

## Hot (free) fun in the summertime

By Otesa Middleton Miles – Bankrate.com

This year's surging gas and lodging prices might put the brakes on some families' warm-weather travel.

But, don't despair. Although AAA says gas costs 34 percent more now than it did this time last year -- a \$0.75 hike per gallon -- and overall vacation costs are up 5 percent, there are plenty of free activities, close to home, for families looking for ways to entertain the clan.

In fact, experts insist many of the free, fun festivities will strengthen family bonds and keep your little ones in shape and on their educational toes during the heat -- all without costing you anything but your time.

Rae Pica, a children's physical activity specialist in Center Barnstead, N.H., advises families to spare themselves fuel costs by getting creative and exploring local offerings, "without putting lots of miles on the car."

"Often we don't visit places nearby that others travel to get to," says Pica, author of several books, including "Your Active Child" and "Great Games for Young Children."

"Why fly a kite or go bike riding or Rollerblading in somebody else's town? Do it at a park or beach nearby," says Pica, who lives on a lake and seldom travels in search of fun. "My husband and I rarely go anywhere."

Planning outdoor activities will help keep family members fit and promote camaraderie. "Family fitness is a very big deal right now. We do have a childhood obesity crisis," says Pica, director of Moving and Learning, which offers products and services related to physical activity for kids.

Pica says the most active children are the ones whose parents encourage them to run, jump, play tug of war, play volleyball or do other physical activities. Being active, Pica says, will benefit the body better than a vacation that requires the child to "sit on a plane or wait in line at an amusement park."

Often, with parents juggling work plus their children's growing to-do lists, families don't spend enough fun time together, Pica says, blaming tight schedules and technology.

"Parents enroll kids in so many organized activities, and they only see them when chauffeuring them around and then the DVD is on," she says.

Searching for free summer outings or simply playing outside, can give a big boost to family time.

"We love our machines and have gotten far away from our values," she says, recommending no-tech games for families. "Hopscotch and tag and hide and seek and blowing bubbles seems too simplistic to people these days.

"The family that plays together, stays together."

## Complimentary concerts

Jill Murphy Long, of Steamboat Springs, Colo., is an enthusiast when it comes to play.

Long says you don't have to limit yourself to organized activities -- make up your own. This summer, she plans to create her own backyard games.

"I'm making a grown-up version of pick-up sticks. I'm making it out of bamboo in the yard. We have horseshoes, croquet, Whiffle balls and bat."

She not only takes advantage of her town's outdoor free concert series -- she walks to the performances with her family.

"We make it more of an excursion," Long says. "We bring a gourmet picnic and join other families."

Long says the concerts serve as informal music lessons for youngsters, introducing them to less mainstream genres such as acoustic or Irish music.

"Once you're out there, nature really has a way of confirming that what you decided to do is the right thing to do."

Long, who has a 15-year-old daughter, says she revives some of the low-tech games of her childhood, including water-balloon fights and flash-light tag. She received her inspiration for finding unique children's activities from her mother, who would give the kids big sticks of chalk for decorating the driveway.

## Hike or bike

Long also hikes with her extended family, which includes children ages 7 to 21.

"We reward little kids by looking for different types of flowers," says Long. For the older children, "we pull out a compass, have them guess which way we're headed, and as they get older, pull out the topographical map and teach them how to read it."

Long and her daughter also cruise on mountain bikes through their neighborhood in the Colorado Rockies.

"I'm 42, and I still ride my bike everyday," says Long, who wrote the book, "Permission to Play: Taking Time to Renew Your Smile," because she found most of her daughter's teenage friends carried completely booked planners.

Getting active and spending time outdoors isn't the only way to fit in free fun. Other programs offered at local libraries, bookstores and museums offer mental stimulation -- often in air-conditioned comfort.

## Membership has its privileges

Troy Corley, mother of two teens, didn't plan a big vacation for this summer. Instead, she will keep herself, her 18-year-old son and 15-year-old daughter busy with free activities around the Los Angeles area.

Corley, who lives north of L.A., in Ojai, publishes no-cost activities in the guide "Free L.A.: The Ultimate Free Fun Guide to the City of Angels."

She recommends becoming a member at museums and zoos for the year-long free admission that comes with the membership. With some, the benefits also extend to "sister" museums and zoos across the country.

Sometimes, Corley says, "if you have a membership to one museum or zoo and you're visiting grandma, you can go to that one for free." This also works for some science centers and aquariums, she says.

