdoor recreation; marinas and boatyards carry nautical charts.

(ALSO: STEM; Language, Literature, and History)

IDEA #62. Read from cover to cover a magazine about a sport you don’t know anything about
Magazines about specific sports abound, and the chances of finding one in a library—or at a bookstore—are great; consider just the number of magazines devoted to sailing, or automobile racing, or mountain biking, or surfing.

Like any publication about whose subject one knows little, sporting magazines at first seem to be written in some alien language. The visual images may be accessible, but the nouns and verbs refer to unknown activities and obscure performers. It is often the advertisements that provide the first keys to understanding, a reference here illuminating the gist of an article there. In time one begins to understand some of the key values of the sport as well as some of the issues of the moment, and a careful reading can be enough to make even a complete novice feel at least a bit like a real fan, although a few sports—like
cricket—are so esoteric in their nomenclature and terminology that they defy easy comprehension just from reading.

It should be noted that some cable television plans include access to channels devoted to rarefied or uniquely cultural sports; an afternoon watching (for example) rugby, windsurfing, or some form of equestrian sport can be pretty engaging, as well.

Perhaps the magazine will inspire further investigation, even a trip to an event (see IDEA #16). No doubt there are surfers from Iowa who first learned about the sport from a magazine, and their example should not be taken lightly.

**IDEA #63. If there’s a sport you enjoy, consider going to a sports camp to fine-tune skills and make new friends**  
(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)

Vacation sports camps come in all sizes and in all degrees of seriousness, from a couple of hours a day for beginners to invitational residential camps at which college coaches scout scholarship prospects. Some are camps with varied programs built around a particular sport, while some are essentially pre-season training experiences for committed varsity-level athletes. Some are inexpensive, even free, while others cost hundreds of dollars a week.

If a child is really interested in a particular sport and enjoys both the play and the camaraderie, a sports camp can be a way to support the interest while providing a positive personal experience. It’s important to be realistic when selecting a sports camp, however. Is the camp only for the super-talented, or is it intended for athletes of all levels? How committed is the child to the sport? Do you want your child to be pushed by drill-sergeant-like coaches for five days, or do you want the child to build on fundamental skills in order to take more satisfaction from recreational participation? Do you really believe that your child is a scholarship prospect, or would everyone be happier at some place a little less intense? How much is the child’s camp experience about fun and friend-making, and how much is it about developing killer moves in the sport? And then, of course, there’s the financial factor: Is the whole experience going to be worth the cost in dollars and time, including travel?

If the parents’ and child’s goals and assessment of needs and talent agree, then the choice of a camp should be relatively easy. Speak to the director to find out how serious the training regime might be. If you can contact other parents or guardians, get a sense of what the camp culture and atmosphere are like. Also
check on health and safety: is there a trainer or a nurse on staff? What is the food like? Is there water always available for the campers?

The best part of a good sports camp is that the staff is able to break skills down so that young athletes actually understand what they are doing and how certain tactics and strategies work. Good athletes, after all, are able to envision and think about a game even as they play it, their mastery of basic skills so complete that their conscious minds are free to create new plays. Any experience that helps the truly interested young athlete approach this level of understanding might be well worth the time and effort.

When summer approaches, it’s probably a good time to start exploring camp options—locations, day-only or residential, overall programs, prices. It’s also good to have a couple of months’ lead time for the child to look for ways—babysitting, odd jobs—to help defray the cost, thus raising their commitment level as a stakeholder in their own experience.

IDEA #64. Practice an amazing (but safe) feat of balance, like standing on one foot for a long time or carrying something on your head. Perhaps start by practicing keeping a yardstick balanced on your finger, or your chin, or on top of your foot.
There are no easy ways to do this, and the practitioner probably learns more about patience than about balance. The art of balancing requires a Zen-like ability to place yourself, and your body in particular, deep in the moment and shutting off much of the conscious mind. This is indeed a subtle art.

So how does turning off the conscious mind help turn someone into a thinker? From earliest times wisdom has been seen as something arising from a level of consciousness that many people are unable to access easily. In this place of deep concentration and of deep insight there exist possibilities of thought that the normal preoccupations of even the child or adolescent mind tend to obscure. The kind of deep “unconscious” concentration required to balance an object, or to properly aim an arrow or throw a strike for that matter, can be a place of power for the young person. Learning to access this place—athletes who can do this easily call it “The Zone”—and the clear channels of thought within it can be a useful skill in many areas, from taking standardized tests to completing tasks requiring great concentration and patience to performing other physical acts; it is even the place from which artists and poets often draw inspiration and vision.
Balancing a yardstick on a big toe for 30 seconds may not turn a young person into Picasso or William Tell, but it will help them explore an important realm of consciousness while having fun—perhaps even amazing others—at the same time. And better yet, balancing wizardry can be performed based on senses other than sight.

**IDEA #65. Learn to identify at least three different kinds of animal tracks**

While animal tracking is no longer a vocational necessity in most parts, learning to observe the passage of other creatures through our world is an exercise in looking closely and analytically at our environment. The tracks in this activity do not necessarily have to be of wild creatures; learning to differentiate one family pet from another would also fit the suggestion.

Animal track guides can be found in most reference books, even including some dictionaries, and local environmental organizations or hunting clubs may have specific guides to animals found in your region. In much of the wintry Northern Hemisphere, snowy yards and fields become a great places to find well-articulated and easily identifiable animal tracks. If the child who finds this activity engaging should have occasion to travel, it might even be worth trying to locate tracking guides for the destination.

Identifying a track is one thing, but actually following an animal’s trail is another. If there is a teacher or acquaintance skilled in this art, then perhaps they could be enlisted as a mentor. Otherwise, the aspiring Davey Crockett can start by trying to identify all the tracks in a certain small area, perhaps, and then expanding the territory. Over time patterns may emerge, and the youngster can learn to see not just tracks but animal movement. Other clues that can be learned include animal scat (droppings), which differ significantly from one species to another.

As always, if the youngster’s tracking takes them into an area with natural hazards, some safety guidelines should be put in place through rules and instruction. If there is serious danger—poisonous snakes, for example—it would be better if the child tracked with a friend, and possibly an adult friend at that.

*(ALSO: STEM)*
IDEA #66. Find a big local or regional citizen or amateur sporting event you can participate in: a running race, state or local “games,” a tournament in your community. If you don’t want to participate as an athlete, go (take some friends!) and volunteer, or just cheer for the participants—they’d love to have you!

Around the world more and more “citizen” sporting events pop up every year. Runs long and short, indoor and outdoor, bike races, triathlons, canoeing races, and tournaments in sports of all kinds are everywhere; even some of the larger charity “walks” and fundraising bike-athons are as much about sport and exercise as they are about their worthy cause.

Many events emphatically welcome beginners or others who want to develop some skill and confidence in competing (and many events also have adaptive divisions, so that a physical or mental disability need not prevent someone from participating.) It is important that any prospective athlete in one of these events have trained in preparation, and any sort of training should never be undertaken unless a doctor has certified the athlete’s general health.

Timed events involving movement—running, bicycling, swimming, boating—may intimidate the novice athlete, but the key idea here is “personal best”—to do as well as the individual can possibly do, perhaps setting a personal mark that may be bettered the next time out. Other events, in team sports, should be entered into with the idea that the fun is in the participation, not just winning. The athletes will soon have an idea of how competitive they are in the field and what they might need to do to improve their performance, and debriefing on performance is an key piece of the thinking athlete’s preparation.

If the whole idea of competing does not appeal, it’s a safe bet that any such event will make use of as much volunteer time and talent as they can recruit. Courses need to be set and monitored, registration and refreshment tables need to be manned, times and scores need to be kept, and hundreds of other chores need to be done. Volunteers who are alert and above all responsible make these events possible, and the young volunteer who takes on a role in one of these events will gain skill, confidence, and respect, even if there is no trophy or ribbon at the end.

But perhaps issues of age or other factors will limit the child’s interest to spectating. That’s just fine, as the athletes will appreciate another cheering, supporting voice. And watching might spark some subsequent interest in playing or doing.

(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement; Service and Helping Others)
IDEA #67. Go on a whale watch, visit a nature center, or take a hike to observe nature
(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)
Like looking at the Moon or a planet through a telescope, seeing a particular creature or even an unusual plant in its native habitat can be awe inspiring. Whether the youngster has the good fortune to see a right whale spouting right beside a whale watch vessel or just sights a carnivorous plant in a marsh, the notion that such things do exist outside of the pages of books—and often surprisingly close to our homes—is a reminder that the natural world, for which humans are obligated to care lest we lose it altogether, is real.

Almost every organization with a focus on nature offers some kinds of viewing experiences. A local science or nature center may sponsor regular events, and branches of the Audubon Society, especially, make a point of making field trips to natural destinations available to youngsters. A whale watch might be far off a family’s beat and budget, but other opportunities will exist in the community. And even if no organization seems to offer what is needed, perhaps a local teacher or scientist could lead a private tour for an interested young person.

It is unfortunate that we must include here a small caveat: There are some unscrupulous operators of nature tours whose practices are scientifically and ethically unsound. They may enter animal habitats in unsuitable vehicles or vessels, or they may go so close to the animals as to disturb their patterns of existence; some even lure animals to be seen using methods that are directly harmful. Any “nature tour” being contemplated should be checked through a local museum or environmental organization.

(ALSO: STEM)

IDEA #68. Find a sports league for younger children in your community and offer to help officiate or coach
If a child has any interest in sports or athletics, one way of “giving back” to a community is through participation in youth sport programs—not as an athlete but as an official or coach. Little League baseball and town soccer in many places could scarcely exist but for the participation of teenage umpires and referees, and the experience of applying rules and making those difficult judgment calls can help prepare the young official for more difficult challenges in other fields.

Officiating presupposes a solid knowledge of both the sport and its rules, and moreover most programs that use non-adult officials offer some form of
training; this no doubt includes advice on how to handle the occasional obstreperous player or parent. Even so, these young officials are usually dealt with quite decently by players and onlookers, as after all their presence makes play possible. Well-run leagues will continue to provide guidance for their younger officials throughout the season.

While adult coaching is the norm in most youth sport programs, a younger and skilled “assistant coach” can be a valuable asset to a team’s training regime, running drills or working one-on-one with players on particular skills. While the student-coach does not have to be a nonpareil athlete in the sport, a good skill base and, most importantly, an understanding of how skills can be broken down for teaching are essential.

The young official or coach gains unparalleled experience in exercising judgment and leadership; the fourteen-year-old who can manage a field full of scrumming eight-year-old soccer players is probably ready for most anything. And if that fourteen-year-old can confidently call balls, strikes, and outs, they may be set to take on the world.

(ALSO: Service and Helping Others; Civic and Community Engagement)

IDEA #69. Learn to juggle. You’ve always wanted to, anyhow; now’s the time. Practice until you are good enough to juggle in a public place.

Like the balancing activity suggested in #63, learning to juggle—an art that is just plain fun to watch as well as fun to perform—is another way into a whole host of parts of the brain: juggling requires close observation, timing, balance, and spatial perception, all at once. Even those with limited dexterity can master basic juggling moves, and there are even juggling kits with instructions intended for “klutzes.”

Getting the skills of juggling down requires practice, practice, practice, and along the way the learner must control impatience or a tendency to give up. The motivation must come from within, and perhaps the learner may find that his or her desire to learn is not commensurate with the time and effort required to succeed; a person cannot be forced to learn to juggle (or to do much else).

But the persistent student will suddenly begin to make two-object and then three-object sequences, and then all the hard work and frustration will pay off. An act that at first requires immense concentration will become almost
automatic, with the juggler able to “switch on” the juggling brain more or less at will.

