



52

Ways Families Can Spend Time Together

One of a series of Parent Guides from

**THE
PARENT
INSTITUTE®**

Parent Guide

52 Ways Families Can Spend Time Together

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Introduction

A closet-full of the latest fashions won't do it. Neither will the hottest new toy. Even the most exciting electronic game is no substitute.

As much as your child might beg for any of the above, none of them is really what she wants and needs most of all. Instead, her most important requirement is you—time spent with you and other family members.

As a parent, you probably know this in your heart. But did you know that research has confirmed it, too? Several studies have shown that children are most likely to thrive when they grow up in families that make spending time together a top priority. Give your child plenty of your time, and the odds are good that she'll be happier, do better in school, and be less likely to engage in dangerous behaviors such as the abuse of alcohol and drugs.

But

as a busy parent, perhaps a member of a two-career household, you may be wondering: What kind of time? Some undivided attention at bedtime? A good talk in the car? Regular family meals? Are these enough—or do we need to do something special?

The answer is all of the above. Real family closeness comes from those little moments spent day to day—things like sitting down to dinner together, or remembering to give your child a big hug before he walks out the door. But adding in “special activities”—once a week or so—can do a lot, too. You'll make wonderful memories, foster your child's learning and creativity, and—perhaps most important—really savor the joy, the fun, that comes from being part of a family.

That's where this Parent Guide comes in. Following, you'll find 52 ways for families to spend time together—one family fun idea for each week of the year.

Attach

it to your refrigerator so you can find a great idea at a glance. To make it even more convenient for you, the ideas are separated into three categories:

- **Indoor Activities** are ideas for things you can do on those rainy days, or on Sunday evenings after dinner. They require little more than your time.
- **Outdoor Activities** are ideas for things you can do on those Saturday mornings when you look out your window and discover a beautiful day. These typically combine fun with physical fitness.
- **Planned Activities** are those you may want to put on your calendar in advance. These are things like zoo or museum visits—things busy families want to do, but can't always accomplish on the spur of the moment.

Enjoy this guide, and most of all—enjoy your family!

**Each child is unique, so this publication alternates using masculine and feminine pronouns.*

Indoor Activities

1 Have a family “Read-In.” Gather your crew in a cozy room. Everyone brings a favorite book or magazine and soaks up some quality reading time. After 30 minutes or so, each family member reads part of his book or magazine aloud to the others.

2 Make a family tree. Spend an evening introducing your child to some of the people who shaped your family. Include information about her grandparents, and any other ancestors you know about. Photos and other memorabilia can make the experience more fun. If you and your family really enjoy this activity, consider pursuing it further.

3 Rattle some pots and pans. But plan to make more than noise! Cook dinner together, making each family member responsible for one part of the meal. Besides being fun and delicious, cooking reinforces important math skills, such as fractions and measurement.

4 Fire up the popcorn. A family movie night is almost always a hit with everyone. Make it more meaningful later by talking about what you saw. Which characters made good choices? Which made bad ones?

5 It’s your turn to be actors. Play charades. You can allow family members to act out whatever they choose, or you can limit the game to “favorite book characters” or another category. If you have access to a video camera, you can even turn your game into a home movie.

6 Dance to the music. Put on some upbeat music or turn on the radio and get everyone in the family up to dance. Do the hokey pokey or teach your children the electric slide. You’ll be getting some great exercise and making wonderful memories.

7 Show your artistic side. Encourage each family member to unveil his hidden artist. Get out the paper, crayons, paint, markers, whatever art supplies you have. Then get to work making your own creations. Or, tape several pieces of paper together and make one large picture that each member contributes to.

8 Roll some dice—the kind that come with board games. Family game nights foster togetherness, cooperation, taking turns, reading skills, math skills, and reasoning skills. Everyone is a winner!

9 Tell your life story. Children almost always love to hear stories about when their parents were young—as long as the stories don’t turn into an opportunity for parents to preach! Instead, pick a story about a time you did something funny, or silly, or maybe even thoughtless. Show your child that you once felt the same things she is feeling now.

“Children
spell ‘love’ ...
T-I-M-E.”

—Dr. Anthony P.
Whitham

10 Go on a hunt—for odds and ends around the house. A family scavenger hunt takes a few minutes of preparation, but can be done easily using things you have on hand. No need to hide objects—just give family members a list of things in certain categories. Example: Find something purple, something made of wool, something shaped like a triangle, something that is part of a set, and something that is good to eat.

11 Organize family photos. Gather up all—or some—of your unfiled family photos and organize them into albums. As you do this, you’ll likely be reminded of some wonderful family times. It’s also a great way for children to practice sorting and classifying as they search for pictures with common themes.

12 Write down your family news. Many families create family newsletters to place in holiday greeting cards, but you don’t have to wait for a special occasion. Have each family member contribute information about new or important things happening in their lives. Assign a family “reporter” to write it all down, and a family “editor” to put the newsletter together. Send it to friends or relatives who would love to hear your news.

13 Make it all add up with a family math night. Boost your child's math skills, and reinforce the idea that math is useful and fun—not boring and difficult. Some ideas—pour beans in a jar and estimate how many; use different objects for measurement—how many pieces of dry spaghetti does it take to span your child's height?

