

what your baby learned today

(even if you only went to the grocery store)

by Hollace Schmidt Photographs by Marc Asnin

As a mom of three, it seems my to-do list keeps growing, and the time I have to get it done keeps shrinking. I sometimes worry that the one shortchanged while I scramble around is my youngest, Allison, who's now a little over a year old. I'm ashamed to admit I haven't pulled out even half of the toys I spent hours entertaining her siblings with, nor have I signed her up for a library storytime or Gymboree class. Instead, most of her days over the past year have been spent trailing me in the kitchen as I get meals together for everyone or riding in the back of our SUV to her sister's preschool or brother's soccer games.

What keeps me from feeling too guilty is that her pediatrician assures me she's developing quite well. It seems that our family's everyday life has provided Allison a great education so far. "Babies don't need expensive toys or advanced classes to learn about the world," says Debbie Glasser, Ph.D., a psychologist in Weston, Florida, and founder of NewsForParents.org. "Parents are their first and most influential teachers—and a baby's classroom is wherever he goes."

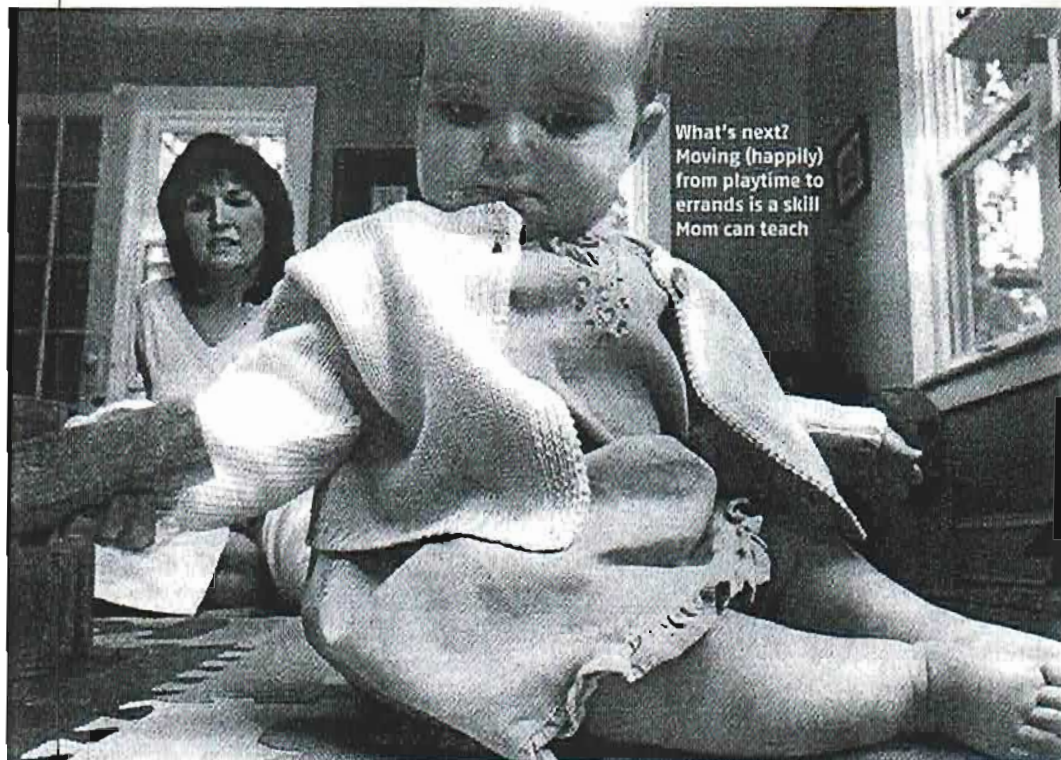
In fact, Glasser told me, even something as mundane as a trip to the grocery store is full of learning opportunities for babies. How could this be? Isn't the supermarket a place most moms, like me, wish they didn't have to drag their baby to? I put a recent morning shopping trip—just like the ones Allison and I have been going on for months—to the test. It turned out that our ordinary activities made great lessons:



8:00 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: GET DRESSED

Allison watches from her playpen while I shower, dress, and blow-dry my hair for our grocery-store excursion. I try so hard, thinking that this can't be too exciting for her. As it turns out, she's getting an action-packed demonstration on how to perform vital life skills. Experts say that babies learn by observing, so as she watches me, she's taking mental notes that a toothbrush goes in the mouth and that pants go on legs. The proof: Allison is pulling off her sock and trying to wriggle her toes back into it again. "You almost got it!" I tell her. She's so engrossed that I actually get an extra minute to swipe on a little mascara. More important, Glasser says, Allison gets time to practice her fledgling independence skills and gain self-confidence as I cheer her on from the sidelines. >>



What's next? Moving (happily) from playtime to errands is a skill Mom can teach

on her shoes, she makes it clear exactly who will decide when we leave (it isn't me). A better idea is to tell her in concrete terms about what's coming next by saying something like "We'll read one more book together and then it's time to go bye-bye." Even if your baby's too young to completely understand you, this will prepare him to shift gears.

9:15 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: DRIVE TO THE STORE

As I back out of the driveway, I peek at Allison strapped in her car seat and wonder if she considers our car her second home. I'm certainly not thrilled about

how much time I spend behind the wheel, running errands and shuttling the kids around town. And I worry: Can all this driving be any good for Allison? It actually can, experts say, because she's checking out her environment. When I comment on what's going on ("Look at that fire truck. Isn't the siren loud?"), I'm not just talking to myself, and though she can't answer me yet, she's listening and starting to associate words with what she's hearing and seeing, Pipes says.

9:25 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: LISTEN TO THE RADIO

Just before we get to the store, I turn on the radio. I know I should probably find some classical music for Allison's benefit, but my favorite Maroon 5 song comes on and I belt it out. No matter the genre of music or the fact that I'm completely off-key, Allison is learning to appreciate the joy that music brings, Glasser says. (So nice to know my goofy singing and dancing has a higher purpose!) Also, she's feeling the rhythm and being exposed to new words and sounds. To add to your baby's music lesson, scan through the channels for a station you don't normally listen to to expose your baby to more new sounds or even another language. >>

8:30 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: CHANGE DIAPER

Wearing just her diaper on the changing table, Allison has the hiccups from laughing so hard while I blow raspberries on her tummy. "I'm going to get that belly again," I say as she squeals in anticipation. It's the kind of playful moment she's loved since she was tiny, but there's a bonus: She's becoming aware of her body and learning language best the more she hears it spoken. So as I've been naming her parts when I touch them, she's been picking up on what they are called.

9:00 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: GET OUT THE DOOR

"Time to go to the store," I tell Allison. She waddles after me to the garage door and picks up her shoes. She's catching on to our routine! By following a similar pattern each morning—first I get dressed, then she gets dressed, then we get on shoes to go—she learns what to expect, making her feel safe and smart, says Tracy Pipes, a child life specialist at Children's Medical Center Dallas. However, I've also discovered how to make her really mad. If I scoop her up suddenly from her toys and start putting

9:30 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: SHOP FOR FOOD

We've made it to the store. After settling Allison into the cart, I fish out a toy I've cleverly thought to bring along so she doesn't get bored while I shop. That's certainly fine, say the experts, but I'm glad to learn that while she's shopping with me, Allison is taking on a full course load of math, science, and reading. With all of the grocery store's colors, numbers, letters, textures, and shapes, "there's hardly a place that can be a richer learning environment," says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D., coauthor of *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*.