While juggling may please the juggler, they will soon learn that the sight of cascading balls or other objects is enormously entertaining to others. If the impetus is there, there are infinite ways in which the art of juggling can be expressed, in the number of objects in the air, say, or the kinds of objects. Street jugglers usually have a patter that they can perform while juggling, even interacting with members of the audience, and then there are always the high-risk juggling objects—knives and torches—that always seem to thrill watchers. *(We emphatically do NOT recommend the juggling of dangerous or fragile objects; we are just making an observation on one aspect of the art.)* If your municipality allows it, the ambitious young juggler can even try at street performing, under supervision of course. What better way to develop some “street smarts”?

**IDEA #70. If you are physical able, climb a mountain (or a hill) or hike a trail.** You may be able to find a nearby trail by consulting a local hiking or mountain club. If you can get to the Rockies, or the Alps, so much the better. Whenever you’re hiking, be sure to take a map and whatever else you need to stay safe and on-track—and don’t go hiking alone! *(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)*

Hiking is not everyone’s cup of tea, but the experience of completing a trail or summiting a significant peak—significance being relative; for beginners even a good-sized hill is a notable accomplishment—is hard to beat. Along with the physical elements of the hike, there is also the matter of navigation that may require good observation skills and perhaps some map-reading. In addition, there are things to see: plants, landscape, rocks, or even elements of the built (man-made) environment if the trail is in a developed area.

Hiking trails are everywhere, and if you haven’t been aware of those in your general area, a few inquiries should bring you to a trailhead. Local jurisdictions, local hiking clubs, and even the federal government maintain tens of thousands of miles of trails, including the Appalachian Trail that extends from North Carolina to Maine and the Pacific Crest Trail that covers the length of California, Oregon, and Washington State; there is even a coast-to-coast trail being developed.
Trail safety is sometimes more than common sense. Many hiking clubs or outdoor-gear retailers have tips on their websites regarding basic equipment (maps, good shoes, a light, water bottle, a first-aid kit) for hiking.

The hiking experience can be enriched in any number of ways. Go with friends, for one, and take along a good (and current) trail guide; the best of these not only explain routes but also remark on notable natural and historical sights to be seen along the way. A field guide to plants, trees, or birds can be useful, as can a pair of binoculars or a lightweight telescope. The literature of the outdoor life is extensive, with almost anything by Henry David Thoreau being good trail reading; Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* may be the classic hiking novel for high school-age readers, familiar to anyone with a commitment to mountain climbing in particular.

Ever since European literati and painters began poking around in the wilderness for fun in the nineteenth century, hiking has been something of an intellectual endeavor. Whether the trail is in the Alps or an urban industrial corridor, the act and the reflection will provide plenty of food for thought.

In case the youngster or a member of the hiking party has limited mobility, there are an increasing number of adaptive trails in various parts of the country that accommodate hikers in wheelchairs or who have severe sensory impairments.

(ALSO: *The World and Its Cultures*)

**IDEA #71. Find a bird guide and start trying to identify the birds you commonly see and hear.** Your local Audubon Society can help you develop your skills, and they probably sponsor organized bird-watching events at which you can learn from serious birders. Start your own life list.

No creatures so lend themselves to observation as birds, and the extraordinary profusion of species and the relative ease with which a serious birdwatcher can pile up a long list of species sighted has made birdwatching one of the world’s most popular hobbies. Committed watchers travel the world, often undergoing considerable hardship and vast expense, to build up their life lists, logs of all the types of birds they have ever seen.

Even better, birds are also audible, and many birders are as eager to hear and recognize new species as they are to see them. This auditory birdwatching adds another level of challenge to the activity as a whole.
Field guides to birds of various regions are readily available in print and online; any library should have several from which to choose. Increasingly, publishers are producing guides that use photographs instead of the old, and often lovely, paintings and drawings. There are also audio guides to bird calls, although these may be a bit harder to find.

A sharp-eyed young person armed with a good guide can easily spot several dozen species in most locales over the course of a season, and if there are migratory flyways nearby this number can increase dramatically. Add some binoculars to the watcher’s toolkit and the number will grow even more. As fall turns to winter in the northern hemisphere many bird species are migrating, but the thinner foliage can make those who linger more easily visible.

If the youngster is truly bitten by the birdwatching bug, the next step is to find a local birding group—perhaps through a local Audubon Society chapter—and go out with experienced members. Many birding groups conduct periodic counts of species and individual birds in their area, and participating in one of these events can be exciting and profitable in terms of additions to the list.

Some birders specialize, and so the young watcher may want to work mainly on shorebirds, ducks, birds of prey, owls, or the many species of sparrows. But specialist or not, the youngster who has become adept at sighting birds and looking closely enough to differentiate among similar species will have gained important observing and analytical skills.

(ALSO: STEM; The World and Its Cultures)

IDEA #72. Look for patterns in nature—start by learning about Fibonacci numbers and then hunting for them, both in nature and in man-made situations. What is the most surprising place you find a Fibonacci series?

There are innumerable patterns in nature, but few are quite so common or so startling as Fibonacci numbers. Leonardo Fibonacci, a 13th-century Italian mathematician, noted the property of a series of numbers 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13 ..., where the next number in the series is the sum of the two numbers preceding it.

Interesting to a mathematician, perhaps, but astounding when one notes the many ways in which nature enacts Fibonacci’s series. The number of seeds on a pine cone, the proportions of a chambered nautilus shell, the number of petals on a flower—all express the regular pattern of a Fibonacci series.
And while these number sequences are common, there are other patterns to be observed in nature—the number of leaves on a stem, the pattern of leaf alternation that separates False Solomon Seal (a shrub) from the real thing, the structure of insects, the times when certain birds sing, the relationship between the temperature of the water in a lake and the direction of the wind. The more closely one observes the natural world, the more the young scientist discovers order and symmetry and balance. The Fibonacci series is just one amazing example.

If the young observer is inclined to keep a journal of his or her “discoveries,” any science or mathematics teacher would be more than pleased to see and discuss the results.

(ALSO: STEM)

IDEA #73. Get some friends or relatives together and camp out for a night—or more. Make sure you get permission and observe good camping practice—leave no trace!

(COULD BE a Big Idea Requiring Planning and Serious Resources)

Camping out is about as fun as an activity can be, but successful overnights in the out-of-doors are the result of some careful thought and planning. Much of this planning has to do with the campers’ understanding of their own capacities as well as practical knowledge.

The first order of business in planning a camp-out is to determine who the participants will be. Good campers are old enough to be independent of the need for comforting adults or frequent trips to the bathroom; fear of the dark is also something of a limiting factor, although sometimes an overnight in a tent with trusted friends or family members can be enough to help dispel this phobia.

Destination and equipment are equally important, as the object is to minimize the risk of having inclement weather or other environmental factors intrude on the participants’ good time. Perhaps a back yard or some public space very close to home seems like a good place to begin (and of course, make sure that anywhere you plan to camp allows such activity). Unless there is absolutely no risk of rain or animal visitation, some kind of tent is required, but this need not be an expensive model from an outdoor-equipment store—hundreds of thousands of pioneers and soldiers have made it through the night under the equivalent of a blanket or tarpaulin tented over a rope strung between two trees or other objects, with the corners somehow fastened down. Sleeping bags or blanket rolls (made by pinning a blanket together into an envelope) keep
out the chill. Some sort of small flashlight—to be used for serious business only!—completes the absolute basics.

Of course, if the hike is to distant place, there will also be the need for food and other necessities, including perhaps even recommended tools for dealing with human waste. Camping equipment and camping regulations can be quite elaborate in many locations, and prospective campers who are combining their overnight or nights with some hiking on trails or on public land should check with local authorities before setting out. In some parts of the country there are very strong prohibitions on camping or very serious regulations to be followed.

The need for camping safety cannot be overstated. Camping seems to involve knives and fire more than other activities, and the young camper needs to be instructed in proper use of sharp tools and in the basics of campfire safety. On the whole, fire management and cooking are best done under the supervision of someone wise in the ways of Smokey the Bear and of the specific equipment being used, and local regulations must be strictly observed not only to protect the participants but to protect the environment. A campfire, incidentally, can never be put out thoroughly enough.

Perhaps the most important goal of the thinking child’s camp out is to begin to instill a sense of environmental stewardship into the young camper. For many decades the Leave No Trace movement among outdoorspersons has emphasized the idea that a good camper literally leaves behind no evidence of his or her having been present in an environment. Whether the site of the camp out is a family backyard or a designated campsite in a national park, when the group leaves in the morning there should be no sign at all that they have been there.

(ALSO: STEM; Service and Helping Others; The World and Its Cultures)

**IDEA #74. Learn how to read a weather forecast and a weather map.** Become familiar with the words, the concepts, the symbols, and the numerical information that appear on a comprehensive weather map, weather site, or weather forecast page. The weather probably matters more to young people more than they realize. And never before has information on the weather been so readily available to the average person—on television and radio weather forecasts (and you haven’t heard a serious forecast if you haven’t heard Vermont Public Radio’s “Eye on the Sky” broadcasts, rich in detail and available on line, in newspapers, and above all on a variety of public and commercial internet
weather sites like AccuWeather, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Weather Underground.

Winter brings snow, sleet, and other phenomena, and summer can be a time of extreme weather events like heat waves and hurricanes. The young person who can become an adept consumer of weather-related information and who understands the significance of terms like high and low pressure, fronts, dew points, degree-days, and precipitation will be equipped, perhaps, to help friends and relations make plans and avoid or take advantage of meteorological phenomena. Simply the ability to read local radar maps can be a useful skill in predicting where and when “scattered showers” may fall, and the information often expressed as probabilities—“a 20% chance of rain tonight”—can also help the young weather maven understand more about the probability and statistics as well as to read different kinds of graphs and charts. There are also specialized forecast formats for aviators, mariners, and forest rangers—even major league sports teams have their own private forecasts made.

Global climate change is making more and more weather oddities into common experiences, and so the chances are good that we will all become more adept at parsing news on weather and its trends as our local environments become more and more subject to the forces that have been set in motion and that will require us to adapt our behaviors and our expectations to new conditions. If indeed “everybody talks about the weather,” those who make sense when doing so will be increasingly worth listening to. (ALSO: STEM)
Talking About Social Justice with Kids

Readers may or not take an active interest in issues of social justice, which tend to reside (as I confess that I do) on the progressive end of the political spectrum. But it would be hard for anyone in the parenting or educational business to miss the tsunami of responses to events like the Ferguson, Missouri, shooting by police of Michael Brown in 2014 or the shootings at Sandy Hook, Connecticut, or Parkland, Florida.

Shootings like that in Ferguson and so many since, often followed by subsequent community protests and counter-protests, have highlighted any number of issues, from the nature of policing to the extent to which racism is bred in the bone of American society. For high-minded rationalists, the civil unrest is a symptom of something complex and nuanced, and for those who lead from the heart in response to the death of young, unarmed African American men, such events are indicative of a deep and festering wound in the soul of American society.

If you’re reading this you care about kids. You are likely a parent or a guardian or an educator. You watch kids every day, and you are probably keenly aware that human history does not tell a very happy tale about the way in which children have been treated—the Holocaust, for starters, and stories of the Native American genocide in North America feature some truly horrific acts. But the world seems to have gone even crazier in the past couple of years, and terrible situations too often grab the headlines and hold them.

For the parents and teachers of interested children, these situations seems to require some kind of response; children who pay attention to current events will have questions from which it is hard to turn away. This matter has very much been on the minds of educators, who have tried hard—ourselves among them—to consider the most honest and direct ways of responding to these questions while balancing a teacher’s responsibility to promote thoughtful inquiry against the equally compelling civic obligation to call out injustice and advocate for justice.