14 Do some rhyming. Reading poetry improves your child's listening, vocabulary and sense of timing. It also expands her cultural horizons, and brings out emotions. Spend some time reading age-appropriate books of poetry. Then experiment with writing your own poems. Save them in a folder or bind them into your own book.

15 Take a trip, using books and the Internet. Which places would your family like to visit? Pick two or three, and spend an evening checking them out. What is the climate like? What would you eat there? What are the best things to do? How could you get there?

16 Listen to the music. Taste in music is a very personal thing, and most families don't necessarily agree on what makes a good song! Invite each family member to choose one or two favorite songs to play. Then, have him explain why he likes that particular music. Try to convince each other.

17 Enter the construction zone. Challenge each family member to create something with unusual materials. One idea is to use a pack of old playing cards (it has to be a pack you don't want anymore), a hole punch, and some pipe cleaners. Another idea is to use marshmallows and toothpicks.

18 Open your own bakery, at least for a few hours. Like cooking, baking teaches math skills (sorting, measurement) and promotes a feeling of accomplishment—you worked together to make something delicious. But it's also a great sensory activity. Working with dough and smelling fresh baked goods can be calming and therapeutic.

19 Where in the world is ... Madagascar? Prague? The Seychelles Islands? Challenge your family to a geography bee. For the youngest players, use local geography and landmarks—is your preschool next to a pond or next to the woods? Check your answers with globes and maps.

20 Now that's a puzzle. And your family can put it together. Doing jigsaw puzzles teaches logic, and enhances visual and spatial skills. Start with easy ones, and work up to challenging ones as your family improves.



Outdoor Activities

21 Go fly a kite. Nothing improves a windy day like successfully launching a kite and watching it soar. Make some observations: From which direction is the wind coming? What effect does the kite's tail have? Try flying it with the tail hanging free, and again with the tail taped to the kite. What differences do you see? By the way, don't forget to pack a picnic!

22 Take a hike. Studies show that a daily 30-minute walk is all the exercise most people need. Double the benefits by turning your exercise into family time too. Take a family walk today, and pledge to make it a habit. Chart your progress on a calendar.

23 Starry nights are a perfect time to be outside. Spread out a blanket and watch the stars come out on a clear evening. Who can spot the first star? Where is it? You can enhance this activity if you have, or can borrow, binoculars or a telescope. Getting a book of constellations from the library, or printing out some material on constellations from the Internet would be helpful, too. See how many constellations you can identify together.

24 How does your garden grow? It's time to find out! Whether you have a big patch of dirt to dig in, or a few containers on a windowsill, making something grow is a satisfying activity. Your child will learn the responsibility of caring for another living thing, have the chance to observe the stages of plant life, and maybe even develop a bit of patience—it's a long time from seed or seedling to full maturation.

25 Bring the Olympics home. Watching sports on TV is fun, but does little to build physical fitness. Get outside, and have some races. Other ideas—have a Frisbee® toss, see who can sink the most baskets, or toss a ball in the air and see how long you can keep it aloft.

26 Be kind to feathered friends. Hang a simple bird feeder: Cut a large opening in a plastic milk jug and fill it with several pinecones that you have rolled in peanut butter and birdseed. Or, if you have access to a pond or lake, visit it with some breadcrumbs for the birds that gather there.

27 Start scrubbing. Gather your family and some water hoses and do some outdoor cleaning on a warm day. Washing the car is one idea, but you could also wash bikes, scooters, lawn furniture, or outdoor toys. Consider wearing a bathing suit—you never know when a water fight is going to break out!

28 Get rolling. Now that those bikes and scooters are sparkling clean, it's time to show them off. Go on a family bike ride around your neighborhood. (Don't forget to wear your bike helmets.) Other ideas—roller skate, inline skate, or pull your child in a wagon. When you're finished share a pitcher of lemonade.

"Lost time is never found again."

—Benjamin Franklin

Planned Activities

29 Immerse yourself in another culture. Our communities are becoming more diverse all the time. Choose an ethnic heritage represented in your community and learn more about it. Some ideas: Find recipes and cook some ethnic food; visit an ethnic restaurant, grocery or other place of business; rent a foreign-language film; tour a house of worship and speak with the clergy or staff.

30 Get crafty. Making crafts builds fine motor skills and reinforces following directions. It's also a great way to spend a rainy day. But unless you make weekly visits to a craft store, it takes a little planning. For a quick craft that takes minimal materials, try shirt painting. You'll need only plain T-shirts, fabric paint, cardboard, and things to paint with. Place the cardboard inside the shirts so the paint does not soak through to the other side. Then get creative. You can wear your shirts on a family outing, or give them as gifts.

31 Hear the call of the wild. Visiting a zoo ranks high on the list of favorite activities for many families because each experience is never quite the same. On one day you may see the lions at feeding time, on another you may see a new baby elephant. Ask your child questions as you tour. Is this animal a mammal? Why or why not? What does it eat? Is it a carnivore (eats only meat), a herbivore (only plants) or an omnivore (both)? What country is it from?

