

Curious about Our World

A few years ago, Aunt Hannah rescued a giant laminated wall map of the world from the neighbor's trash and gave it to us. We put it up on the wall opposite our breakfast room, where, at the time, many of our learning activities occurred. The map had an immediate and unexpected impact on the kids. They gathered excitedly around it and began to ask questions about the places we found. They stood in rapt attention as I told them what little I knew about each country, and then begged for more.

Honestly, this is not a homeschool parent's fantasy. They loved that big map, and referenced it frequently. Since then the breakfast room has become a bedroom, and the map came down. Now they've asked me repeatedly to put it back up again.

I'm so grateful for their curiosity about our world and fascination with that map. Sadly, I lost my own connection with that curiosity somewhere along the way. Maybe it had something to do with being coerced into memorizing states and capitals. Places to which I've never been and about which I have little curiosity are still taking up much-needed storage capacity – though I admit to having forgotten most of them (Boise, oddly, remains, unsure whether it belongs to Idaho or Iowa). These studies belonged to the discipline we called Geography, and if you approached this territory, you needed to have a sharp memory for place names and the shape of things.

If I wanted to suggest ways to memorize the names of things and their shapes – particularly states and countries – I would certainly suggest puzzles. I would also encourage that you do the puzzle face-down (the puzzle, not you, although you would have to be facing down to do the puzzle). I'm no expert on mnemonic devices, though, and I've discovered that we don't have much trouble remembering the things – even reams of things – we're really motivated about and happy to learn. One of my sons knows dozens of the episodes of the Doctor Who series by name and air

date, and what happened in history the week those shows aired. Another can tell you an enormous amount of information about Japanese pop culture and the films of Hayao Miyazaki. My daughter can receive what is to me an unintelligible barrage of commands in French from her ballet teacher, and then execute them in sequence without hesitation. They did not need puzzles or mnemonic devices to learn these things, and most of them they did not learn face down.

So what about Geography? I believe we are all naturally curious about the world, until those who are trying to help us unintentionally demotivate us by formalizing it, making it difficult and boring. If we simply provide children with access to the tools through which they can discover our amazing world – pictures, books, videos, maps, and especially travel – they will learn quite naturally. If the adults in their lives are curious about the world, that will make a difference, as well.

Will they have gaps, you may ask? Probably. They may grow up not knowing whether Boise is the capital of Iowa or Idaho. If they ever need to know, however, they'll Google it.

Speaking of Google, if you need inspiration to regain your curiosity about the world, discover Google Maps. You can see the whole world from space, and then zoom in with detailed satellite images of everywhere from your own street to Zimbabwe. Or Boise, Idaho, for that matter. Now that is cool!