To this end—and I know that some of our readers here are in the home-school world and may not be attuned to discourse in the traditional school community—we would like to call attention here to a resource for talking to and teaching kids of various ages, developmental stages, and perspectives about such events.
If you are familiar with Twitter you probably know and understand the “hashtag” concept: that certain topics can be tracked or searched for by hashtag, which is simply a topic name, compressed to a single character string, preceded by the pound sign (#). Thus, anyone with a Twitter account can search or follow the tag (for example) #RedSoxNation (caps optional) to keep tabs on what Boston Red Sox fans are thinking about. Trending events, whether in the news, sports, or entertainment areas, quickly generate their own hashtags.

In 2014 educators, eager to gather resources or teaching about “Ferguson,” created the hashtag #FergusonSyllabus as an identifier for ideas, materials, readings, and approaches to bringing Ferguson-related issues and events into their classrooms.

Since that time the use of Twitter has expanded, for better or worse, but “current events” with a strong social justice component have generated dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of similar hashtags, and searching and following these have become important to classroom educators who wish to amass resources for teaching about these issues. For those home-schooling their children, such strategies are equally valuable.

We generally try keep politics at arm’s length in this volume, but the fact is that events like Ferguson have struck a chord in educational circles that seems to require a response, and so we offer the this approach as one way for those who are raising or who work with interested children to explore the many serious questions that shocking events in the world so regularly raise for so many of us.
CIVIC AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

No responsibility sits more firmly on the shoulders of any citizen than the obligation to be an active member of civil society. From the smallest functions of local government to the most profoundly significant questions of national policy, it behooves all people to engage positively and productively with the society in which they live. The rewards of civic engagement are many and palpable, and active citizens and community members gain a sense that their voices and values matter; as stakeholders in society, we should all understand at first hand the value of protecting and expanding that stake for the benefit of all.

The suggestions for CIVIC AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT are aimed at helping the young citizen find those areas in which their own interest can be converted into satisfying activism and advocacy. Along the way, they may have a chance to define and articulate certain social and political values that may serve them in good stead and carry them forward toward a life of principle and purpose. While not all are suitable for every age group, most can be adapted to fit the inclinations of anyone with a serious interest in making a difference in their community.

IDEA #75. Get a volunteer gig working for a town or city agency or a political or community action organization

Many community organizations and not a few local and state governments have volunteer programs aimed at high-school-age citizens and focused on using the energy and enthusiasm of students to build community support around specific issues or programs. Many communities also have various sorts of “youth advisory boards” or the like that provide a thoughtful voice in policy making on behalf of citizens too young to vote.

The first step here would be to contact your local government. If there is an executive officer—a mayor, a governor, a county administrator—that office may be the best source of information on opportunities for young citizens to become involved. Work your way through the system until you find the program you seek.

Outside of government in many communities and locales there are politically active organizations focused on a single issue or set of issues. Such organizations can be identified by tracking the names of bodies to which speakers at local hearings belong or simply by attending carefully to the news
or searching the internet. Some such groups are faith-based and might be found by inquiring through church, temple, or mosque groups or, again, by watching the news.

One never knows whether one’s volunteer time will be spent stuffing envelopes, making coffee, or sitting in on important policy discussions—only experience can tell which kinds of activities are going to hold real interest or seem “worth the time.” Even a young volunteer should not be afraid to offer to do more or to remind supervisors that they may have more expertise (if they really do, in fact) than may be apparent. The point of engaging in civic volunteership is to be able to have an influence—even the tiniest—on community matters that do indeed matter. On the other hand, envelopes need stuffing and tired activists need their caffeine, and so the young volunteer should also recognize that the least glamorous parts of service are sometimes also among the most necessary and most valuable in the long run.

(ALSO: Service and Helping Others)

IDEA #76. Write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine—even your school newspaper—on an issue you care about. Pat yourself on the back if your letter is published.

Newspapers and many magazines came into being as organs of opinion as much as information; many newspapers actually consider their opinion-editorial (known as “op-ed”) pages to be their centerpieces. Along with the work contributed by their own staffs and whichever columnists they choose to publish, most happily publish numbers of “letters to the editor” in each issue.

The key here is to find an article that interests that child and about which they have an opinion—preferably a strong opinion based on real understanding of and engagement with the topic or issue. Help the child develop this opinion by asking questions, suggesting alternative perspectives, and looking for the strongest and most persuasive arguments and evidence to support it. Then it’s time to sit down and write the letter, which can be submitted by email or even old-fashioned snail mail.

The letter to the editor is a small art form in itself. Brevity and clarity matter greatly, and most newspapers print a disclaimer that letters chosen for publication may be edited for these qualities. But along with being intelligible and pithy, the letter must also make super-clear its relationship to some specific matter on which the publication has published either news or commentary. In other words, the letter must be about something that has already come up, and the letter to the editor is thus written to comment on or
express agreement or disagreement with something the newspaper or magazine has already published or at least about an issue that has appeared in its pages.

The letter to the editor should begin with a specific reference to the publication’s content related to the issue, and the letter should then immediately make clear the writer’s point of view relative to the publication’s; it is acceptable, we should point out, to agree as well as to disagree. In a second paragraph the writer should specify with evidence just why they hold a specific opinion or why they recommend a specific course of action. If the opinion or recommendation agrees with the publication’s position, it would be best if the writer were to bring forward some novel reason—otherwise, why should the newspaper be much interested?

A final, short paragraph should recapitulate the writer’s main point and sign off, followed by a signature over a legible printed name, an address, and a contact telephone number or e-mail address.

Many newspapers and magazines will contact the writer of a letter that they select for publication, but there is a good chance that, once sent, the writer will hear nothing at all. Most publications receive far more letters than they could possibly publish, and so there is a selective and competitive aspect to the writing of a letter to the editor that must be acknowledged.

If the writer chooses to write to the editor of a school publication, the same suggestions hold as to format and content, and the chances become significantly greater that a letter may be published.

A note on format: Letters to the editor, even if transmitted via e-mail, should follow proper business letter style with regard to punctuation, salutation, closing, and overall structure. Since writing a business letter is something of a lost art, the young writer might be guided to examples from a parent or guardian’s correspondence or to “textbook” examples that can be found in student writing handbooks or library or online reference books.

(ALSO: Language, Literature, and History; Service and Helping Others)

IDEA #77. Write a letter to a public official suggesting a solution to a problem you see in your community, state, or country. Make sure that your letter is detailed and persuasive and that the official you are writing to actually has some authority in the
matter you are writing about. Pat yourself on the back if you receive an answer; give yourself a reward if your answer is not a form letter; persuade someone to take you to dinner if your letter actually makes a difference.

Like the letter to the editor, the letter to a public official is a fundamental building block of a democratic society; the letter is even part of that “right to petition” that is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution. Even in an age when politicians tend to look to polls and to visits from lobbyists for guidance on important issue, letters from constituents still receive a surprising amount of attention at all levels of government.

A letter to a public official should, like an editorial letter, be clear in intent and as concise as possible. It should also, of course, express a point of view or make clear a course of action that is being recommended. If possible, it would also be a nice touch to make some specific reference to the official’s position or track record on the general issue.

Before writing a letter the youngster should give some thought to and possibly do some research on the matter of a proper recipient. If the matter is local, who are the local or regional officials who deal with the particular issue? If the matter is statewide, should the letter be to the executive branch—the governor and or someone in a particular department—or to a member of the legislative branch? On a national level the question is the same. Along the way, the letter-writer will learn a good deal about the three branches of government as well as about the structure of state and local administrative systems—levels of government that are often unknown territory for students.

An opening paragraph might introduce the writer vis-à-vis the official (constituent, neighbor, interested observer) and then make clear how and why the issue under discussion is important in the writer’s life.

Body paragraphs, which could number one or more, ought to set forth the writer’s recommendations with as much supporting detail as possible. In the latter sections and appeal to the official’s self-interest is permissible (“I’m sure that with 28% of voters in this district being retired, many people would find the policy helpful”), as is any kind of distinctly personal touch might underscore the writer’s point (“Since my sister uses a wheelchair, accessibility in all of our playgrounds is very important to me”).

A closing paragraph should thank the official for his or her attention to the matter and perhaps include an offer to meet face-to-face with the official to discuss the matter. As with the letter to the editor, proper business-letter form
is very important here, although it would not be necessary to type or word-process.

Many officials with large constituencies and large offices—the President, many senators and governors—will have form letter answers—some, it must be acknowledged, maddeningly bland and noncommittal—that are sent almost automatically to letter writers; the same holds true for many members of the United States House of Representatives. Well-crafted, provocative letters to officials at any level can, however, elicit thoughtful, personal responses, and, on rare occasions, a letter-writer can be rewarded by action—even the very thing the writer has recommended.

But any answer is at least an answer, and the young writer will grasp the idea that the government does actually listen to the people, even when it does not always act in swift accordance with each individual’s wish.

*(ALSO: Service and Helping Others; Language, Literature, and History)*

**IDEA #78. Attend a meeting of a village, town, or city government or committee. They’re free and open, and they happen all the time (check village, town, or city websites or call offices for schedules). Then find an adult with whom to discuss the experience.*

Whatever one’s local government might be, a surprising amount of its activity takes place before the public eye. Although most citizens attend local hearings or committee meetings only when they involve some aspect of their own lives, for public officials such events are part and parcel of the way that decisions are made in the public interest. Open Meeting laws require that public agencies at all levels make their decisions where citizens can observe—and sometimes comment upon or even participate in—the process of government.

Municipal websites or local newspapers are often good sources of information on meeting dates, times, and agenda, but a call to the town office could also supply this information. In some communities there is a public bulletin board in the town hall or even the public library listing all meetings and even the members of the various committees, commissions, and boards that keep the municipality functioning. If the student is fortunate enough to live in a community governed by a town meeting structure—these are still very much a part of life in small-town New England and in a few other places—they can witness democracy in one of its purest forms during “meeting season,” often late winter.
There is much to see at such events. Seemingly innocuous proposals to build this, repair that, or make a particular purchase can reveal deep rifts in the way the community thinks about particular issues or show who has power in the community and who does not. Such meetings are also wonderful opportunities to develop an understanding of the often complex and seemingly circuitous ways in which adults make major decisions as well as to learn the degree to which speaking and acting in public—skills stressed in schools—are important to average citizens as well as to orators, preachers, and other public figures.

For the thoughtful young observer, the number of public bodies holding public meetings is also a good indication of the complexity of the systems by which even smaller communities are managed. Anything that helps make visible the unseen machinery of local government is likely to make the young person more alert to both issues and processes.

The young person should have an interesting experience, and talking it over with a parent, teacher, or other trusted adult could help clarify areas of confusion or even spark further interest.

(AlSO: Service and Helping Others)

**IDEA #79. Listen to an entire episode of On Point on public radio. Call in with something thoughtful to say, and pat yourself on the back if you get on the air.**

*On Point* is one of a number of syndicated interview and call-in shows on public radio; there are also numbers of regional and local programs of the same sort. Most feature an interview with one or more experts on a particular topic; sometimes the interview is with a single author, public figure, or artist. At some point listeners are invited to call in with questions and commentary; most show like *On Point* screen callers to ensure a very high quality of discussion.

Like *This American Life*, programs like *On Point* assume and require a level of awareness of and interest in the “deep background” of events and issues, and the experts on tap do not condescend to listeners in the level of conversation or vocabulary. In a nutshell, such programs provide, along with certain magazines and newspapers, the raw material by which many knowledgeable, thoughtful people inform themselves and form opinions about the major issues of the day. They require a certain degree of intellectual discipline, and the beginning listener may even want to have at hand an atlas or a dictionary to chase down stray facts that arise—a program segment on world affairs may
focus on Vanuatu or South Sudan or Nunavut, and the active listener will need to know where these places are.

