

the new family

# Family Fun in the 90s

Parents today may be busy, but having fun with the kids is a top priority, too. Here's how to make the playful most of your family time.

by Melinda Blau

Family fun is in big trouble. "Half the population now says they have too little time for their families," reports Juliet B. Schor, Ph.D., Cambridge, Massachusetts-based author of *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. Our weekly work schedules have gotten longer and more complicated, we put in more overtime, and many of us have longer commutes as well. Dr. Schor's study found, in fact, that some of us must work more than six extra weeks a year just to reach a 1972 standard of living!

With so many couples juggling multiple work responsibilities and child-rearing tasks, it's no wonder that the precious little time we spend together can be stressful. "When Gracie was a baby, all I could think about was the ton of chores I had to do," says Denise Witzig, 42, of Oakland, California, a professor and mother of two children, 6 and 9. "No one has any fun that way."

Yet making time and space for playtime is essential for a positive family life, says Amy Lew, Ph.D., a Newton, Massachusetts-based marriage and family therapist who co-authored the book *Raising Kids Who Can*. "Playing together as a family helps develop a sense of connection and togetherness," she says. Even a simple family car trip involves planning, problem solving, research, and cooperation—skills that serve kids well now and in adulthood.

And since fun takes many forms, each parent should be able to carve out a comfortable role. "My husband is more likely to be silly, to get on a tricycle with the kids," says Witzig. "I'm more likely to read and make up stories with them. So we balance each other."

There's a laughter bonus to family fun, too. Not only does laughing produce endorphins,

which, Dr. Lew explains, are the chemicals in our brains that act as natural stress busters and energy boosters, but good times also help kids get through the inevitable tough times. "Fun and good memories are the glue that helps hold us together during the rest of life," she says.

To schedule in some good times, Alexis Fortworth, a New York City-based time-management consultant, suggests sitting down with your spouse every Sunday night. Make a list of "imperative and important" things in your and your kids' lives, she advises, and then decide what else in your busy schedules can be "simplified, eliminated, or delegated" to make room for more fun time together.

Some families have an organized

Retro fun: It's still hip to play board games together.



LIBBY INGOLA. LAMBERT/Archive Photos (bottom).



Jump in! These days, some of the silliest fun comes from the spontaneous leaps you take.

approach to making time for family fun. "We don't usually do a grown-up social activity on the weekends unless it also includes the girls or is absolutely critical," says Felicity Hannay, 48, of Lookout Mountain, Colorado, a lawyer and mother of two daughters, 9 and 12. She and her lawyer husband, James Wood, 47, sit down months in advance to set aside fun family time.

Susan Raisch, 41, a Staten Island, New York-based mother of four children, 2, 7, 11, and 13, says she learned the hard way how important it is to anticipate snags before they happen. "So now, *before* we go out, I ask myself: 'Will the little ones tire out too quickly? Does the baby need to eat

earlier than the others, or at least have a snack to tide him over? Will the older ones get bored? Will I be busier playing traffic cop than enjoying the time with my kids?'"

But keep in mind that even when you make careful plans, snafus are bound to happen. When a child gets sick or your schedule suddenly changes, share your disappointment that things didn't work out, and then put your heads together and think of what you can do instead. Creativity is the key. After all, not all fun can be planned, especially weekday fun, which usually has to be sandwiched between work and home responsibil-

ities. But many families report that squeezed-in, spontaneous kinds of fun can be the best of all.

#### 14 Definitions of Fun

Fun doesn't have to be elaborate, expensive, or time-consuming (see "Bargain Pastimes," page 92). Parents and kids in a fun frame of mind can turn practically any situation into a good time. Here are ideas from an assortment of creative families:

**1. Enjoy everyday special moments.** Think of quality moments rather than extravagant productions. "Fifteen or 20 minutes of undivided attention is

# Fun Through the Ages

valuable in and of itself," says Leslie Hamilton, Lee, New Hampshire-based author of the upcoming book *Child's Play Around the World*. You can share special time with your child just by blowing bubbles, making faces in the mirror, playing hide-and-seek, or spotting all the red cars on your way to school (see "Fun Through the Ages," right).

**2. See fun through your kids' eyes.** By taking cues from their kids, Kathy Ramiza, 27, a nurse in Lincoln Park, New Jersey, and her teacher husband, Paul Vaccaro, also 27, have broadened their sense of what "fun" is—and where to find it. Their son Jacob, 18 months, loves watching the fountain in the local mall. And for Jacob's 3-year-old brother, Zack, the mall's escalator ranks right up there with rides at an amusement park.

**3. Have fun with chores.**

Turn washing the car into a water fight, or putting away groceries into a silly songfest. For young kids especially, chores seem more like fun than work. "Zack loves to vacuum," says Ramiza. "And both boys love to run errands with me. They get to know people wherever we go—at the dry cleaner, the bank." When you go through your mail, try making paper airplanes out of the pieces of junk mail,

**Toddlers:** Your child's idea of a good time is doing anything you do. So sit him on your lap and teach him how to work a pair of round-tipped scissors. Or let him help you cook. He'll love the process (but won't care that much about the result).

