

Family Fun Guide

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Nothing's more important than taking care of your family. The bonds you develop when your children are young and in your care are critical for their future happiness – and yours. Spending time together having fun is a great way to develop meaningful relationships.

In today's economy, it can be hard to go out and have fun together because of the expense. But there are many ways you can have fun with your family for little or no cost. Using your creativity is your best asset.

Let's look at a few activities that you can do with your family to form close connections. The more you get your children involved in planning and participating, the more fun you'll have with them.

Game Night

Most kids love playing board games or card games. You can have a weekly game night to help spend time together and have fun. Board games also teach critical skills such as taking turns, sharing, counting, and reading.

There are games for just about any age. Even if your child doesn't read, you can find games that use colors or simple pictures. Very young children can also play on a team with an adult. Board games and card games are inexpensive items and can be used over and over.

Simple snacks (such as popcorn and fruit punch) are also a great addition to your game night. Your kids will start to look forward to this family fun night each week and can help take turns choosing the games and snacks.

Nature Walk

Kids love nature, and it's great as an adult to slow down and take time to observe and enjoy it. If you have a park nearby with nature trails, you can take a short hike with the kids. Help them make small journals out of paper where they can draw what they see.

Small magnifying glasses and plant and animal guides can help you learn more about your natural surroundings. You may even want to bring a small sack to collect items. When you go home, you can use construction paper and glue to make a collage of your treasures.

Even if you don't have a park nearby, you can often take a walk right outside your door to find nature. Kids will enjoy discovering things in their own yard that they hadn't previously noticed in their daily play.

Taking nature walks in different seasons can help your kids also learn about how nature changes through the year. You can point out the different things you can spot in one season that aren't present in others.

Backyard Camping

Most kids love camping, but going far away can be very time consuming and can get expensive with all of the gear you need to buy. Try camping in the backyard so that you don't have to go very far and you still have some of the luxuries from home.

You will need a tent and some sort of sleeping bag or even just a comforter for each person. You can cook out on the grill and tell ghost stories with your flashlight in the night. But when someone needs a bathroom or you need a little electricity, you're not too far from home.

This is also good practice if you'd like to take a camping trip away from home. Your kids can get used to what it's like to sleep in the great outdoors. Then when it's time to go farther away, they'll already be accustomed to what camping is like.

Crafts

One of the most successful family activities you'll experience is making crafts. You can use all kinds of materials to create fun items. Try collecting things like paper towel rolls, egg cartons, and old newspaper. Then let your family's creativity run wild.

Keeping supplies such as glue, paint, staples, scissors, tape, and markers can help turn any everyday object into art. Let your children display their items in their rooms or in a family room. You can replace them the next time you make a craft or when the season changes.

Local Museums

Education is critical for children, and taking them to local museums can be an opportunity for hands-on learning. Many museums are free to residents or at least have a free night for the community.

Call your local art, history, or science museum to find out what nights are free or very inexpensive. Have your kids bring a journal to draw or write about their favorite exhibits. Then talk about it as a family when you get home.

Tour Your Own Town

Most towns – even small ones – have tourist attractions. However, most people have never even seen the attractions in their own town! Spend a day going to look at places in your own area where you've never visited.

You can make it more fun for the kids by getting a free map from your chamber of commerce or visitor's center. Talk with the family about where you'll be going and map out the different spots you'll visit.

To commemorate your "tour" take lots of photos and then compile them in an inexpensive photo album when you get home. You'll have fun getting out the album and talking about the events of the day.

Put on a Play or Puppet Show

Kids love to use their imaginations. Turn your living room into a puppet theatre or put on a live play. Let kids write a script and make costumes and props. Then use some rope and a sheet to create a curtain.

If you have a video camera, make sure you tape your children's production. They'll get a kick out of watching their younger selves performing. Encourage them to do as much on their own as they can, but make sure you help with anything for which they need an adult.

Plant a Garden

When the weather is nice, you can help your children plant a garden. Even if they just want to plant a few small indoor plants, you can get them involved in the idea of growing their own food. Allow kids to be responsible for specific plants – making sure they're watered and weeded.

Some easy plants for kids to grow include lettuces, peas, tomatoes, and just about any herb. When it's time to harvest, show children how to take what they've grown and turn it into a delicious meal. You'll be encouraging family time and healthy eating.

