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Road Trip Conlanging with Kids

Over a decade ago I moved 350 miles from my parents. This has meant many long drives with children in my car. I have developed several games to keep them occupied beyond the usual license plate bingo and I-spy that we started with. One of these games is the “Car Conlang game” or “Carlanging” for short. This game would pair nicely with reading *Frindle* by Andrew Clements, in the car, at home or in the classroom too, but we’ll just stick to the car here.

With small children, creating a language together in the car can be as simple as making up common nouns and adjectives and using them throughout the drive (or the trip) in place of their native language equivalents. You can further gamify this level of carlanging by declaring that forgetting to use your newly minted words means an instant loss of the game. Little kids like to catch their parents using the wrong words. You could keep score, but we generally don’t.

As kids get older, they can bring a more sophisticated understanding of grammar to the game, which provides an opportunity to expand their knowledge beyond what they’ve learned in school. This can be an excellent way to introduce concepts like number, agreement, conjugation, tense, aspect, mode, and case. If you haven’t tackled phonology much, this is a great time to get into the nitty gritty of sounds and how they go together.

We travel with notebooks, sketchbooks, pens, art supplies, and tablets (of the electronic sort), and one of the kids gets to be the scribe. More recently, I’ve added a voice recorder app that skips silences. (It’s great for getting conlanging and worldbuilding ideas down on the go too.) Make sure to bring your silliest, most ridiculous test phrases and sentences and encourage the kids to come up with their own. For example, your second grader will find “The hamster wears tiny underpants” a delight to translate.

Have fun out there!