**Preschoolers:** Your preschooler loves to be creative, so work on crafts that require simple skills like coloring, cutting, and pasting. A walkie-talkie made of paper cups and string will be a big hit.

**Grade-schoolers:** Your school-age child is capable of doing more sophisticated crafts, such as sewing together a stuffed animal or shaping a

bowl out of play clay. This is also the age for collecting stamps, shells, or baseball cards. Your enthusiasm can help your grade-schooler sustain interest in other ongoing projects, too, such as building a model or starting a family newsletter.

**Preteens:** Don't be surprised if your pre-teen prefers playing tennis or rollerblading with his peers to doing everything with you. But there's still plenty for you to share, from Marx Brothers movies to stimulating dinner-table talk. A smart move: Invite your pre-teen's friends over to play board games or join in family trips.

Source: Leslie Hamilton

memorable family moments. "If you limit kids' viewing, it's a joy to see a special or a documentary together and then discuss it afterward."

**5. Spend one-on-one time.** Ramiza takes Zack with her to pick up her paycheck,

he was fully clothed. "They were only 2 at the time," his wife, lawyer Beth Krulewicz, 39, recalls, "but they were definitely amused." If you don't want to go quite that far, however, think of ways to make dreary times fun. While walking with her sons to the school bus, one New York City mom "times" them as they dash down the sidewalk from one streetlight to another, using the names of planets to describe the boys' fast moves. "Wow! You got there in 12 Saturn seconds!" she'll say, much to the delight of

**Musical merriment:** Turn your child upside down and "play" her like your favorite horn.



**Good memories can be the glue that helps to hold your family together when the going gets rough.**

Hamilton suggests. Or make room cleaning into a game, says Lew, by calling out, "How many blue things can we put away in the next three minutes?"

**4. Have special family nights.** The Raisches have impromptu "restaurant nights" at which everyone gets dressed up and husband Ken, 44, and son Peter, 11, cook for the females in the family. Susan also maintains that TV—often thought of as a detriment to togetherness—can provide

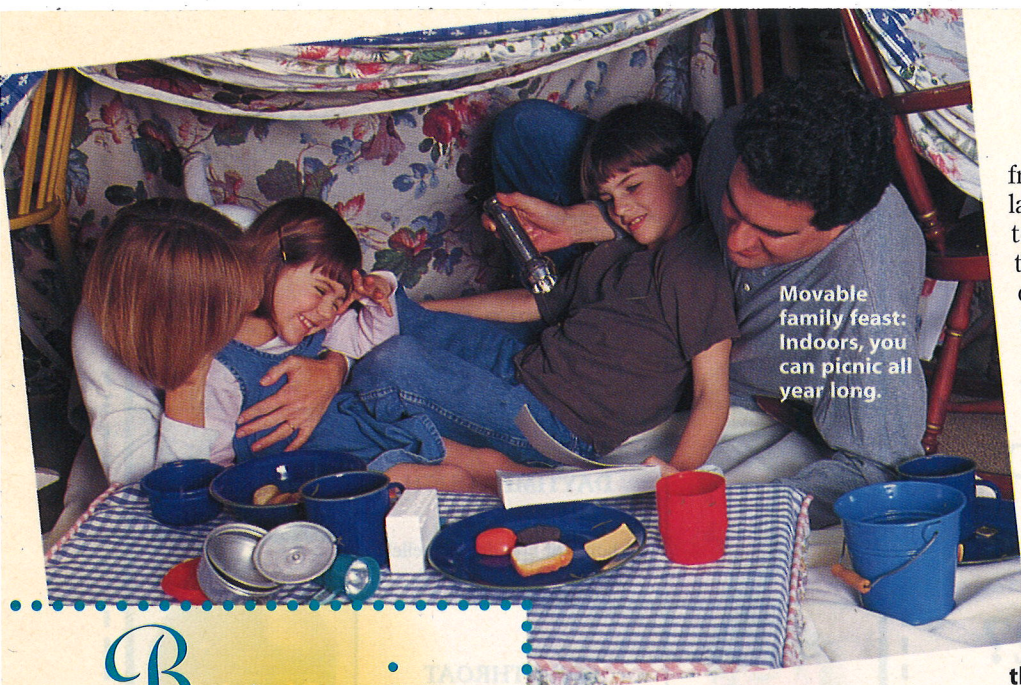
which is easy for her—and is a special treat for him. And every year, Susan Raisch takes one of her four children to visit her parents in Florida. "You find out more about what each child is interested in, and you get to know each child better as an individual as well," she notes.