When I ask Allison to help put two oranges into the bag, she feels their cool, pitted skin and sees their matching colors. As I'm browsing in the soup aisle where all the red and white cans are on the top shelves and the blue ones on the bottom, she's exposed to patterns, which Hirsh-Pasek tells me is how children begin to think mathematically. She reaches for graham crackers in the snack aisle because she's recognizing the squiggle lines and pictures from the box we have at home and is developing skills she'll need for reading. (And when I hand her the box to hold and she throws it on the floor? Physics, naturally!)

10:00 a.m.

LESSON PLAN:
THROW A TANTRUM

Cruising past the bakery section, Allison spots the sparkly sugar cookies that she taste-tested last week. She immediately starts

fussing and pointing. "No cookie today." I tell her, speed-walking past the display. Then, what I'm dreading: Her face scrunches up and she starts to wail. I want to shrink into the floor—but since I can't, I have an opportunity for Allison to learn how to manage her feelings, says Claire Lerner, child-development specialist at Zero to Three in Washington, DC. When I empathize ("I know you're mad that you can't have a cookie, but we're not having any

more sugary snacks") and then offer her a healthier snack that I packed in my bag, she starts to understand limits and self-control, Lerner says. She takes my Cheerios peace offering and I breathe a sigh of relief. (My lesson here: Keep that diaper bag stocked!)

If your baby is a tougher sell and a tantrum escalates, you may need to decide if you can ignore it and finish your shopping or just come back another time. What not to do: Cave in and go back for the cookie. Your baby will learn that if he throws a big enough fit, he'll get what he wants.

10:30 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: SMILE AT PEOPLE

At the checkout, the friendly cashier, Millie, waves to Allison and I lift up her hand and help her wave back.



Field trip! The store shelves are stocked with things to discover

Millie asks if I'd like plastic bags for the groceries and I answer, "yes, please" and then say "thank you" when she hands me my change. As I turn to leave, a neighbor walks up with her toddler son and we stand and chat for a few minutes. These are such simple exchanges, Lerner says, but it's good for Allison to observe different types of people and how they interact—and such social skills as congeniality and manners. >>

11:00 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: UNLOAD THE GROCERIES

Back home, I attempt to carry in the groceries with Allison on my hip. She squirms in my arms trying to get at the bags, so I let her hold one with a box of pasta in it. By giving her a little job to do, I'm **teaching her about cooperation**, Glasser says. She also gets to feel very important to be entrusted with such a big responsibility. When I encourage her ("You're such a great helper!"), she experiences how good it feels to be appreciated, which might actually make her want to help again. Babies and young toddlers often love to please and try out new skills, so why not take advantage of their eagerness? Get them in the habit of helping now and you'll have to nag less later.

11:15 a.m.

LESSON PLAN: SPEND TIME ALONE

I can't possibly manage to get groceries for a family of five put away with Allison tugging on my pant leg, so I pull out a stack of Tupperware to keep her busy. I feel a little bad because we haven't had time yet to read a book or play with her toys—and now she doesn't even get my attention. But as it turns out, some downtime can be as valuable as time with me, because she's **learning self-reliance**. When babies are left to their own devices in a safe and supervised setting, they become independent and resourceful and develop their creativity and imagination. They also begin to understand patience when they see that sometimes Mom is busy. I know Allison, though, so I know that

unless I work quickly, she'll be reaching up to be held within minutes. But I also know from experience with Joey and Hannah, Allison's older siblings, that her attention span will grow as she gets older.

I'm feeling much better about Allison being caught up in our family's busy life. One morning not long after our grocery-store trip, I watched—out of the corner of my eye, while doing three other things—as Allison spent a good ten minutes wrestling with a pair of stretchy pants until she got them on her legs. She pulled them only up to her knees, her diaper still hanging out the back, but she shuffled proudly around the bedroom as her brother, sister, and I clapped for her.

I don't think any baby class or educational toy could match that. —

Hallace Schmidt is a former newspaper reporter who lives in Bainbridge, Ohio.

Picture play: After a long day of learning from everything around her, Kate hits the books