32 Go out to eat. Going to a restaurant allows you to try new foods, practice table manners and foster independence. Encourage your child to choose and order his own meal. Let an older child calculate the tip.

33 Set the stage for a fun day. Attending children's theater lets your child see a favorite story take place right in front of her. You can find listings for such productions in your local newspaper.

34 Take them out to the ball game. Go to a sporting event in your community—high school, or even Little League is fine. Cheer for the home team, and ask your child to keep score, figure out averages, or compute statistics, depending on his skill level.

35 Dive right in. Swimming is more than a sport, it's an important safety skill. Enjoy a day with your family at a local pool, lake, or beach. If a family member older than four can't swim, consider contacting your local YMCA or Red Cross about lessons.

36 Find a show, fair or festival. Check your newspaper for things like antique car shows, flower displays, county fairs, or chili cook-offs. These always afford families the chance to learn or experience something new.

37 Look for history in your hometown. Contact your local chamber of commerce for a list of historic places in or around your area. Knowing "what happened here" is part of your child's heritage and will enrich his education.

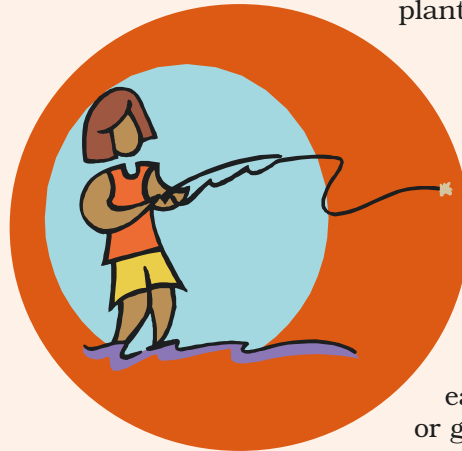
38 Volunteer your time. Someone needs your family's help. It could be your local school, house of worship, or a group that helps the less fortunate. Make a commitment to pitch in together.

39 Catch a fish. Want to know what's on your child's mind? Take her fishing. Something about this quiet, shared activity really fosters bonding and conversation. And if you don't want to clean them, you can always throw them back!

40 Stop under the Big Top. A trip to the circus is like visiting a mobile city. Take in the show, but also try to let your child see the process of putting the circus up and taking it down. This is a fascinating display of teamwork, and shows how important even the smallest jobs can be to a big operation.

41 Hit the links. The miniature ones, that is. A round of mini golf is more than fun, it's physics in action. Ask your child what forces affect the ball getting into the hole. (Some answers: the speed of the ball, how hard you hit it, the spin on the ball, the direction the ball is hit.)

42 Find a waterfront. It doesn't matter whether you go to the ocean, river, lake, pond or stream. What types of wildlife do you see? How is land near water different than land in other places? What types of plants grow here?



43 Get rid of your junk. Have a family garage sale and have your child help as much as possible. Depending on her age, she can make signs, suggest pricing, organize displays, and handle sales. Use money earned for a family treat, or give it to your favorite cause.

44 Check out some artifacts or the subject of your choice at a local museum. Many museums offer self-guided tours to help you learn even more about what you're seeing. Find out if your community has a children's museum. Get your child involved by allowing your child to purchase a post card of a museum painting or artifact before you start. Then have your child look for what's on his postcard during your visit. Afterwards, let him write a note and send the postcard to a friend or relative. And remember—a little time in a museum goes a long way if you have very young children. An hour or two should do it. Leave while they're still fresh, and they will be eager to visit again.

45 Try a different sport. Studies show that you should vary your activities to achieve the best fitness level. So if you walk, try skating. If you swim, try tennis. Anything is fine, as long as it's different. Have a family meeting to choose your activity.

46 Watch some fish make a splash.

At least once, take your child to an aquarium. It offers a glimpse of sea life that most people (unless they are divers) would otherwise never experience. Before you go, check out a library reference book on different types of fish.

47 Invite another family over for a potluck. Nearly all children benefit from opportunities to strengthen friendships and practice their social skills. Having another family over allows your child to interact with both children and adults in a comfortable setting.

48 Find a different way to travel. Does your family usually rely on a car to get from place to place? Pick a day and try a train, subway, cab, bus, bicycle or boat instead. Ask your child to compare his usual experience to this one.

49 Start a family collection. Have a family meeting and brainstorm about your interests. Choose one and start building a collection around it. It could be books, shells, coins, photographs, rocks, or anything you like.

50 Celebrate a new holiday. Do some research and choose a holiday your family does not usually celebrate. Example: the Mexican holiday Dia de los Muertos (November 1st). Find out how the holiday is traditionally celebrated and participate with your family.

51 Shop with a purpose. Involve the whole family the next time you need to make an important purchase. Research different brands and compare prices and values. Even the youngest children can give an opinion about size or color! When your research is done, go as a family to buy the item.

52 Visit a working farm. Even if you live in a big city, chances are the rural areas outside your town are still dotted with farms. Show your child that food doesn't really come from the grocery store. Your local Chamber of Commerce is a good place to start—ask if they can put you in touch with a liaison to the area's farmers.

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