**6. Act silly.** David Kaplan, a Denver-based lawyer and father of 5-year-old twins Noah and Carolin, once hopped into the bathtub with his kids—while

her speedy sons.

**7. Cook with your kids.** Kids love eating something they've prepared—and there's a lot of fun in cooking. Zack Ramiza Vaccaro thinks it's great to scramble eggs and "cook" them in the microwave. But just remember: Don't worry about bits of eggshell in the food. Your child senses it when you get uptight, and then no one has fun.

**8. Play games for fun, not competition.** "Stress cooperation over competition," advises Lew, who suggests playing board games in teams, or using a dictionary to aid you with



Movable family feast: Indoors, you can picnic all year long.

## Bargain Pastimes

- **Think of low-cost, or no-cost, alternatives to a favorite family activity.** Instead of going to a zoo or animal farm, try visiting a local pond where your kids can feed the ducks for free.

- **Walk, hike, explore, collect.** If your child is interested in plants, rocks, or moss, use an aluminum pie plate to make a "dish garden" from your nature finds when you get home.

- **Build things from scraps.** Turn big cardboard cartons into boats, playhouses, and tunnels. Convert cylindrical oatmeal boxes into great doll cradles.

- **Use your local library.** Many libraries now have story hours, movie screenings, and seasonal craft sessions, too.

- **Plan a special dinner.** Charge each child a joke for his "meal ticket." Or have each family member make a dish.

- **Go places without ever leaving home.** Camp out on the living room floor and tell ghost stories by candlelight. Or spread out a beach towel and have an indoor picnic.

- **Take a tour.** Check with the local fire station or pretzel factory to see if there's a time you might visit with your kids.

- **Visit centers of learning.** Find out if a nearby college offers concerts or dance performances your kids might enjoy.

- **Scour the local paper for fun events.** Community festivals have small admission fees; garage sales are free.

- **Start a garden from scratch.** Grow seeds under lights and plant them in the ground in a few months. In the meantime, touring a greenhouse now can make spring come early.

- **Share the fun of helping others.** Visit a nursing home, prepare food for the homeless, or offer to babysit for a family that is under stress.

Scrabble. "What's the goal," she asks, "to have the most fun or to identify the best speller in the family?"

**9. Turn on the music.** "Unplanned fun in our house tends to revolve around music," says Hannay, echoing many Baby Boomers and Gen-X parents. "My husband and I have always filled our house with the sounds of pop, rock, and country, and it often turns into a family dance-a-thon. I have a wonderful video of my husband holding one of the girls and swinging her as if he were playing the saxophone." And here's a fun musical game for toddlers: Tell them to dance until you turn the music off—at which point they have to stop and "freeze."

**10. Make the most of the weather, whatever it's doing outside.**

Hamilton suggests a "rotten-weather walk" to alleviate the tedium of a rainy day. "Being out in a downpour is a great change of pace," she notes, "and the rain sounds great drumming on your raincoat or umbrella."

**11. Create new, fun areas in your home.** The Raisches have found that they get some great dialogues going with their kids when they set up "conversation pits"—snack tables arranged around the fireplace in the living room. And Witzig, who loved going to drive-in movies with her family when she was a child, tries to recapture that same cozy magic by pitching a tent in her living room and then viewing videos from inside with her kids!

**12. Team up with other families.** Especially if you have an only child, you might want to gang up for fun with

friends, relatives, or neighbors. But larger families enjoy going this route, too. The Raisches regularly invite their neighbors to join them for holiday celebrations, impromptu potluck dinners, and even the recent unveiling of their new basketball hoop. And Witzig, who comes from a big family, plans virtually every holiday and birthday with her extended family. "It gives the kids a sense that they belong to a great big community," she says, "and I experience the greatest pleasure watching my kids play with my brothers' and sisters' kids."

**13. Enjoy the "going" as well as the "getting there."** You'll be less anxious on a family outing if you appreciate the preparation process—the planning, anticipation, and the traveling—as well as the fun you'll have when you get there, says Dr. Lew. "With my own family, the fun starts when we leave the house," she adds, describing the way they make frequent stops, play games in the car, and laugh along the way.

**14. Maintain a fun frame of mind.** Most of all, remember that fun is not

*On a rainy day,*  
alleviate the tedium by  
taking a rotten-weather  
walk together.

an activity, but an attitude that your kids can learn from you. Raisch remembers that one of her birthday dinners in a restaurant got off to a terrible start because her son got sick soon after they'd arrived, causing them to leave. "But when we got home, the kids threw themselves into figuring out what else they could do," she continues. "By the time I had gotten the sick one into bed, the others had gotten dinner together, had decorated the living room, had put a corn muffin with a candle in it at my place, and had sung 'happy birthday' to me," Raisch concludes proudly. "Did we have a good time? You bet we did." ■

*An award-winning contributing editor to Child, Melinda Blau writes about family issues in Northampton, Massachusetts.*