

Let's Make Summer Great Again

Summertime.

Now there's a word and a season with some magic.

For most adults, summer brings homegrown fruits and vegetables, vacations, and a slower pace of life. For me, summer bestows the special pleasure of drinking coffee early in the morning on my front porch before the day heats up, enjoying the chorus of songbirds and the breeze slipping down from the hills.

For kids, summer means a break from books, tests, and teachers. Even with the COVID pandemic, surely summer delivers a sense of freedom and adventure to the younger crew, who, for a few months, are less regulated by a clock and routine.

After watching how some families with children spend their summers, talking to my own children about their plans for my grandchildren, and remembering what made my own boyhood summers special, I blended some of these ingredients together and came up with the following recipes to help make this summer a special one.

Give the kids lots of free time. Sure, sometimes they'll complain of boredom—"I can find something for you to do," my mom used to say, and that was a threat, not a promise—but boredom can be good for kids. It forces them to invent their own amusements, to pick up a book, to drift around the backyard looking mopey until they notice the ant war taking place on the sidewalk.

Even more, this freedom allows them to exercise their creative powers. It acts like a gymnasium for the mind, a workout room where there are no instructors or trainers, just a place where they can pretend and dream. One of my granddaughters, for example, has a box filled with tiaras, stoles, and princess

dresses, and she often dresses up and glides about the house pretending she is royalty. She has discovered one of the greatest human gifts: imagination.

Have them play outdoors. Beyond a stand of pines at the back of my house is a yard loud with children laughing, talking, shouting, and screaming. For three or four hours a day, this gang enjoys the fresh air and running barefoot through the grass.

And so should we all. [Studies](#) have shown that Americans spend less than 8 percent of their time outdoors. That figure sounds remarkably wrongheaded, but when I consider other homes in my neighborhood, which have front porches no one ever uses and appear deserted except when residents drive away in their cars, that number makes sense.

Sunshine and fresh air are vitamins for us all. Let's make sure our kids get their fill.

Get to know your own backyard and take the kids with you. The old observation that people who live in New York City never visit the Empire State Building applies, I suspect, to all of us. Here in Front Royal, Virginia, for example, we have various attractions—the Virginia Beer Museum, the home of famed Confederate spy Belle Boyd, a Civil War museum, a dinosaur park, Skyline Caverns, and battlefields an hour's drive away—yet I would wager many who live here have never visited some of these places.

Introducing our children to local amusements and museums is an inexpensive, fun, and educational way to spend a summer's day. It's also a great time to bond as a family.

Start a family night. Putting aside a night or a weekend afternoon once a week to be together offers another opportunity for bonding. Playing cornhole in the backyard, heading out to a baseball game or a round of miniature golf, taking an hour for charades or a read-aloud, watching a movie:

the point isn't the activity, it's the time spent together.

A few nights ago, some neighbors who are moving took a break from loading boxes into a truck to play baseball with one another and with their children. These kids are too young to remember the specifics of this evening later in their lives, but that's not the point. What they will remember, deep in their bones and flesh, is their parents, aunts, and uncles playing with them, helping them swing the bat and hit the ball.

Do my sons and daughter recollect me playing soccer with them in the small gravel parking lot of our bed-and-breakfast when they were in elementary school? Maybe, maybe not. But somewhere in their consciousness is the memory that we engaged, that for a few minutes on summer evenings we kicked a ball around and connected.

Wherever we live—a condo in Miami, a farmhouse in Kansas, a trailer park in North Carolina—we can create activities that give gifts and graces to our children as well as to us, and that will strengthen family ties.

And summer is the perfect time to do just that.

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