Orion for kids: the belt, the sword and the red shoulder

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Find three stars in a row, then the red star above them, the blue-white one below and the fuzzy patch in the sword. Orion with a child, December to February.

To find Orion, look south-east in the late evening in December, or high in the south in January and February evenings, for three bright stars in a short, straight row: Orion's belt. Above it is a red-orange star, Betelgeuse, at one shoulder of the shape. Below it is a blue-white one, Rigel. Hanging under the belt is a short line of fainter stars, the sword, and the middle one looks fuzzy: that's the Orion Nebula, where new stars are being made. Peabody's guide How to find Orion in winter has the same steps, and Sky Tonight tells you when it's dark enough from a ZIP that never leaves your phone.

When to look

Orion is a winter shape. In early December it rises in the east around 9 pm, so it's well up only for late-night families. By January it's up in the south-east by 8 pm, and in February it's high in the south as soon as it's dark. For most families with young children, January and February evenings are the easy months.

The belt first

The belt is the easiest thing in the winter sky: three stars of nearly the same brightness, evenly spaced, in a line about as long as two fingers held side by side at arm's length. Nothing else in the sky looks like it. Give your child the job of finding "three stars in a row" and let them spot it.

The red shoulder

Above the belt and to the left, as you face south, is Betelgeuse. Ask your child what colour it is. Most children say orange or red, and they're right: it's a huge, old star, and its colour shows even to bare eyes. Put it next to Rigel, below and to the right, which is blue-white and a little brighter, and the difference in colour is plain even from a town.

Two fainter stars make the other corners. With Betelgeuse and Rigel, they draw a big box around the belt. That box, with the belt across its middle, is the shape most people mean by Orion.

The sword and the fuzzy star

Below the belt is a short line of fainter stars, the sword. Look at the middle one for a while. It doesn't look like a sharp point; it looks smudged. That smudge is the Orion Nebula, a cloud of gas where new stars are forming. Binoculars make it much clearer: a small misty patch with a few stars in it.

Follow the belt to four more

The belt is a pointer, like the Big Dipper's two stars.

- Down and to the left: Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky.
- Up and to the right: Aldebaran, an orange star.
- Further on the same line: the Pleiades, a tiny, misty cluster of stars.

One shape gives a child four more to name. Write them on a card and tick them off.

What Orion has to do with shooting stars

Every October, the Orionids seem to come from near Betelgeuse. They are dust from Halley's Comet. In 2027 they peak on the night of 21–22 October with a 56% Moon, which makes Peabody's verdict "so-so": worth twenty minutes after midnight if someone's up. The Orionids page has the rest.

A short outing that works

1. Wrap up and go out about an hour after sunset in January.
2. Face south-east or south, and wait while eyes get used to the dark, away from screens.
3. Find the belt, then the red star, then the fuzzy one. Three finds is a whole lesson.
4. Draw it when you come in: three dots in a row, a box around them, the sword below.

Three questions grown-ups ask

Why does the middle of the sword look fuzzy and the rest don't? The other stars are single points of light. The middle one is a glowing cloud of gas with young stars inside it, spread out enough for eyes to notice.

Can we see Orion from the Southern Hemisphere? Yes, upside down from the way we see it, and in their summer.

Do we need a telescope? No. Bare eyes for the shape, binoculars for the nebula.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads and no sign-up. Back inside, the library has stories at your child's reading level.

Sources

- Peabody's guide, How to find Orion in winter: the stars, the rising times and the belt as a pointer.
- American Meteor Society, meteor shower calendar 2026–2027: the Orionids' peak; the Moon that night is from Peabody's sky table, worked out with astronomy-engine.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/orion-for-kids