

Geography

We'd be lost without it!

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The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page. – St. Augustine

Geography is the study of the physical earth and people's responses to their environment. This subject, once heavily emphasized in early American education, is now too often neglected, leaving many Americans geographically illiterate. Think of the horror stories of students who were unable to identify the United States on a world map or the ocean off the coast of California. As responsible citizens, Christians should teach their children about God's world. How can they witness to the ends of the earth if they cannot even find their way there, much less understand the culture once they have arrived? For Christians to impact the world, they need to be aware of their surroundings, now more than ever.

And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15, NKJV)

Fortunately, studying geography does not need to be the painful, boring classroom experience I suffered through in the eighth grade. Recently new geography resources and methods have exploded. Here are activities that my family enjoyed over the years. Implement just a few ideas, and your family will love geography in no time.

Geography with a Mission

The 10/40 Window is an area that contains the largest population of non-Christians in the world. It extends from ten degrees to forty degrees north of the equator and stretches from North Africa to China. Many websites and books address this area. Your family can combine prayer and research on 10/40 Window countries for a meaningful geography study, and you might choose to support a missionary, sponsor a child, cook food from that country, listen to the language, or learn about wildlife, habitats, government, or the social structure. One especially useful book is *Strongholds of the 10/40 Window*, published by www.ywampublishing.com. YWAM has many other awesome resources for the whole family. If you are interested in sponsoring a child, check out www.newmissions.org. Our sons have been on mission trips to Haiti through New Missions, and our family sponsors children through the ministry.

National Geographic Bee

As National Geographic Bee states on its website (www.nationalgeographic.com/geography-bee), this nationwide geography competition, designed for U.S. students in grades four through eight, encourages teaching and learning geography. Our family participated in this bee for a number of years, and I can attest to the motivating factor of studying for it, the excitement of participating in it, and the amount of interesting material learned in the process. You need only six students between grades four and eight to organize a bee.

A Literary Approach

How about geography through literature? I love books. I love reading them, writing them, and discussing them. If your family loves books too, try this: When reading, simply make an effort to focus on geographic references. From the Bible to *Beowulf* and *Heidi* to Henty, you can discover

all kinds of geography learning opportunities. Making maps of characters' journeys and other places mentioned in books can be both enjoyable and educational.

Another literary approach is Flat Stanley, an intentional traveler made out of paper or cardstock. In a book by the same name, Stanley (a little boy) becomes flattened and gets to see the world via the postal service. Now websites and numerous Yahoo groups are dedicated to helping children send their own flat travelers around the country and the world. In exchange for sending your traveler somewhere else, typically you volunteer to host another family's traveler. We belonged to a Yahoo group consisting primarily of homeschooling families. Our flat travelers went to New Zealand and a multitude of states. We also hosted travelers in Delaware and even took a dozen with us to Williamsburg. (Hint: hosting twelve at a time is too many!) The official website is <http://flatstanely.enoreo.on.ca>.

Cuisine and Currency

Anytime I tied food into our studies, I had my boys' undivided attention. Whether they were sampling dishes from around the world or making cookie dough maps of the Thirteen Colonies, they enjoyed eating their way through geography. (Editor note: see the article in this issue titled "The Incredible, Edible Map" by Audrey Smith.)

Does your family enjoy coin collecting? Here is a twist: The United States Currency Tracking Project, "Where's George?", tells you where the dollars in your wallet came from and where they will head next. Go to www.wheresgeorge.com and follow the simple directions for registering your dollar bills. The last dollar bill I found with a "Where's George?" note on it had been to several states in a matter of days. Of course, some of your dollars will end up in a piggy bank somewhere, never to resurface, so the more dollars you release the better your chances for tracking. Post a chart on the wall listing your dollars and where they have been sighted. A large U.S. wall map or even an atlas will be useful for following George around the country. As of this writing, over seventy million bills are registered at this website.

Treasure Hunts

Treasure hunts are an ideal way to introduce geographic concepts. From the simple "look under the table or behind the door" to the advanced "walk seven paces north by northeast," treasure hunts suit and intrigue all ages. I taught a group of older children how to read a compass then set them out on a hunt. Although they needed some help occasionally, they eventually found the box of goodies we had buried in the yard. This makes a great birthday party activity too.

Travel for Treasure

Letterboxing and geochaching are growing rapidly in popularity and can provide great family fun and adventure while getting the family outdoors to explore new places locally, nationally, and even internationally. They provide opportunities to teach your children many skills and are an appealing mix of treasure hunting, navigating, and exploring – a modern day adventure that the entire family can enjoy.

Letterboxing originated in England and became popular in the U.S. after an article about it appeared in *Smithsonian Magazine* in April 1998. The premise is simple: Take a small waterproof container, put a journal and a stamp inside that represents your area, and hide the container in a place that is legally accessible to the public. Write clues about how to find it and post these clues on www.letterboxing.org. Or go letterboxing yourself. The website has clues available for most states and a number of countries. Bring along a family journal and stamp it when you find each box. There is a special kids section on the website as well. Before setting out on a trip, check to see if any boxes are hidden along your route and make time to hunt for them. This is a great diversion for long car rides, and for many families, it has developed into a hobby everyone enjoys.

Geocaching is similar to letterboxing for people who love gadgets. It follows the same premise, except that instead of geographic, treasure-hunt-style clues you have to follow latitude and longitude coordinates with a handheld GPS unit. Instead of a stamp, many geocaches have little “treasures” in them. From baseballs and maps to CDs and even money, there is supposed to be a little gift as a reward for finding the cache. When you take a reward you are supposed to replace it with a different treasure for the next geocacher. These caches may be hidden in a nearby park or high on a rugged mountain or even deep in the ocean. You can find a full explanation of how to get started as www.geocaching.com.

BookCrossing

The goal on BookCrossing’s website is to “make the whole world a library.” Book lover that I am, I find this brilliant. Imagine if thousands of homeschooling families shared their favorite works, especially those with Christian themes, with the secular world. The concept is simple: Take a book you love, register it at www.bookcrossing.com, then “release” it for someone else to find and read. You will be notified by e-mail each time someone records journal entries for that book. If you make release notes on the book, others can go hunting for it. Go ahead and buy an extra copy of *Pilgrim’s Progress* or *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and release it into the wild. Who knows whose life you will touch!

With some effort, imagination, and a sense of fun, you can make geography your family’s favorite subject. In the process you and your children will learn more about God the Creator and His creation.