Call-in portions of such programs do not represent a significant change in the level of discourse. Calls are screened for relevance and, it can be imagined, for tone and overall quality; seldom does one hear callers who simply spout unsupported opinion. But many callers are in fact asking questions of the participants, and there is no lower age limit on the ability to ask good questions—for clarification, for further information, or in response to speculation (what if?). Producers seem to favor younger callers who demonstrate a serious interest in a topic, and so the young listener should not hesitate to try, at least, to connect. A successful effort is a feather in one’s cap, indeed.

And if the idea of calling is daunting, if the young person’s schedule doesn’t quite fit the broadcast time, or if On Point is not available in your area, On Point and most programs like it are available as podcasts from their related websites.

(ALKSO: Language, Literature, and History; The World and Its Cultures)

**IDEA #80. Find a town or community festival with a particular theme; enjoy yourself, and pay close attention to what is being celebrated and how the celebration is organized**

The Fourth of July and Canada Day national festivals in North America, and late spring through summertime and into early autumn is often when the inhabitants of local communities large and small seek to recognize and reinforce their sense of shared identity and also to attract others to their communities by arranging community celebrations. The result is a coast-to-coast panorama of fairs, fetes, and festivals that honor everything from local agricultural products to local history to particular religious figures or events. Some are in smaller towns and villages, while others take place in big city neighborhoods.

Such festivals often feature foods and crafts that are unique to or at least identified with their place, and often there are parades, musical performances, community meals, and sporting events to attract and engage visitors. Often there are opportunities to participate and not just spectate; the interested child can run in a race, submit a piece of art, or judge a contest.

A sense of place in our electronically connected but all too often virtually perceived world is important. The interested child may be a dynamo of
intellectual curiosity, creativity, and technological savvy, but if they do not know how to connect to and appreciate where they are—the place they inhabit and the cultural and natural complexities and wonders of that place—they will be missing something essential in their development. Humans need to be together, and we need—in my opinion, anyhow—to feel as though there is a place in which and to which we belong. Celebrating together—even in a place that is not exactly “ours”—reminds us, reassures us even, of the power of connection to place.

(ALSO: The World and Its Cultures)

IDEA #81. Imagine something that you would like to be different at your school and write a thoughtful, respectful letter to the superintendent, principal, or head explaining your idea and why you think that it should be considered. Pat yourself on the back if you receive an answer, and be ready to follow up on your suggestion if you are invited to discuss it in person.

How appropriate to consider using the First Amendment right to “petition for redress of grievances” on the public official closest to the student: a school administrator. If the school is private, the right should be considered the same.

Students always have ideas about how schools should be run and how their programs should be organized, and here is a respectful, even formal, way to carry a suggestion forward from the conversational stage to the serious one. The first order of business is to come up with a positive suggestion that would make a difference in the quality of school life and that could also be accomplished without some sort of miracle occurring—a doubling of the budget, for example, or the abduction of an unpopular teacher by aliens.

Once an idea has been decided on and at least a suggested plan of action put together, the idea should be put into the form of a formal business letter presenting the proposal and some of the arguments in its favor. Organization should follow the form of a letter to an editor or public official: main point, supporting evidence, likely benefits, and respectful conclusion. This letter should above all things be carefully edited and proofread; it is, after all, about school.

If the idea is seen as sound by the recipients, there may be opportunities to further advance the argument and perhaps even to become involved in some sort of implementation process. A little-considered aspect of being a suggestion-maker is that the role often entails becoming a leader as well. The
ability to enlist others in one’s own ideas is a practical skill that underlies many versions of active leadership, and of course there are rewards of accomplishment and pride for a successful endeavor.

(ALSO: Service and Helping Others; Language, Literature, and History)
Critical Thinking, “Ethan Brand,” and the Holiday Spirit

We happen to be a family that celebrates Christmas, and we have tended to do it in a fairly traditional secular way: tree, stockings, presents, sit-down dinner. For a week or so before the actual day lights twinkle stereotypically in the living room and cats sip spruce-infused water from the tree-stand. Each of us maintains a hidey-hole for gifts and avoids the burden of wrapping until the last minute. There is egg nog.

At some point in my late adolescence I remember deciding that this kind of celebration, with more-or-less mandated giving, rampant materialism, orchestrated good cheer, and choreographed gestures of comfort and joy (stripped, in my home, of religious content), was indeed a humbug. Any day can be a fine day for giving or receiving a gift, and a little more spontaneity in the exchange can deepen its meaning. Why not find other days for random family gatherings or acts of kindness? Why Christmas? Didn’t the ritualization of pretty much everything about the day empty it of meaning and eviscerate “the true spirit of Christmas,” whatever that might be?

It wasn’t so much that I was Scrooge—I wasn’t trying to save a few bucks—but rather that I was taking my role as a self-styled cultural critic to a logical end. I still can’t say that I was wrong about anything, but I had missed something rather important. I could engage in my own personal boycott of Christmas, but if no one else was, what was my point except to add a bit of critical discomfort to the lives of family and friends? (Which may have been my adolescent point. But still.) I could reject the holiday spirit, but if everyone else had it—for whatever reason, because it was in the air, because they felt Christmas or the Solstice or something similar very deeply, or just because they were “s’posed to”—then my little boycott was not just a statement but an active turning away from community.

And in my personal spiritual construct, turning away from community was in fact the definition of the wrong thing to do. I had learnt this from the Nathaniel Hawthorne story “Ethan Brand,” where this rejection is presented and explored as “the Unpardonable Sin.” So I made those around me suffer through one season, and then I decided that I could acknowledge and participate in the rituals of the holiday. To be sure, I have always found gift-giving hard, because I so want to find the perfect thing for each recipient and I remember all too keenly the disappointments of some of my own childhood Christmases. But I also know, as a parent now, that there is something very nice about sitting around with family and watching others be surprised and
occasionally genuinely delighted by another’s gift. I like the smell of the tree, even if I don’t really love egg nog.

At some point I suspect many interested children will question the rituals and traditions with which they live, and I believe wholeheartedly that they should. Whatever the holiday or occasion—and it certainly doesn’t have to be Christmas—it will mean more when the young person comes to it on his or her own terms, having tested it, questioned it, thought it through. I suppose this risks full-on rejection, but that is an individual’s right, just as it is an individual’s responsibility to figure out what they owe to family and community and how to make good—or not—on that obligation. I may have taken my theology from “Ethan Brand” (others will find better, richer sources), but we must all decide for ourselves where the “spirit,” the rational self, and our place in the world intersect.

I regret having annoyed folks with my Christmas boycott many years ago, but in my own way I grew from it, and so when I say “Happy Holidays!” to someone nowadays I mean it: I want them to be happy. And I hope that they have thought about why they might be happy, or even how they could be happier or be making others happier. Being in the holiday spirit, I think, entails thinking about what this might actually mean. And the meaning, of course, is what matters.
BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The multiple intelligences identified by Howard Gardner encompass most kinds of intellectual function, but if we were to add another it might be the intelligence of The Dealmaker. (NOTE: This statement was written and published well before the U.S. election of 2016, and there is no intended connection between the concept offered here, ironic or otherwise, and any official of the United States government, past or present.) Some individuals seem to have a gift for making good decisions around material objects, a knack for trading and leveraging that plays itself out in schoolroom transactions well before it may pay off in business or social realms later on.

Conducting transactions around material objects seems to be hardwired into the human spirit, and even in non-materialistic cultures there is still the need to make decisions about allocation and accountability. Where elders are in charge of these matters, it is because their longer experience has given them a certain perspective and wisdom, a perspective and wisdom that we believe can be gained even at a young age when children are given the opportunity to participate in a culture’s economic activities.

A part of some of the suggestions in the BUSINESS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP section involves “giving back” to the community by contributing a percentage of any profits made to come worthy charitable cause of the child’s choice. If the object here is to strengthen the youngster’s capabilities as a businessperson, it is also about building a sense of social responsibility.

Lately we have encountered the term “social entrepreneurship,” which reminds us that the skills and habits of mind of that we think of as characterizing successful businesspersons can also be harnessed in making social change and working toward goals of equity and justice. We do not explicitly address this concept in these suggestions, but we encourage children and adults alike to envision analogues in the service of making the world a more equitable and pleasant place.

IDEA #82. Earn a sum of money with a simple business you think up and run all by yourself. Then find a charity you believe in and contribute a tenth (or more) of what you earned.

The one-person street corner lemonade stand is the classic first business, and the young entrepreneur can learn a great deal from even something so simple
—material costs, price-setting, inventory control, even labor costs. Whatever the nature of the business, the essentials remain the same: to keep income ahead of expenses and to find ways to keep customers satisfied.

The major decision to be made, of course, is the nature of the business itself. Perhaps it plays to the strengths of the child, either as something that can be made and sold or a service based on a particular interest or ability. Is there an interest in the product, a probable customer base? Can the product be created and sold at a price point that ensures profit? What are the possible pitfalls and problems that could arise?

Once the business has been decided on, the next steps are to determine details such as the nature of advertising, location, quality and quantity of materials needed, and when the business will actually be in operation. Once these things are decided on, the business can open.

NOTE: Certain kinds of businesses, and children of a certain age, will require a certain amount of adult monitoring. Unforeseen issues may arise with customers, local regulations, and losses—to name a few—and the youngster may need some adult back-up to assist with troubleshooting. If the business seems to be headed for a total loss, some adult wisdom will be necessary to determine when to pull the plug and to reflect on what went wrong. In business as in so many areas, failure is one of the very best teachers.

(ALSO: Service and Helping Others)

IDEA #83. Try selling a work of art or literature that you have created. The internet or your public library will have resources on how to sell your writing and illustrations, or perhaps a local art store will be willing to give you advice about marketing a painting or a piece of sculpture.

This activity combines the challenges of creativity with the sometimes greater challenge of finding a market for one’s art. There are vast numbers of low-circulation poetry and literary magazines that will accept work submitted by amateur or unknown authors (usually, alas, without payment, but look hard), and there are probably at least as many magazines, books, and websites dedicated to publicizing ways for authors to get work published. The chances are good that your public library will have at least one of these “how to sell your work” books, which may also have information on selling illustrations and fine art work to the same kinds of literary magazines.
There may be other markets closer to home. Some small-town or community newspapers will happily accept fiction, poetry, and even art work from local creators. There may even be local or regional literary magazines whose existence is unexpected; the library might be a good source of information here.

As far as the marketing of visual art goes, many communities have summer arts fairs where local artists can show and sell their work. Some of these are juried—that is, artists are selected by a committee to participate—but some are open. There is likely to be at least one art dealer nearby who might be persuaded to handle good-quality work by a rising young local talent, or there is always the equivalent of the lemonade stand: put up a booth on the curb.

If the youngster has a few friends with creative urges and a pile of poetry or paintings, why not suggest that they pool resources and publish their own literary magazine or start their own gallery? A few advertisements from local merchants or friends would pay to photocopy a few dozen copies, which could also be sold. Or perhaps a local business has a small spare room that could become gallery space. And there’s always a website: many blogsites are free and could be used to post poetry, short stories, or paintings or photographs, although it’s hard to make money on a blog.

It is easy to find people who will maintain that art does not pay, and often they are correct. But an ambitious artist (and friends) might be able to raise at least a few dollars in the art market, and along the way there will be opportunities to learn about both the creative self and the art market.

(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #84. Earn a sum of money with a business that you organize and run with friends. Then find a charity you believe in and contribute a tenth (or more) of what you earned.

This activity builds on IDEA #81, above, with the added complexity of partnership. Here is a valuable opportunity to learn interpersonal skills around management and compromise, with the new wrinkle that the joint participants are friends.

