

Supermarketing¹

By Carol J. Castellano

My daughter Serena loves our weekly trips to the supermarket. Her fun begins outside the store, where she chooses just the right basket to sit in. Then we make the automatic doors open. This must seem like some sort of magic to a child, opening onto an interesting world of smells and sounds and tastes and people and, from a parent's point of view, learning opportunities. Serena was three years old when we began our supermarket routine. You can adjust your "lessons" to the level of age of your child.

"Serena, Daddy needs some pears," I announce as we enter the produce department and we begin to choose a few. "Is this a good one?" I ask her. "Does it have a good smell? See how it feels. Here's the stem! Oh, look, there a leaf on that stem! Let's get a plastic bag to put our pear in."



Serena helps me peel a bag off the roll and helps to tear it along its perforated edge. As we put in the pears, we count them. "One, two, three, four. That's one for Daddy, one for Mommy, one for Serena, and one for John. Do you think that's enough pears? Let's feel them through the bag. Can you feel four pears in there?" On to the apples. "Hmmm, these apples feel different from the pears, and they smell different, too. But look they have stems. Apples and pears both have stems."

We go on through the produce department discussing each of the fruits and vegetables that our family eats. I find that giving Serena a personal fact or two about each item makes it more meaningful to her. "Mommy likes Delicious. Daddy likes Macintosh." Or we might sing a song (Apples and Bananas, or Day-O) or talk about the guacamole we're going to make out of the avocado. I also use storybook details to expand Serena's world. "Look, here is parsley, just like Peter Rabbit was looking for in Mr. MacGregor's garden." In these circumstances, Serena is very willing to handle and explore things she ordinarily would be reluctant to touch, such as lettuce or broccoli.

In order to give her an idea of how much food a supermarket sells, I tell her to lean over and reach out her hand. "This is a long aisle! Serena, they have cookies and cookies and cookies

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<https://nfb.org/sites/www.nfb.org/files/images/nfb/publications/fr/fr14/fr04se07.htm>



and cookies and cookies and cookies in this aisle!” I tell her as her hand passes over package after package. We do this in several aisles, using items that she is particularly fond of or interested in. I include as much incidental information as I think Serena can absorb while still having fun. If the new information can build on something already known, it will be easier for the child to learn. For example, “The bread in this package is made from wheat. Do you remember when we saw the wheat at the farm?” You could include whatever information would be relevant to your child. Think about what knowledge he or she already has that could be added to.

Serena’s favorite aisle, after cookies, is the dairy aisle. She loves to handle and count the packages of cheese, the containers of milk and orange juice, and the eggs in the carton. All kinds of learning can go on here. “This carton of milk is much smaller than the carton of orange juice.” (Use the terms quart and half-gallon if your child is ready for them.) “Wow, the orange juice is so heavy I can hardly pick it up.” We drop it cautiously into the cart behind her and listen for the thud. “The juice inside the container comes from oranges just like the ones we chose before. You have to cut the orange open and squeeze it to get the juice out. Serena, help Mommy check the eggs. We don’t want to bring home any broken ones. Let’s count them. Twelve, that’s a dozen. We’ll have these eggs for breakfast tomorrow.”

I try to let Serena take each item from the shelf. If she cannot reach, I put it in her lap so she can look at it. Then I say, “Let’s put it in the basket BEHIND you.” Heavy emphasis on the “behind” got Serena to learn that particular preposition and its meaning very easily. The supermarket cart seat is also good for “beside you” and “next to you” and Mommy is standing “in front of you.” You can practice memory skills by asking “Do you remember where I put the bananas? Yes, they’re on the seat next to you.”

Throughout the store we talk about shapes and sounds and textures. “The peanut butter jar is round.” “The macaroni in this box makes a lot of noise when you shake it. When the macaroni is cooked, does it still make noise? No, soft things don’t make much noise.” “These potatoes are dusty with dirt. They grow in the ground, right in the dirt. We’ll have to scrub them really well before we cook them.”

We make a stop at the courtesy desk. “Mommy has to get the check approved. Here, Serena, could you hold the checkbook for me? Now hand it to me, please, and hold my pen.” I think using proper terms such as “courtesy desk” and “approved” gives the child the best exposure to the activity and expands the vocabulary as well.

Finally, to the checkout, “Serena do you hear the cash registers ringing? We’re at the checkout counter now. Mommy is putting the groceries on the conveyer belt. Do you want to feel it move? Look, here are the pretzels we took off the shelf before. I took them out of the basket and put them up here. Now the cashier will tell me how much money our groceries cost. As soon as I pay we can take our groceries home.”



Usually by this time three packages of snacks are open, we are both tired, and we can't wait to get home. But I know the fatigue is worth it, because after every trip to the market, Serena has learned at least a few things and has further solidified the knowledge she had before. She is more understanding of, and drawn into, the comings and goings of the world around her.



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