Scavenger Hunt

Scavenger hunts are fun activities for families. If you have another family you're close to, you can join up and have a scavenger hunt contest. Come up with a list of things to search for in your town or actions you can take. Bring along a digital camera and get started.

Some good ideas for scavenger hunts include: town landmarks, mall scavenger hunt (great for bad weather days), neighborhood hunt (collecting items from willing neighbors), and nature hunts. Make clue sheets for each team and whoever collects the items first is the winner.

You can make it even more fun by assigning a prize for the winners. For example, make a silly "trophy" out of everyday household items. Or the losing team has to do some sort of simple service for the winners.

Family Cooking Night

Moms and dads don't have to be the only ones to help prepare a meal. Get the kids involved in planning the menu, shopping for groceries, and cooking the food. Plan to spend a little more time than usual preparing this meal to allow for younger children to help.

If you really want to get creative you can make a "restaurant" and allow the kids to take family member's orders and serve the food. They'll be having fun and you'll get a little bit of a break at dinnertime.

Picnic

Having a picnic is always a favorite with kids. If the weather is good, you can have a picnic outdoors. But when the weather is rainy or too cold for picnic, an indoor picnic is a fun treat. Spread a blanket on the living room floor and eat your lunch on it.

Great items for picnics include fried chicken, sandwiches, chips, fruit, fresh veggies and dip, lemonade, and cookies. Let the kids help make the meal and pack the picnic basket. Don't forget to bring napkins and utensils.

Letter Writing

If you have family members or friends that live away, organizing a family letter-writing night is fun. Have each person write a note or draw a picture for the distant relatives. Then place them all in one large envelope and send them off in the mail.

You may even get lucky and get a written response from the family. This is a fun way to begin a pen pal relationship with people you don't get to see very often. It's always fun getting real mail in the mailbox. You can also exchange pictures or small gifts.

Plan an Etiquette Dinner

It's always nice when children (and adults) have good manners. You can make learning manners fun by having an etiquette dinner. Make or order in a fancy meal and dress in your very best. Use cloth napkins and pretty dishes.

Teach children about how to set the table properly, to put their napkins in their laps, and how to pull the chairs out properly. You should also discuss the proper way to eat foods using utensils and to eat with their lips closed.

While many people don't worry too much about manners with their children at home, it's a good idea to teach them proper manners so they're ready for any social situation. You may even want to have them practice polite dinner conversation.

Put the Puzzle Pieces Together

Puzzles are a fun way to have family together time that don't cost much money. You can set the puzzle on a table and leave it out or you can use a puzzle mat to put it away when you're not working on it. Kids and adults alike enjoy putting the pieces together.

When you're finished with the puzzle you can disassemble it and save it for another time. Or you can preserve it and frame it so you can always see the fruits of your labors. The older your children are, the more challenging the puzzle should be.

Service Project

As a family, it's always fun to serve others together. There are lots of things you can do to help out other people. You can volunteer as a family to serve food at a local soup kitchen or shelter. You can work together to pick up trash at a park.

You may also find fun in visiting a nursing or retirement home together. You can even just bake cookies as a family and deliver them to your neighbors. Small acts of kindness go a long way and you can create a lasting bond with your family when you work together to serve others.

Prepare for an Emergency

It's a good idea to spend time learning how to take care of things in emergency situations. Spend a day or two making a map of your house and talking with your family about a plan if a disaster happens. You should come up with escape routes and a place to meet.

You can also talk about fire safety tips such as stop, drop, and roll and what to do if they hear the smoke alarm go off. Draw pictures of ways to stay safe in your home. If you're in an area where specific natural disasters such as tornadoes and earthquakes occur, talk about those, too.

Learn a New Skill

As a family it's fun to learn how to do something new. You might try taking a family cooking class, learn to play a new sport, or attend an art class together. Many community centers offer inexpensive classes where children and adults are welcome to learn together.

Once you've learned a new skill, make sure to keep up practicing it outside of class. Arrange nights to play the new sport or cook a family friendly meal together. Practicing new skills will keep you all from forgetting them.

Fun Doesn't Have to Be Expensive

Having fun together as a family doesn't have to cost a lot of money. As much as possible you should let your creativity take center stage. Use objects that you already have in your home and visit places that are nearby and free or inexpensive. The main thing is to develop positive relationships with your children while having fun!



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