One of the best ways to forestall problems among the partners—even with an elementary schooler’s lemonade stand—is to make a simple chart that defines and allots tasks and responsibilities, doing what’s possible to draw on strengths and interests. With the chart completed and literally signed off on by all participants, the next step is to build a timeline of jobs to be completed.
Careful, open, and clear pre-planning of the work to be done is essential in making the operation, and the relationships of the partners, run smoothly.

**A note for interested parents/guardians:** Incidentally, this same system—an established business model—can be used to help kids organize and complete collaborative academic projects, where workload inequity and individual shirking often lead to disaster among even close friends. Even if the teacher does not help students by assigning such a system, urge or even guide your child to set things up in this way—a clear list of tasks, a clear allocation of responsibility, a clear timeline—whenever a group project is starting. The plan should impress (and perhaps inspire) the teacher, and the work will go much more smoothly.

(ALSO: Service and Helping Others)

**IDEA #85.** Find a local business that will let you volunteer as an “intern” or helper. Even if you don’t wind up doing much important work, what can you learn about the business and about how people work?

Internships are increasingly a standard part of the professional planning phase of collegiate life, but the opportunity to spend some real time in a workplace setting is above all a chance for younger people to come to an understanding of how actual work is carried out in the adult world.

Schoolteachers are constantly reminding students that certain kinds of behavior will not pay off in the “real world,” and children are accustomed to living in a more or less authoritarian environment. What better way can there be to see both how adults behave in the workplace and how decisions are made and implemented in the adult world than by observing real work?

Not all businesses will welcome young volunteers, and some may simply say no. The age of the child (probably no one under twelve or thirteen should even consider this activity) and his or her level of responsibility—perhaps attested to in a written recommendation from a teacher or principal—will have a bearing on what kinds of opportunities open up, and patience may be necessary. Issues of hazard and confidentiality may also arise and should be thoroughly discussed by parents or guardians in advance.

An ideal situation would have the youngster tagging along with a particular individual who is not unhappy to have a young sidekick and who will have the patience and interest to explain and answer questions. For children on the younger side the old “take your child to work day” concept may be a good
way to start, as long as the parent or guardian is able to perform his or her job with a child at hand and as long as the employer is not averse to this arrangement.

Among the valuable lessons students tend to learn from internships is that not every job is suitable for every person; some students find out just how much they do NOT want to work in certain kinds of environments. On the whole, however, most youngsters find some exposure to a real work setting to be of great interest and great value, and the thinking child will find much food for cogitation as they observe adult work in action.  

(AlSO: Service and Helping Others; Civic and Community Engagement)

**IDEA #86. Invent something or come up with an original idea for your own business, and then find someone who can help you write a business plan for putting your invention or idea on the market. When your plan is done, figure out how to put into practice.**

Of course this suggestion presupposes a certain inventive strain in the young person, as coming up with an idea for a successful business is a major challenge even for the most original of entrepreneurial minds. But let the imagination run free, even if the idea is flawed, because the point here is for the child to consider all the steps required in establishing a business and bringing a product or service to market.

The internet or a public library can provide reference materials including actual templates for business plans. The exercise is to apply specific, intentional thought to the business idea and to imagine each segment of the actualization plan. There are opportunities here to consider such matters as mission—the larger intent of a business—and the ways in which businesses find and pull together the resources necessary for production. Marketing is the final aspect to be considered, and perhaps the student can analyze some of his or her own experience as a consumer to come up with ideas as to how a product can be made appealing to a particular group of people.

One aspect of this project is to imagine what people want and need—to make the consideration a business idea an exercise in empathy. Another part is to consider the kinds of companies and products that truly and consistently deliver in terms of quality and service. What makes Coca-Cola a successful company, or Microsoft, or Old Navy? How do such companies become so successful—is it luck, or planning? What companies has the child seen fail—
what fads and “must-have” items have completely disappeared within his or her lifetime? What is the secret of business success, in other words?

If the plan seems sound and exciting, there is no reason that the young person cannot try to connect with some adult resources who might help turn the dream into a reality. After all, how old was Bill Gates when he started Microsoft or Mark Zuckerberg when Facebook took off?

(ALSO: STEM; The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #87. Find a product or company you are interested in, find it on the stock market, and follow its fortunes there

Imagine that you have bought 100 shares of a stock, and track it—write it down!—at least once a week on the internet or in the newspaper. Keep track of how much you win or lose in a month, or two months. Are you happy or sad that you didn’t invest real money?

Stock market reports feature prominently in the news, and investment is the cornerstone of capitalism. The child who learns to understand the system and who can begin to see the relationships between the urge to buy and the urge to sell can at least begin to develop a sense of society’s values as well as how day-to-day events influence the economy.

The first order of business is to help the youngster understand what a “share” of a company is, and how the rising or falling value of the share is a function of the perceived future value of the company. The simple fact is that a stock sale represents a fundamental disagreement between buyer and seller as to whether the value of the stock will rise or fall, a fact with profound implications for the economy as a whole and, of course, for the immediate future of the company.

The second step in this activity is to choose a stock for the hypothetical purchase. Youngsters like to invest in things in which they believe and with which they are familiar—a company that makes a favorite possession, like a computer or a game, or that provides a service the youngster enjoys, like a particular restaurant or television network. It should be fairly easy to find out if the company is listed on one of the major stock exchanges—New York or NASDAQ—and what its trading symbol and current share price are.

Imagine one share at X dollars, and then imagine a hundred shares. This is the initial investment cost (and a simple multiplication problem). For the duration of the activity the young investor can track the share price; does it rise or fall?
Older children may want to track several stocks, perhaps keeping a graph or table of daily value and perhaps also noting the state of the market in general, up or down.

At the end of the period, total up the value of a hundred shares and then compare it to the initial cost. If the investment “made” money, especially more than a percent or two, the investment was sound and perhaps spectacular. If there was a paper loss, then all involved should feel relieved that the investment was not real, but even a significant loss might not signal disaster. The question might be, What would explain the rise or fall in the stock’s price? Were there news items relating to the company and its business, or did the fluctuations in price seem to have little relationship to anything obvious?

The real lesson of the stock market is to look at long-term investment and to see how a company might do over an extended period of time. Another wise investment strategy involves diversification, investing in several or more different kinds of businesses. Many people do not understand the importance of the stock market as a principal investment of pension and retirement funds, insurance companies, banks, and even college and private school endowments—not just individuals.

It should be possible to locate a stockbroker—try an online search—who would be willing to discuss the market and its vagaries and processes with an interested young potential investor. Of course, this exercise could be performed with real money and real shares, although perhaps a very small amount of stock would be a safer way to start.

(ALSO: STEM; The World and Its Cultures)
Problem-Solving Communities


Close to thirty years ago I had a brief stint as assistant coach to a team of students who were engaged in the competitions managed by Odyssey of the Mind, founded in 1978 and now also an international organization and competition. Our team made it to the World Finals, but a tight budget kept me off the plane to Colorado, and thus I missed seeing our team finish third there! But the experience, and the program, inspired me.

Part of that inspiration has drawn me to a certain genre of reality TV that involves problem-solving and puts the problem and the solving over human drama. The old Scrapheap Challenge (known in the U.S. as Junkyard Wars) program enchanted me, with teams competing to solve engineering challenges under tight constraints and limited in their selection of raw materials to what they could find in what seemed to be the world’s most wonderful junkyards. Project Runway at its best offers the same kind of experience: a problem, constraints, solution design, coaching, and critiques. All these shows lack is the opportunity to iterate and improve the work product, but otherwise they give a fair representation of the “design thinking” process being taught in many schools these days.

But I digress. The Interested Child likes to reference programs and opportunities offered in schools that might pique the curiosity and perhaps in time the passions of kids, and programs like Odyssey of the Mind (known as “OM”) and its counterpart, Destination Imagination, are superb in this regard—and we suspect there are local and regional versions and variations that also ignite children’s creativity around solving complex problems in ways that incorporate every aspect of STEM, STEAM, and intellectual endeavors in general. There are also numerous robotics programs and competitions that serve the same purpose—and then there is Canstruction, which combines design, problem-solving, and service learning.
So if your school—or your interested child’s school—has a team or a program based on the idea of problem-solving, look into it. If you’re an interested adult, you might even ask about volunteering as a coach or a driver or a fund-raiser.

And if there is no “problem-solving” program, suggest that having an Odyssey of the Mind, robotics, Canstruction, Destination Imagination, or similar program would be a great way to engage kids in hands-on learning in science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics, the humanities in action, and even service learning. I remember the thrill of watching kids’ gadgets, machines, and solutions in action at OM competitions, and you and any interested children you know can be thrilled, too.
Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

Science, technology, and mathematics are not all about test-tubes and equations. Great scientists and mathematicians are able above all to think scientifically and mathematically; in other words, they are able to perceive patterns and relationships and to pose deep questions about what they see. In the end, being a scientist or a mathematician is simply about observing experience and then thinking about it. To a perceptive young person, quantitative and causal relationships will begin to emerge where least expected, and the youngster who is inclined to apply even more thought to these relationships is on the path to truly thinking like a scientist.

The suggestions in the SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, AND MATH section are designed to foster scientific and mathematical approaches to otherwise ordinary day-to-day experience. Some require more rigorous or disciplined action—record-keeping, for example—but all are designed for the simple purpose of helping the young person see common phenomena in new, more insightful ways.

IDEA #88. Learn to identify five (or ten) different types of trees.
In a world in which the study of biology in schools is largely confined to the molecular and cellular level, the old-fashioned study of nature by observation and classification is something of a lost art. Nonetheless, many students are interested in various kinds of field biology, and the ability to recognize different species and families is an important skill to acquire.

Even if the youngster may not be heading toward graduate study in biology, it is both useful and satisfying to be able to recognize different elements of one’s environment. In most locales the variety of trees is still linked to an older variety of purpose: some trees were planted for shade, others for the timber or firewood they produced, still others for their ornamental qualities. In a few places the tree population is as it was prior to the development of the land by settlers; cottonwoods and willow mark watercourses, or the giants in virgin forest are preserved as relics of natural history. The successive growth of particular species marks the historical sequence by which nature reclaims cleared land.

Good field guides to the study of trees (dendrology) abound, and any library or bookstore should be able to provide choice. The better ones will provide not just pictures and names but also explanation and history, perhaps explaining the suitability of its wood, seeds, sap, or bark for uses in an earlier time. The
guide might also refer to some of the more urgent issues confronting modern tree populations—blights and insects whose spread has been made possible by human agency, or invasive non-native species that thrive opportunistically in ecological niches once occupied by other species that they have in effect driven out. Rather than representing a constant in nature, trees have life cycles and crises, and the more one can learn about this, the more effective a steward the thinking youngster will be.

(ALSO: Sports, Fitness, and the Great Outdoors)

IDEA #89. Learn to identify at least three (or five, or ten) constellations. Be able to identify the North Star. Learn to spot a couple of planets.

A knowledge of the heavens has been the sign of a learned person in many cultures, and for an investment of relatively little time in generally pleasant circumstances a young person can gain a surprising degree of knowledge of astronomy. Although the makeup of constellations may seem obscure to some observers, familiarity with the unchanging layout of the stars can eventually bring an understanding of the patterns that our forebears once regarded as common lore. At various times of the year a number of planets are prominent in the night sky during the normal waking hours of most children, and the seasonal procession of constellations gives the knowing looker yet another way of measuring, and pondering, the passage of time.

There are a number of good astronomical maps and sites on the internet, as are computer programs and apps for mobile devices that simulate in detail and with labels the night sky at any time of day from any location. There are also any number of excellent guidebooks and online sites dedicated to helping young observers learn about stars and planets, and several magazines—Astronomy and Sky & Telescope, in particular—carry detailed maps of each month’s night sky, including the phases of the moon and the appearance of planets and other non-stellar objects. A great, simple gadget is a planisphere, an adjustable star chart usually made of cardboard and available online or at many science museum gift shops—even educational toy stores.