Corley also advises checking out several branches of your local public library. Once, her children took a free course in drawing comic books at the library.

Finding free things to do might seem like a simple task. In even a metropolis such as Los Angeles, however, Rita Shuster found herself overwhelmed, searching for classes and activities for her three children.

"I was spending hours researching things to do and classes to sign up for," Shuster says.

She longed for everything in one place.

Last year, she put her findings online at [www.kidstuffLA.com](http://www.kidstuffLA.com). With some 1,000 listings, the Web site has a good sampling of free choices which include plays, kid clubs at the mall, museums, galleries, storytelling, the science center, craft time at bookstores and restaurants that offer free food for young ones.

"I created kidstuffLA.com to help myself and others like me," Shuster says. Parents rate the activities on the site and can write comments. "There's nothing better than hearing what other parents have to say about services and products for children. They are the real experts," she says.

When trolling for free activities, Shuster suggests taking into account hidden costs.

"There are many free festivals throughout our area. But only admission may be free," Shuster says. "After you get there, you are usually hit up with parking fees, food costs and sometimes tickets for rides and entertainment. So those types of events are not truly free."

## Cultural exposure

Shirley Russon Ririe, a long-time dance instructor and national leader in the field of dance for children, encourages parents to get children involved in physical activities this summer, particularly since many schools are reducing art and physical education offerings. These activities, she says, might not cost anything for parents to develop, or participate in, but will offer many rewards for a child's physical and intellectual well-being.

"Parents need to get children into things where they're active and fill in some of those things that are missing," says Ririe, who is the co-founder of the Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company. Ririe is also a member of the national advisory committee for the nonprofit Young Audiences, which offers performing and visual art programs for children in 32 locations nationwide -- some for free.

Parents who find activities and create games have more success preventing their youngsters from "sitting and playing video games and playing with their iPods," says Ririe, who is based in Salt Lake City. Those very popular, sedentary activities "are not very good for physical development or creativity. Parents have to be even more proactive in getting their children into things more active in nature."

### INFO BOXES

#### **Museums, zoos and aquariums**

Enjoy Monet for no money. Or lions, tigers and bears on a budget. Many museums, zoos and aquariums will let you and the family in free at least one day per month. Others, like the North Carolina Museum of Art, screen free films in the children's area.

#### **Look to libraries, bookstores**

Check the city, county, state and university libraries in your area. Instead of paying to rent movies, check them out of the library or grab books on tape. There, you'll also find story times, games, puppet shows and, sometimes, even pet

demonstrations -- all for one very low price: free. Also, visit independent and chain bookstores for schedules of readings, signings and parties to celebrate Harry Potter's July 31st birthday at no charge.

### **Peek at parks**

In Chicago's Grant Park you can watch free movies. In Fairfax, Va., several parks offer free arts in the park, concerts and drive-in movies, while New York's Bryant Park hosts a poetry series, concerts and more for no money down! And don't forget about nearby state and national parks.

### **Botanical gardens and arboretums**

Visiting the trees and plants often comes with a price tag, but some give no-cost classes, such as the Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, which offers a turtle course at no charge. The U.S. National Arboretum in D.C. has several free exhibits and tours. Admission is free to the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens in Wyoming.

### **Local farms, dairies and manufacturing plants**

Many berry farms allow you to pick your own fruit and allow you to just pay for what you picked. Mayfield Dairy Farms, in Athens, Tenn., and Braselton, Ga., hosts more than 50,000 people each year who want to check out their milk and ice cream facility. After the free 45-minute tour, visitors can buy a scoop of the company's ice cream for \$1 a dip.

### **Youth sports**

Participating in youth sports will likely cost money, but most of the time, you can watch for free. So go take in a kiddie soccer, basketball or football game.

### **Print and online information sources**

Pick up your major daily newspaper plus the alternative weekly papers to find out what free stuff different groups offer. Pull out and save any weekly or summer calendars. The Internet can help you find free stuff from the comfort of your own computer. Search for your town name and state plus the words "free activities."

### **City hall, bulletin boards, visitors bureaus**

Get in touch with your city hall or the downtown association charged with organizing such activities as outdoor concerts and other diversions for your area's business corridor.

Take a look at bulletin boards posted at the grocery store, city hall, library, school, office building, house of worship or doctor's office for fliers advertising classes, tours, festivals and other events.

Check out the visitors bureau in your area to learn of freebies you didn't know existed.