

Gardening with young children—dig in!

Spring is a wonderful time to introduce children to the wonders of gardening. Young children learn by experiencing “hands on” and by having opportunities to think about, re-visit, and question their experiences. Through gardening, you can encourage this hands-on curiosity and discovery.

What might children learn while gardening?

To name just a few, children will learn about:

- Science and nature when exploring plants.
- Math skills when counting scoops of dirt.
- Reading, writing, and drawing through stories, books, and activities, such as creating a garden journal.
- Social relationships as they work with other children and adults.

Get ready to dig in

Gardening does not have to be overwhelming, nor does it have to be an everyday or every week experience. Gardening can be part of the natural environment you create in working with children. Try creating an environment where meaningful exploration can occur and provide children the opportunity to practice taking care of a plant or garden, and the opportunity to explore their ideas freely. Young children can have a positive gardening experience simply by starting a seed or bulb, digging in dirt, or taking care of a house plant. Where and how you start gardening with children is based on a few considerations:

- Reflect on what the children (and you) want to discover about gardening. Make a list of children’s names and beside each name, write their ideas (display so children can see; add pictures and symbols if needed).
- Spark ideas by looking at gardening books written for working with children.
- Consider what you will need and have access to (outside/inside areas, lighting, water, materials to support plants and gardening, such as tools, containers, seeds, and plants).

Consider safety

Be safe and use good judgment when working with young children. Know which plants are safe for children, and be aware of what is in the potting soil. Read the label carefully and ask your local garden center about potting soil that is best for young children. This is the same for seeds. Some seeds (and bulbs) are coated with chemicals harmful to young children. Seeds should not be used with children under the age of three. Watch also if using water or tools with young children. All activities and materials should be well supervised.

Contact the **National Poison Control hotline** (800-222-1222) for information on poisonous plants and seeds.

[National Capital Poison Center](#)

[The Poison Control Center](#)

Take time to reflect on what the children (and you) want to discover about gardening.

Nurture the growth

Caring for something, nurturing its growth, and developing a positive relationship with nature are some of the most important skills and opportunities practiced in gardening. For some children, this may be their first experience involving any aspect of nature, gardening, or caring for a living thing. You are the role model for children; if you don't like to touch dirt or worms, for example, neither will the children. Your goals will be offering what the child needs to have success and offering experiences for children to gain the most they can from the project or experience.

You can help by asking yourself:

- What might the children need to explore about this idea?
- What can I do to support their ideas and guide learning and exploring?
- How are they responding to what is offered?
- How can I document this experience so the children can revisit their ideas and share with others, such as their families?



Tip:

If children have to wait for a turn during a gardening activity, have them draw in garden journals (notebooks or pages stapled together), dig in a container of dirt, or have a basket available filled with books on gardening or related themes.



Dig in!

Encourage the children to participate and to help in the process of gardening. Suggest ways to predict, measure, and care for the ongoing growth of their seed or plant. (Taking photographs may help children revisit and organize thoughts about the experience).

Children may be able to:

- Help get supplies ready (line table with newspaper, pass out supplies, fill watering can, etc.)
- Scoop dirt into the pots or dig the ground and soil
- Water and mist the plants
- Count seeds
- Draw pictures of seed, growth, plant, etc.



Watching a plant grow and change, as well as possibly produce a flower or fruit, shows children that their efforts to treat the plant respectfully and nurture its growth have made a difference. Through gardening, not only do plants grow, but children grow, too. Give them the tools, dig deep, and watch how their garden grows!