There are telescopes available that can be programmed to aim themselves at specific astronomical targets, but these, though the prices are coming down, still run into the many hundreds of dollars for the most basic models. Of course, a mere ability to spout the names of a few constellations, and even to spot planets, is only the very beginning of a true knowledge of modern astronomy. Many of the better star guides are also good basic textbooks in the nature of the universe, with discussions of the many types of stars, galaxies,
and nebulae and in-depth features on planets, asteroids, and comets. Knowing where the Pleiades are relative to the moon will no longer make one a sage, but being able to understand the patterns, forces, and elements of the universe is still a sign of an essential intellectual engagement with the world around one.

(ALSO: Sports, Fitness, and the Great Outdoors)

IDEA #90. Choose some object that you use or some food that you eat regularly. Research and then write the story of how that object or food was produced—everything from raw materials to processing to transportation to marketing. How many countries or states are involved in your story? Who makes the most money in the process—the people at the raw-material end or the marketing end, or someone in between?

We take for granted almost everything we eat and consume, with few products or services attracting even a small amount of our thought as to their origins or the process by which they were made or brought to us. This activity aims to help the young person explore the complexity of the modern consumer economy.

A powerful fact of economic life is that we are becoming more and more distant, physically and psychically, from means of production. Our lives as consumers are mediated less by an understanding of how things come to be than by the engines of marketing and advertising, which would have us believe that most of what we consume has been created, sui generis, at the stores from which we buy. Famously, many of our consumer goods are produced “offshore,” and diners in most parts of the country sit down to eat food that has traveled hundreds or thousands of miles from where it was grown or even processed.

Because many companies are loath to have us know how highly processed our food is or the conditions under which our clothing or electronic goods are made, this activity will actually require some fairly serious sleuthing. A can of green beans, for example, involves 1) the beans, which were grown somewhere; 2) a can, which was made somewhere from steel processed somewhere; 3) the canning process, which takes place somewhere; 4) the label, made of paper from somewhere and printed somewhere; 5) transportation to a warehouse somewhere, and then a market; and 6) all the mechanisms involved in advertising and marketing the product. Along the way there are government inspectors, fertilizers and pesticides used on the bean fields,
energy consumed by tractors, factories, and trucks, and some master hand
directing the entire process from “corporate headquarters.” The challenge is to
find the details of each step; imagine the challenge in doing the same for a
laptop computer, an automobile, or even the DVD of a favorite film.

Library and internet research will only accomplish so much in this activity,
especially if the youngster starts with a very specific product in mind. But
persistence will pay off, even though there will be blank spots in research and
even the possibility of experiencing some corporate stonewalling; after all,
there are business secrets involved in any process, as well.

The truly ambitious student might want to do a comparative study involving
the same product today and fifty years ago. The results might be revelatory as
to the degree to which globalization has affected every aspect of our lives.
*(ALSO: Business and Entrepreneurship; The World and Its Cultures)*

**IDEA #91. Find an opportunity to use a serious telescope at a
local observatory, astronomy club, or with a relative or friend
who has one. Observe the rings of Saturn for yourself.**

A good telescope is a costly object, and a truly great telescope is well out of the
reach of most individuals. However, any number of organizations and
individuals are deeply committed to offering access to the sights that can be
seen through such instruments.

In your community there may be an astronomy club, or perhaps there is such
an organization at a local school or college. Some clubs and educational
institutions have “open viewing” nights when they make their equipment
available to all comers, asking only for the users’ interest or perhaps a modest
donation. These sky parties, as they are sometimes known, bring together both
amateurs and experts (and astronomy has a long tradition of amateurs who are experts) to share their knowledge and their telescopes, and most groups are
especially eager to host young viewers. Sometimes individuals have built their
own observatories, often identifiable by the dome-shaped telescope housing
that is the highest point on a building; such individuals could be approached
for permission to view some night—the worst they can say is no.

Once a young person has viewed a nebula or a planet through a high-quality
telescope, they will never see the night sky the same way again. The rings of
Saturn, for example, are quite familiar from drawings and photographs, but
seeing them with one’s own eyes is an amazing experience. Even if this
activity does not spur the youngster on to become the next Copernicus or
Stephen Hawking, it will alter his or her perspective if only to the extent that it makes more real the descriptions and models of the universe upon which we base our understanding of the cosmos.  

(ALSO: Sports, Fitness, and the Great Outdoors)

IDEA #92. Acquire some kind of magnifying glass or pocket microscope and look at snowflakes, sand, dirt, or anything else that you think might be kind of interesting. Your food might be kind of an interesting place to start.

When Antonie van Leeuwenhoek “discovered” the miracle of optical magnification in the 17th century, he opened up an unseen world. Even relatively low degrees of magnification—ten to twenty times normal size, referred to as “power” and abbreviated as 10x to 20x—can reveal extraordinary and wholly unexpected details in the most common objects. Almost any piece of food, for instance, takes on a whole new appearance under magnification (and perhaps should not be the first subject of a squeamish eater’s attentions in this activity), and the surface of one’s own skin or even a hair has amazing facets and features. Even a dollar bill has secrets that unfold only to the viewer whose vision is aided by a strong lens.

A simple magnifying glass should be easy to find; a sewing supply store or a department store should offer a choice. For a few dollars more many hobby stores have specialized magnifiers, some with battery illumination, and specialty electronics and scientific supply stores have a variety of small scopes of 30 power or more that can be used to obtain stunning close-up views of grains of salt (whose cubical crystalline structure is clearly visible) or sand—or the anatomical details of a dead insect.

The next level of interest and investment in this activity involves the acquisition of a microscope. As with most optical technology, quality is proportional to cost, but it may be possible to obtain the use of a school microscope or a ‘scope belonging to an individual. The quality of the lenses, the strength of the lenses, and the source of illumination can vary dramatically, and it might be well for the novice microscope user to start by using prepared slides (of blood cells, fungal spores, dust, plant cells, to give some common examples) under the direction of a knowledgeable elder. Too much magnification can actually be a distraction, as the level of detail is so great that a sense of what is being viewed is utterly lost.

Wanting to see the tiny “essence” of things can become something of a compulsion, once the discovery is made that even smooth objects are in fact
creviced and canyoned or that a drop of pond water can contain a myriad of life-forms. All such activity serves to train the observer in a kind of critical thought, to look beyond surfaces and to regard apparent clarity with some skepticism. Leeuwenhoek’s gift to the world can provide enormous intellectual sustenance for a curious youngster.

(ALSO: Sports, Fitness, and the Great Outdoors)

IDEA #93. Find a local scientific or medical laboratory (try a college or university) or a company whose work is primarily involved with science or engineering. See if you can spend a few days observing, or perhaps even offer to volunteer.

Science and technology form the backbone of the American innovation economy, and many institutions and companies, small and large, are deeply engaged in research and development. In some cases the work is “pure” science, tracking down basic knowledge, while in other cases the work is applying scientific know-how to specific practical problems. In any case, somewhere relatively close by should be a commercial, educational, or medical laboratory that the interested youngster could approach about observing science at work.

There are likely to be practical or even legal restrictions on any such activity, but the chance to spend a few days simply watching scientists or engineers at work should be well worth any time that is involved. Some places may welcome questions, while others will be less receptive to interruption, but if the youngster displays an active, thoughtful curiosity, a supportive relationship could grow. Depending on the nature of the work and the age and capabilities of the young observer, it might also be possible to parlay this interest into an opportunity to volunteer or intern.

Most school science classes do a good job teaching students about the theory of science, and the best of them include realistic laboratory exercises that give students the chance to perform procedures, record data, and actually apply some theory. But until a student has seen a real laboratory in action and shared some of the day-in, day-out routine of science—especially when the science being done is original work directed at answering important questions—they can never fully appreciate the complexity and the richness of authentic scientific inquiry.

(ALSO: Service and Helping Others; Business and Entrepreneurship)
IDEA #94. Take a factory tour and write about the experience

Once a feature of almost every American community with any sort of industry, factory tours are becoming more and more rare. The “offshoring” of manufacturing has not hit all domestic factories, but concerns about liability have closed the doors of more and more of the remaining establishments to visitors.

Still, there remain a number of famous and not-so-famous businesses that maintain elaborate factory tours. Many, like those in the food and beverage industry, work hard at attracting and entertaining tourists, and free samples are part of the treat. Others are proud to show off state-of-the-art manufacturing operations and are more likely to appeal to a technically savvy crowd.

Factory tours may be located by word of mouth, by tourist websites (and try an internet search on “factory tours [yourstate]”), and in one of the several guidebooks that focus on such sites. It’s always best to call ahead, as some tours are by reservation only or occur only at specified hours.

The object here is to get as close as possible to a production process. Mass production and the factory system are the two hallmarks of the Age of Industry, an age that less and less visible in North America. To see raw materials transformed into a finished product is to witness what was two hundred years ago a marvel, and a fast-moving production line, whether it is producing cupcakes or convertibles, can still set the heart racing and the imagination whirring.

For the thinking child, the sight of a factory in production mode is an opportunity to ponder the nature of technology and the nature of industrial society itself. Look closely at the workers or at the automated machinery that may be doing much of the work, and think about what life must have been like when just about everyone who did not live on a farm worked in a factory, with the noise, grit, and superhuman pace an everyday part of life. Now that much of this work has either been automated or moved to nations whose factories tourists seldom visit, factory tours are as much about a vanishing way of life as they are about producing. A journal entry would be a great way to reflect on such an experience, and any social studies or history teacher would be delighted to hear more if the child were to document the tour in a more public form.

(ALSO: Civic and Community Engagement; Business and Entrepreneurship; The World and Its Cultures)
IDEA #95. Navigate! Next time you take a journey, either by
yourself or with friends or family, take over the map-reading and
route-selection duties. Find the most detailed maps you can, and
learn to read them carefully and accurately.

Map-reading is an essential literacy skill that adults (including, alas, many
teachers) assume that children have learned through osmosis. Unfortunately,
this is seldom the case, and so even map-illiterate-proof resources like Google
Maps and in-car GPS navigation systems are not always enough to keep
people from becoming lost.

In the United Kingdom, home of the superb Ordnance Survey maps that can
be found in many households, map-reading is something of a fetish, and
excellent school geography curricula ensure that few British people are ever
geographically lost, at least for long. Although American USGS topographic
maps are of excellent quality, they are not always useful for just “getting
around,” and their delicious intricacies are seldom taught in school. Instead,
Americans rely on inconsistently drawn and keyed road maps that are seldom
of a scale to be truly informative; increasingly, they rely on GPS readouts that
concentrate only on the route and the destination, utterly ignoring terrain,
settlements, places of interest, and other features that can enrich map-reading
and fuel curiosity.

Nonetheless, American children can become excellent readers of maps, and
the household that takes the time to preface journeys of any length with a
review of the route will be modeling the idea of using maps as a resource as
well as instructing children in their use. At some point the child can be
instructed to do the route-planning on his or her own, and there will be some
pride of accomplishment when the destination is reached without incident. It
would be equally fruitful and fun to spend some time looking at an especially
detailed, high-quality map—a government topo, perhaps, or a navigational
chart—of a place with special meaning to the child. Landmarks and
landforms, routes and settlements, all these have been determined by and/or
have determined how a place looks and feels to those who go there and live
there, and to a skilled map-reader a two-dimensional representation can be as
informative and evocative as a photograph or even an actual visit.

For families who share an excitement about places and maps, there is also the
potential thrill of taking a Blue Highways trip, in the spirit of author William
Least Heat-Moon’s extraordinary 1982 narrative of that title recounting his
journeys off the interstates on state and local roads often portrayed in blue on
old road maps.

