

Fun and Frugal Family Outings

The time we spend with our families is priceless. But most popular family activities are quite expensive. Even a simple night at the movies can put a serious dent in the budget by the time you buy tickets, popcorn and drinks for everyone.

Fortunately, there are cheaper alternatives to expensive family outings. They provide the opportunity to have just as much fun at a fraction of the cost. Some are even free.

Movies and Music

Kids are often itching to see the newest releases at the movie theater. Doing so even once a month, however, can get pricey. One alternative in some areas is the drive-in. Admission is usually much cheaper than it is at a regular theater, and some let you bring your own drinks and snacks. Drive-ins usually show fairly new releases, so the kids can say they saw something that's not out on video yet.

Some theaters offer reduced-price matinees during the day. Some even have free kid-oriented movies on weekend days. These options offer the theater experience without the outrageous cost.

Kids often want to go to concerts, but tickets to see the most famous bands are far from cheap. Check your local paper for free concerts in the park. Many areas have them during the warm months. Young children can enjoy the music without the huge crowds and deafening sound systems, and older children might gain an appreciation for less well-known bands.

The Great Outdoors

Nature offers a wealth of possibilities for family outings. Camping is a wonderful activity for families, and it doesn't have to be expensive. It can be as simple as pitching a tent in the back yard, or you can spring for a camper and rent space at a campground. Bring the grill and some hamburgers or hot dogs or catch some fish to fry.

Parks are great for day trips. Those with playground equipment can keep youngsters entertained for hours on end. Hiking trails offer opportunities for exercise and exploration. Most parks have picnic facilities, so you can pack a lunch instead of eating out.

Other Ideas

Here are some more inexpensive family activities to consider:

* Play miniature golf. Admission is usually quite reasonable, and it provides the opportunity for relaxed yet engaging family competition.

* Visit a petting zoo. These small zoos do not have the exotic animals you see at larger ones, but kids can feed and pet the animals.

* Go to a museum. Some offer cheap or free admission, while others cost more. But the larger and more expensive ones often sell season passes, so if you live close by, you can visit numerous times for one low price.

* Go boating. If you're fortunate enough to live near a body of water, boating is fun and relaxing. Canoe and paddleboat rentals are inexpensive, and when you're done boating there are usually other cheap or free activities in the area.

* Attend events at a nearby college. These may include plays, concerts, dance recitals and movie showings. Prices are low, and student discounts usually apply to kids, too.

Having fun as a family doesn't require a six-figure income. If you look hard enough, you can find lots of free or cheap activities that parents, and kids can enjoy just about anywhere.