



## 50 Free or Cheap Things to Do With Kids

Once school is out, you'll probably hear your kids utter these words: "I'm bored." Rather than let them turn on the TV or play video games, try any of these 50 free or cheap ways to entertain them. With the list, hopefully you won't have to listen to your kids say they have nothing to do during the summer ever again.

**Plant a garden.** My kids love planting seeds in the spring and watching them grow through the summer.

**Have a water balloon fight.** Let the kids toss water balloons at each other or you. My youngest daughter loves the chance to soak her dad.

**Go bowling.** The Kids Bowl Free program allows kids to play two free games a day at participating bowling centers.

**Watch birds.** My friend and her two sons take their binoculars and a book of their state's native birds to the backyard and try to identify as many birds as possible.

**Create a water park** in the backyard. Turn on the sprinkler, fill the baby pool, get out the Slip 'N Slide and let the kids have fun cooling off on a hot day.

**Take a bubble bath** outside. If the kids are tiring of the inflatable pool, make it fun again by filling it with bubbles -- and tossing small toys in for them to find under all the foam.

**Visit the public library.** Public libraries often offer free summer reading programs that include workshops, movies, children's theater, puppet shows and more. Or just check out how-to books so you and your kids can learn something new together.

**Start a book club.** Create a summer reading list for your kids, then discuss the books after they read them. Invite their friends to participate, too.

**Listen to a concert in park.** Many cities have free summer concert series during the day or evening.

**Go to a museum.** If you have a Bank of America or Merrill Lynch credit or debit card, you can get a free ticket on the first Saturday of every month to 150 participating museums (in 31 states). Check out the Bank of America Museums on Us program for more details. Also check with museums in your hometown to see if they offer any freebies for kids.

**Participate in a workshop.** Home Depot has free workshops for kids ages 5 to 12 on the first Saturday of every month between 9 a.m. and 12 p.m. Kids make a craft they can keep. Some Whole Foods locations offer cooking classes and other workshops aimed at kids.

**See free or cheap movies.** Many theaters have free or cheap (\$1 to \$2) showings of family-friendly movies on weekday mornings. Check the Web sites of theaters in your city. Many advertise their summer

movie programs on their homepage. Otherwise, check the site's specials or values page.

**Make a movie** with your video recorder, smart phone or iPad. If your computer came with free movie-editing software (most do), upload the video and add special effects to it.

**Stage a play.** If you're not technically inclined or don't have movie-making equipment, encourage the kids to create a play instead.

**Be Jackson Pollock** (the artist known for his drip/splatter painting). Grab a large piece of material, sheet or canvas and let the kids splatter it with paint outside.

**Pitch a tent** in the backyard and roast hot dogs and marshmallows if you have a fire pit (or on the grill).

**Collect bugs.** Send the kids out at night with jars to catch (and release) lightning bugs, or let them search for creepy crawlies during the day.

**Take a hike** along nature trails or at a nearby forest.

**Play in a creek.** Our daughters loved wading and catching tadpoles in a creek that runs through a public park in our county so much that they asked to go back the next day.

**Have a scavenger hunt.** Hide items in your house or yard, then give the kids a list of the items and see who can find them the fastest.

**Create comic books,** then share them with the family.

**Make a cardboard box house** and let the kids decorate it with paint or markers. My kids spend hours in their box house.

**Build a fort.** If you don't have a big box, build a fort with sheets and blankets instead.

**Invent something** using old parts or things from around the house that you don't need.

**Decorate windows** with washable window markers.

**Set up a spa.** Paint your kids' nails, do their hair and apply makeup -- or let them provide spa services to you.

**Visit the fire station.** My kids loved visiting the fire station, where fire fighters would let them sit in their big fire engines and load them up with stickers, coloring books and more.

**Conduct a science experiment.** My kids never seem to tire of the science experiments their dad conducts (even the simple "volcano" made with baking soda, vinegar and food coloring). So, pick up a book on kid-friendly science experiments at the library or bookstore and amaze your children.

**Launch a rocket.** Probably the best \$15 we spent was on the Stomp Rocket, which has four foam rockets kids can propel into the air by stomping on a launch pad. Whenever my children's friends visit, they compete to see who can send the rockets the farthest down the hallway.

**Bake.** Let the kids help you make cookies, a cake, anything. We fill plastic condiment dispensers with pancake batter and let kids create shapes in the frying pan (we do the flipping).

**Go on a picnic.** A meal is more fun on a blanket in the park, woods or even the backyard.

**Fly a kite** after your picnic (or anytime there's a good breeze).

**Create an obstacle course** in the backyard and let the kids race.

**Visit a construction site.** For little boys (or girls) who love hammering, sawing and big machines, let them be mesmerized by all the action at a construction site.

**Have a dance party.** Play your kids' favorite tunes and let them boogie.

**Play in rain.** The kids will love the chance to do something that's taboo.

**Have a tea party.** Pull out those fancy silver trays or plates you never use (or stick with plastic for toddlers), pile on some cookies and treats, and get dressed for high tea.

**Participate in nature programs.** City park systems that have nature centers usually offer free programs for children that let them explore the outdoor world.

**Play hide and seek.** It's a favorite at our house, and you can do it indoors or outdoors.

**Build ice castles.** Freeze water in plastic containers of various sizes then let the kids take the ice blocks outside and create castles with them.

**Play charades.** My family played this when I was a teen, and we'd try to come up with impossibly difficult things to act out. Download the free Charadium app to your iPad or smart phone -- it's loads of fun.

**Have an egg toss,** then hose the kids down after (if your kids are squeamish, avoid this activity).

**Visit a pet store.** Think of it as a mini petting zoo. Just warn the kids before you go that you won't be bringing home a pet (unless you actually want to). You also could take the kids to the humane society, which might need volunteers to walk the dogs.

**Take a trip to the dollar store.** My sister used to take my kids to the dollar store for a little math lesson. She would tell them how much they could spend, and they had to find items that didn't exceed that amount.

**Make instruments.** Rainsticks are easy to assemble by filling a paper-towel tube with rice and crumpled wiring (or something to make the rice move slower) and covering the ends with paper and tape. Or get really creative and create enough instruments for an entire band, as these Florida high-school students did with items found in the trash (see 'The Garbage Men' Rock a Trashy Sound)

**Learn a language.** Check with your public library to see if offers free programs online. Or visit YouTube and type in, for example, Spanish lessons.

**Travel the world** without leaving home. Learn about other countries (using Wikipedia) and make their traditional meals (with help from the kids) for dinner.

**Create a driving obstacle course** with orange cones for teen drivers and award them points for accuracy (not speed).

**Look at the stars.** You can download an app that helps you identify constellations -- or check out a book from the library. If there's an observatory or planetarium in your town, see if it offers free shows.

**Teach your kids money skills.** See Kiplinger's Editor Janet Bodnar's list of games, Web sites and books that teach personal finance.