(ALSO: The World and Its Cultures)
IDEA #96. Think of some silly—or important, even—task that you have to do and then build a “machine” out of junk and duct tape (or other cheap and easy-to-find materials) that performs the task. You can decide to make the machine beautiful and well-crafted, or you can decide to make it utterly ridiculous—the more duct tape, the better!

The cartoonist Rube Goldberg was famous for designing “machines” of absurd complexity that accomplished everyday tasks, and today there is a rich tradition in both engineering and design in using unlikely materials and over-engineering to create simple machines—usually in fact a combination of the classical simple machines (inclined plane, wheel and axle, pulley, wedge, screw, and lever)—to do things that are either necessary and useful or in fact totally useless.

No material has lent itself more to the uses of amateur inventors and engineers than duct tape, the ubiquitous silver-gray fabric-based tape that seems to stick to everything, especially itself, and that has famously been reported to have been used to perform emergency repairs on everything from shoes to airplanes. A pair of good scissors, some sacrificial cardboard boxes and a few sticks of wood are all the raw materials a young engineer might need to create almost anything; if other materials are also at hand, even Rube Goldberg’s creations might only be a starting point.

This is the unlikely time to introduce to the youngster the concept of scientific elegance. Some engineers are naturally tidy in their work and have an inborn sense to design that makes everything they produce look somehow elegant—simple, clean-lined, neatly made. Elegant solutions in science, engineering, and mathematics combine simplicity and grace, without extraneous elements, and the quest for elegance in an activity like this reduces the Rube Goldberg aspects to a bare minimum.

On the other hand, there is an exuberance in recognizing that anything made primarily of scrap and duct tape is in itself likely to be an assemblage of casually combined and inelegantly put together pieces, and that therefore a certain amount of extraneity is to be welcomed and even sought. Why not make the thing as baroque as possible, with added elements that have nothing to do with function but add whimsy to the form? If the object reminds one a bit of a rabbit, why not add long ears, whiskers, and a cotton tail?

This activity is about invention, but above all it is about allowing imagination and inclination to run a little wild. Elegant or not, the duct tape invention is
part of great way to explore how things work and how they go together—learning a bit of physics and industrial design along the way. *(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)*

**IDEA #99. Observe something and keep a record on a daily basis—your weight, the temperature at breakfast, the number of cars parked on your block at a particular time of day, the number of times your teacher says a particular word over a two-week period.... Make a graph and look for patterns.**

If scientific genius is “ninety-nine percent perspiration and one percent inspiration,” as Thomas Edison said, much of the sweat equity in progress has come from careful, regular observation and record-keeping. Extraordinarily, it is the highly disciplined management and analysis of disease records, rather than lab work with microorganisms, that has led to the understanding of the causes of many epidemic diseases, and the laws of planetary motion are a product of the detailed recording of planetary positions by Tycho Brahe; Kepler and Newton drew upon such records to derive mathematical principles, and Newton applied these principles to the study of gravity.

Modern science depends on detailed quantitative record-keeping, and much of the application of computers in science is in the service of developing statistical models. The young scientist who sets about the precise recording of observed data is, therefore, participating in a long and fundamental scientific tradition.

The fun of this activity, of course, is to begin to discern patterns. If the recorder makes a point of recording several possibly related kinds of data—temperature and barometric pressure, say, or the total number of goals scored in each game each day in a professional ice hockey league and the number of spectators in each arena—interesting correlations may appear. The task of the scientist, of course, is to determine whether these correlations are in fact the result of some natural or psychological forces or merely coincidence. The number of fish caught by Aunt Minnie each day may or may not have anything to do with what Aunt Minnie had for breakfast, but careful observation of these two phenomena might yield significant data.

As with any form of observation, regularity, precision, and the number of data points generated are the key to meaningful results, and so this activity also involves a certain amount of self-discipline before there can be any analysis.
The more consistent the manner of the observation and recording, the more useful the data will be.

**IDEA #98. Build a precise scale model of something.** Try making an exact model of your room, for example, complete with furniture and belongings, at an exact scale of one inch to one foot (1″:1′). And remember, a scale model can be larger than the original object.

When one considers that a full-scale battleship AND an exact one-foot model of the same vessel can be built from the same set of instructions, the power of the concept of scale becomes apparent.

The art of scale model design begins with the concepts of precise measurement and proportion. A model of an existing object for which plans are not available begins with measurement, and all models require an understanding of the mathematical concept that ALL relationships must be set in the same proportion.

Materials for a scale model project are not particularly important, although resources like stiff cardboard, foam-core board, and balsa wood can be exceptionally useful. For the ambitious, many art and craft supply stores sell materials for scale modeling, and some even sell architectural details—roof shingles, door hardware, and the like—set to particular scales. A proper job also includes tools for cutting to precise measurements, and some kind of adhesive for fastening; with sharp cutting tools and aromatic glues, caution should be observed.

In IDEA #36 we suggested the creation, as an art project, of a giant-scale model of a smaller object; such projects can have a certain whimsical charm. We referred there to a giant pencil as well as a giant lipstick, but any small object can be scaled up for the purpose of enjoying this activity.

(ALSO: *The Arts and Creative Expression*)

**IDEA #99. Bake a loaf (or two) of bread.** It doesn’t have to be fancy, but it’s a great exercise in food chemistry, cookery, and patience.

They say it’s the “staff of life,” and bread or bread-like foods are part of nearly every culinary tradition on the planet. Basically some sort of ground grain, usually but not always with a leavening agent like yeast or baking powder,
breads are excellent sources of carbohydrates—regarded by most as a dietary necessary, in reasonable quantities—and their varied textures are an epicure’s delight—and they just tend to taste pretty good.

Bread recipes and video instruction on parts of the job like kneading are all over the internet, and breads can be as exotic or as ho-hum as the baker wishes. The many cultural traditions represented in the bread family—from Middle Eastern pitas to South Asian naans to Native American fry-breads to the multifarious baguettes, limpas, pumpernickels, and “white bread” of Europe and America—could represent a cook’s tour of the planet for an ambitious and curious baker.

We recommend tackling a yeast-raised wheat bread as a first go—the preparation of the ingredients, the proofing or activating of the yeast, the kneading, the waiting for rises, and the smell of the hot loaves as they come out of the oven and are set aside to cool before slicing are a great combination of work and pleasure and a fine exercise in deferred gratification.

For thirty-some years we have been using the basic bread recipe, the most flexible we know of. Based on white flour, yeast, sweetener (to feed the yeast), some kind of shortening, and a bit of salt, any sort of whole grain can be added, the sweetener is wide-open to experimentation, and the fat can be a low-flavor oil, butter, margarine, or (we suppose) animal fat or ghee. The process involves first mixing all the ingredients except the yeast and flour; then add the yeast to this mixture; then slowly adding the flour after the yeast has burst into bubbly, fragrant life—some young bakers are intrigued by the idea of yeasts being living organisms (and some, to be sure, are horrified).

FLEXIBLE BREAD RECIPE

**Ingredients:**
- 1 and 1/2 cups water
- 1 cup milk
- 1/3 cup natural sweetener (honey, cane sugar, corn syrup, agave…)
- 1/4 cup butter, oil, margarine, or other “fat”
- 1 cup whole grain (corn meal, oat meal, rye meal, mixed-grain hot cereal, wheat or oat bran…)
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 4 level teaspoons of active dry yeast (bread machine yeast will do)
- 6 cups, plus or minus, all-purpose flour
Directions:
1. Mix fat, sweetener, salt, and grain in a bowl
2. Bring water and milk to a boil and add immediately to the fat-sweetener-salt-grain mixture
3. Mix thoroughly and let cool to approximately “skin” temperature—100° F. or 38° C.
4. Add the yeast, then mix just enough to moisten yeast
5. Let yeast work until there is a thick froth on the liquid mixture
6. Add the flour, 2 cups at a time, mixing thoroughly. After about 4 cups the mixing becomes “kneading,” requiring strong manipulation with hands and arms to work the dough into a workable form. If it helps, the dough at the end will be just about the consistency of Play-Doh, with which most children are somewhat familiar.
7. Form the dough into a compact ball, cover with a damp cloth, and let rise until doubled in size.
8. Punch the dough down, re-form, cover with a damp cloth, and let rise until doubled again.
9. Punch the dough down, form into two loaves, and then cover with a damp cloth and let rise for another half-hour or so, until the loaves are definitely bigger.
10. Bake at 350° F. or 180° C. for 30–35 minutes. More, smaller loaves, rolls, or pizza crust will all require less time; the bottom should be golden brown and the top firm and lightly tanned. Loaves should sound a bit hollow when tapped on the bottom when done.

We suspect you could use gluten-free flour to make this bread, and the recipe’s flexibility also invites experiments with form: we’ve made pizza dough and dinner rolls from the same recipe as well as long baguette-shaped loaves and our usual loaf-pan loaves.

If kneading sounds like a challenge, there are YouTube videos to instruct.

As always, interested young bakers should be supervised as they work around hot liquids and hot ovens.

Once one recipe has been tried successfully, it’s time to explore the world’s recipe books for new adventures in bread!

(ALSO: Service and Helping Others; The Arts and Creative Expression)
IDEA #100. It’s part art, part engineering: make something really complicated or really large out of a child’s building toy set like Legos, Construx, TinkerToys, or K’nex. Find a younger sibling or a pre-school teacher who can help you amass a truly awesome pile of raw material; choose your objective, make a design, and build away!

*Go play with children’s toys!*

If this seems like the simplest of all possible suggestions, think again. The lessons of pure design, structural visualization, logical planning and execution, measurement, and improvisation are essential tools for solving a great many of life’s problems, big and little. Here is a chance to be a design thinker, a maker, a true practitioner of STEAM: science, technology, engineering design, art, and mathematics.

In fact, being a professional display builder for Lego is said to be a lucrative career, and at one point the “audition” involved the deceptively simple task of building a sphere out of the random pieces the company supplied. Lego was looking for creative, adaptable brains who could imagine and then build whole new product lines and who could make the toys themselves into hitherto unimaginable constructions. All of the commercial building toys—or even a pile of homemade blocks made of scrap lumber, for that matter—have the potential to transcend their status as elementary toys to become the elemental stuff of wonderful new visions, made real.

Yard and rummage sales are great sources of these toys. They might need a quick bath in soapy water before use, but they last nearly forever, and losses to breakage or misplacement simply add to the challenge of conceptualizing and completing ambitious designs.

Alternatively, the exercise could be to start small: discover the fewest number of pieces that can make a recognizable version of a specific object, for example. Or create hordes of tiny objects or figures, arrayed in patterns.

The possibilities here are truly endless.

*(ALSO: The Arts and Creative Expression)*
IDEA #101. Go to a library or a bookstore (or maybe ask a science teacher at your school) to find and read from cover to cover a magazine about science or some branch of science. *Scientific American* would be a natural choice, but there are magazines about astronomy, environmental science, and technology that are pretty easy to find.

In the world of science—any science—periodicals serve a paramount purpose as the vehicle through which the results of virtually all scholarly research are made public. Even *Scientific American*, which has been published for more than a century as the most prominent magazine for laymen as well as scientists, occasionally presents new findings, and it remains important as a monthly summary of the most significant issues and compelling ideas in the field.

But along with *Scientific American* there are a host of magazines, some highly technical and others written for non-scientists, whose aims are to introduce their readership to the excitement and challenge of science in the twenty-first century. *Science* and *Nature* are probably the most prestigious general publications for scientists and medical researchers, while popular magazines like *Science News* and *BBC Focus* cover many issues.

Specific sciences also have their own magazines. *Astronomy* and *Sky & Telescope* are leading astronomy magazines, but there are other very readable periodicals in fields from archaeology to zoology. There are also many, many magazines with a technical focus, some general and others relating specifically to a single aspect of computer science, say, or alternative energy.

