

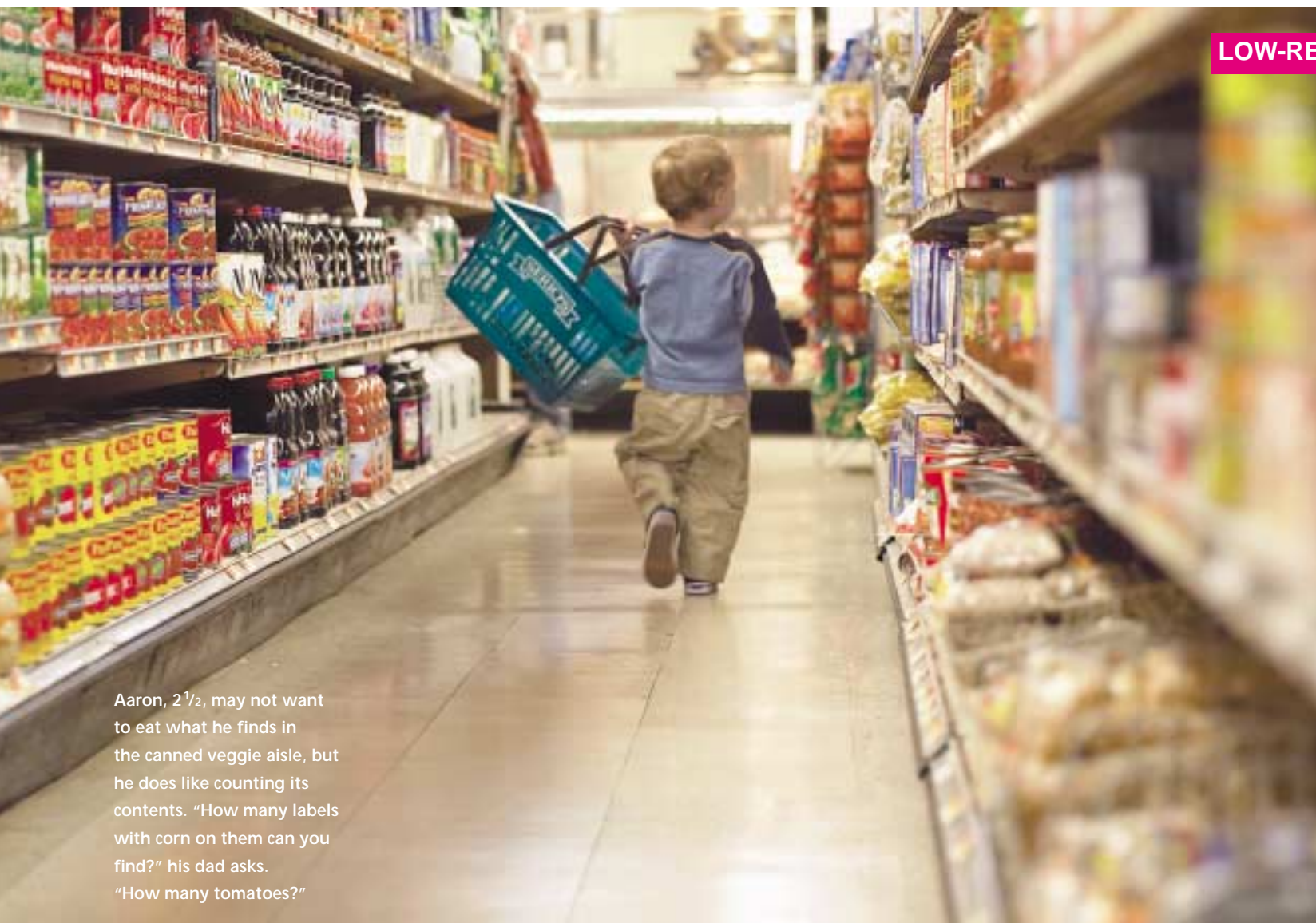
Ruby, 2½, sorts items by color as she puts them on the conveyor belt at the checkout. Or does she have a different sorting “rule” in mind?



LOW-RES

one banana, two banana...

Four simple games that will turn your next trip to the grocery store into an adventure in math. BY SHOSHANA MARCHAND



Aaron, 2½, may not want to eat what he finds in the canned veggie aisle, but he does like counting its contents. "How many labels with corn on them can you find?" his dad asks. "How many tomatoes?"

When my children were tiny, I used to count aloud as I dressed them for the day. One, as the first sock slipped on. Two, for the second. Then one shoe, two shoes. Once they were old enough to pick up on the words Mommy was singsonging, the kids joined in, and math play would extend throughout our day, up and down our 11 stairs and through three loads of laundry.

For my children, numbers games still help counteract the boredom that can set in when I am too busy to entertain them. When we're at the grocery store, for instance, I like to have not just a shopping list in hand but also an array of activities in mind to challenge the kids' counting

and sorting skills. That way, I'm prepared for anything—including a cheese department that's not handing out samples.

Scavenger Shop This classic game usually involves kids hunting for items in the house or the neighborhood, but they also can do it in the market. To avoid having to go on a hunt yourself, limit the scavenger game to the aisle or department you're in, or ask your child to search only the shelves right next to your cart. When you turn the corner into the cereal aisle, challenge your child to find Dad's favorite brand, then maybe two cereals with pictures of raisins

on the box. Each aisle is a new hunting ground.

Questions to ask: How many sizes of canned tomatoes are there? Can you find five colors of yogurt containers?

Weight Training The scale in the produce department may be the best tool in the store for learning and fun. Let your child help you weigh items, especially when you're buying various types of produce. My youngest used to enjoy simply watching the arm on the scale move with each added piece. Toddlers and preschoolers can count the items as you place them on the scale and note how much they weigh.

Questions to ask: Why do three apples weigh less than two cantaloupes? Which will weigh more, four apples or four oranges? "The oranges are bigger but they aren't as heavy," explained my neighbor's daughter during a shopping trip.

3-2-1 Countdown Kids can practice counting backward as well as forward by using your shopping list—even if they're nowhere near the reading stage. If you write nice and big, and cross off items as you toss them into your cart, a child can count the number of objects remaining on the list. My daughter Bella also likes to figure out which is the store's center aisle. We count the aisles, divide the total in half, then count again

to the midpoint. Bella gets to pick one item from that aisle as a treat.

Questions to ask: Are there more items in our shopping cart or more remaining on our list? Which aisle will we end up in if we start in aisle 11 and move back three?

Conveying a Rule When you're finished shopping and get to the checkout, let your child help you put your groceries on the conveyor belt. Sort items according to various rules you both make up. You might start with color, putting the tomato, the strawberries, the apple, and red paper plates together. The green sponge sits alongside the broccoli and the green apple-scented dish detergent. With older kids, move on to more challenging categorization, such as by shape, size, or edible versus inedible.

Questions to ask: What do the broccoli and sponge have in common? How are they different in shape, size, and shade of green? And why is that man with three items in his basket behind us in line fidgeting so impatiently? ●

Shoshana Marchand, a mother of three, has been known to clog up a supermarket aisle while she gives her children an impromptu math lesson. Her writing has appeared on Salon.com and in Rolling Stone, Harper's, and FamilyFun.

Fun Facts

Next time you're at a grocery store, see if you notice: Green, brown, and red are the most popular colors of food, and there are almost no naturally blue foods. Source: Infoplease.com.

From left: Ruby narrows her hunt of pasta boxes; the produce department weighs in as *the* place to be for fun; and Aaron earns points for knowing which aisle is which.



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