The youngster who can spend some time leafing through one of these magazines is likely to find a few articles of interest, a few things that are intellectually challenging, and very likely an entertaining but partially baffling array of advertisements and non-editorial content that serve, if nothing else, to provide a sense of the complexity and richness of the world of science.

*(ALSO: Language, Literature, and History)*

IDEA #102. Master a pre-electronic form of mathematical calculation: learn how to use an abacus, a slide rule, a quipu, a Curta calculator, or some other calculating device or method. Instructions can be found in libraries or the internet, and slide rules can be found at yard sales, on internet auction sites, or even in dusty drawers in old mathematics classrooms. There is even
*chisanbop*, a really efficient form of calculating using just the fingers that can be learned on the internet; it is Korean in origin, and experienced practitioners can perform *chisanbop* calculations almost as fast as an electronic calculator.

It is hard to believe that just two generations ago most of the electronic technology that we now use to perform mathematical calculations was unavailable to the general public. Even electric adding machines used power only to assist mechanical processes, and only the most expensive and cumbersome machines were capable of simple multiplication.

Even so, human genius in many cultures had observed certain characteristics of numbers and created hand-operated devices that could perform sophisticated and precise operations. The east Asian abacus, for example, can add, subtract, multiply, and divide in skilled hands almost as quickly as an electronic calculator; although its capacities are limited, it is still sufficient for most commercial needs. The slide rule, based on logarithmic principles, enables rapid calculation in a number of modes, depending on the design of the rule (not, incidentally, a *ruler*, since a slide rule is not made for measurement); during World War II virtually every complex machine short of the atomic bomb was essentially developed by engineers using only slide rules.

The Curta calculator, a rarity these days and rather expensive when one can be found, is a masterpiece of precision design and manufacture from Liechtenstein that can do virtually anything a slide rule can. But the Curta is entirely digital, taking input and yielding data in precise numbers. We are partial to the Curta if for no other reason than that its mechanical elegance is almost unsurpassed. If the youngster has access to one of these, simply handling it will be a satisfying experience.

*Chisanbop* (also *chisenbop*) made its appearance in the U.S. just as cheap electronic calculators were entering classrooms, and so a promising and powerful way of teaching students to perform calculations literally by hand never quite had its day in school. Like the mechanical calculators, *chisanbop* provides its own education in aspects of number theory.

If the youngster is intrigued by this kind of technology, there are still other, less known systems that have been used for numerical recording and calculating, and there are also groups of enthusiasts who are determined to keep alive the skill of using them. While teachers may decry the apparent de-emphasis of “math facts” in contemporary education, the simple fact is the
humans have been engaged in developing ways to make calculating “automatic” for hundreds of years.  
(ALTHOUGH: The World and Its Cultures; Language, Literature, and History)

IDEA #103. Become really good at a strategy- or mathematics-based card or board game. Study some books on chess, and practice until you are ready to enter a local tournament. Work to develop serious skill at other games, like cribbage, bridge, go, or even checkers. Try becoming a bridge master.  
Summer is game-playing time in many families, among groups of friends, and even at camps. Some people enjoy playing games above all things, and many people are blessed with a basic “game sense” that grants them a certain degree of success. But skill in serious strategy games, as opposed to those that are based on luck, can be developed, and many popular board and card games can be played by expert players at a very high intellectual level.  

Few games have attracted more thoughtful attention than chess, contract bridge, and the Japanese strategy game, go. Any library’s games section will have numerous books on chess strategy and on bridge, and a larger library is likely to have books on go; the internet is another obvious source of instruction. Mastery of certain basic skills and strategies in all these games can rapidly improve a player’s level of success, and all these games have organizations devoted to raising the level of play as well as to allowing young players of equal skill to test their abilities against one another in tournaments and other ranking events. If the youngster is interested in any of these games, there is literally no limit to what they can achieve.  

Even humbler and simpler games, like checkers, Monopoly, and other card games, have established strategies by which the most successful players play, and the internet has provided a forum for serious players that is also a great resource for novices who might wish to become serious themselves. There are tournaments held in all these games, too.  

More esoteric games—strategy games like Dungeons and Dragons, Scrabble, backgammon, and other patent card and board games like Uno and Five Crowns—all have their serious players, and once again the internet has enabled communities to form. There are even junior tournaments in Scrabble, and some schools even have competitive Scrabble teams that are every bit as disciplined and intense as school chess teams.
Even if the youngster only wants to become good enough to beat a grandparent at rummy now and then, the art of seeing any game as an assemblage of strategies, contingencies, and problems to be solved is powerful intellectual exercise. Along the way the child may also develop his or her number sense, spatial visualization skills, memory, powers of observation, and ability to visualize far ahead of play. (ALSO: The World and Its Cultures; Language, Literature, and History)

IDEA #104: Become an expert on something: ball bearings, the moons of Jupiter, the manufacture of lip gloss, the art of Renoir, the Crimean War. Learn as much as you can about the science or engineering or art or history behind your topic; offer to give a presentation on your subject to your class at school or to some other group.

At some point many children become at least temporarily obsessed with something, and parents or guardians can nurtures the idea of obsession and expertise. Even so, many other children have a difficult time latching onto something that is truly of great interest, and so it is the combined job of the family and the child to try to identify something that has the potential to become, if not an obsession, at least the center of a strong, deep interest.

Sometimes the subject can be elicited through a kind of Socratic dialogue with the child, trying to draw them out on some apparent interest, past of present. The interest might be related to sport, to family, to nature, to the arts, to a pet or a hobby—it does not matter. What does matter is that child begins to see value in amassing more than a superficial knowledge or skill and to reach the point where one piece of information invites the discovery of yet another, and so on, until the youngster’s knowledge may exceed that of those around and even become a source of pride.

Many school projects are designed around the idea that the student should find an interest and develop it, and the best of such projects succeed admirably in inspiring children. Sometimes the student may carry the interest forward with them, building upon it until true expertise is obtained.

There is of course a danger that a narrow and passionate interest will somehow run counter to the exigencies of school learning, or that the individual will indeed run the danger of boring friends and family with recitations of facts and figures. With regard to the former, a well-developed interest is regarded as the sign of a capable and disciplined mind, while it may
be up to those friends and family members to help give the young expert some perspective on where and when a demonstration of mastery might or might not be appropriate. But the child who possesses the curiosity and the discipline to develop a strong interest has acquired intellectual character of a fundamental and important sort.

(ALSO: The World and Its Cultures; Language, Literature, and History; The Arts and Creative Expression)

IDEA #105. Learn a common communication code. Morse code—dots and dashes—is great for sending or receiving messages, even if it is no longer a requirement for a basic amateur radio license. Or try semaphore, also known as wig-wag, which uses two flags to send alphanumeric messages, much like the colored signal flags used at sea.

Although the original uses of Morse code and semaphore communication have gone obsolete with improvements in electronic telecommunication, both are examples of highly successful attempts to make possible reliable communication over distance, and both still have some utility. The youngster interested in radio transmitting and not just listening can learn Morse (and thus qualify for an amateur radio license with special privileges; see IDEA #106, below); a flashlight can communicate a message in Morse in the darkness—in other words, the code can still do what it was invented to do, even if messages are no longer sent by telegraph operators. (Wikipedia, incidentally, has a great page on Morse code, with many linked resources.

Semaphore and signal flags can be used to send messages over much longer distances, and special “shorthand” groupings of just a few wig-wags or signal flags are still established ways of sending common messages; websites devoted to both these forms of communication can be found. While a full set of cloth signal flags can be expensive to buy or hard to make, paper duplicates can be made with crayons, paints, or markers. Two sets of semaphore flags—one for each friend or “station”—require only some cloth and sticks.

Children’s and young adult literature of an earlier era often featured “secret” communication using one or more of the methods suggested in this activity. Reading code is like knowing another language, with the added benefit of being a language that is well suited to technology-based communication.

Truly ambitious youngsters in search of a means of private communication might consider learning American Sign Language, not a code but a fully
developed language (that represents a culture, as well) whose complexity and grace—especially once the user passes the finger-spelling stage—is extraordinary and whose use is thought to play a significant role in developing certain language centers in the brain.

For the young learner who is simply entranced by codes, a whole world of cryptography can be opened up by an exploration of reference and specific materials in any library. With so much of the world of codes and ciphers based on mathematical principles, their study can have a very positive effect in the development of mathematical and analytical thinking skills.

(ALSO: Language, Literature, and History)

IDEA #106. Get your amateur radio operator’s license
A century ago amateur radio operators, who built and operated their own radio transmitters and receivers to explore the possibilities of what was then a new medium, were often regarded as the tech gurus of their time, revered in their communities the way we today admire expert coders and software developers.

Today there are still thousands of licensed radio amateurs, or “hams,” whose transmissions fill the airwaves on their allocated bands and who continue to tinker and improve the quality and capacities of their equipment. The licensing process is built on steps, but there is no lower age limit on licensure, which requires only that the operator pass a test based on a defined set of questions for which practice materials are readily available. Tests are offered through local radio clubs and given regularly.

In the United States the Amateur Radio Relay League partners with the Federal Communication Commission as a kind of clearinghouse for licensure and other information related to the amateur radio operations. Its website at www.arrl.org offers all the information the interested child would need to become a licensed operator.

Equipment, incidentally, has become much less expensive and esoteric in the Digital Age, so that a Technician Class amateur (the lowest license level) can find handheld transceivers for little more than the cost of a basic smartphone. Chores, odd jobs, or babysitting might offset this cost fairly quickly.

It should also be noted that there are a number of public schools in the United States that have radio clubs that own equipment and can guide students
toward becoming “hams,” often an entry point into sustained interests in engineering and technology.

And the other side of the radio coin is that it offers students an entry point to quite literally a world of new acquaintances. As skills, license levels, and equipment sophistication rise, so do opportunities for conversations with other radio amateurs across the globe.

(ALSO: The World and Its Cultures)
Celebrating Transitions and Interested Children

I remember the feeling I had in my last year working in a school, when the school had just finished its middle school-to-high school promotion ceremony, a happy event complete with student speeches, an eighth-grade class video, and a colleague fighting to hold back tears as she spoke about what she has learned from her students. It was a moment for all to remember.

The end of any school year is the season for such transitional events, from scouts crossing bridges and flying up to schoolchildren of all ages leaving behind classrooms, campuses, and most of all caring teachers, leaders, coaches, and other adults with whom they have developed relationships of all kinds over the past year or more. My social media feeds teem with photographs of happy kids, happy teachers, and happy families, and I get to feel just a bit older as my former students celebrate the transitions of their own children—including high school graduations. Over the years I’ve gotten to post a couple of those college graduation photos myself.

I like to think that each of these transitions marks, if not an Aha! Moment in a child’s life, at least a recognition of a changed, enhanced relationship with the world. I want to believe that kids making an upward leap to new challenges and new adventures are excited by the need to be a little more interested in, a little more engaged with the world they occupy—that each new challenge opens new doors of curiosity and maybe even passion, new perspectives on an existence rich with possibilities and connections.

And of course each of these new possibilities and connections carries with it just a bit more responsibility, a greater obligation to pay attention to the needs of those around them and the consequences of their own actions. This can be a wonderful and empowering thing, hard as it can sometimes be to shoulder those obligations.

It happens in our world that often we recognize and celebrate transitions and then take a break—summer vacation, for example—before actually moving on to the next experience. I hope that as we send our transitioning children off, or maybe accompany them, that we take advantage of the moments we have to encourage and nourish their interests and take seriously their potential as active, engaged citizens of the world, whether they’re Brownies, Webelos, middle schoolers, college graduates, or newly minted PhDs.

Here’s to The Interested Child, of all ages!