

Rainy Day Play

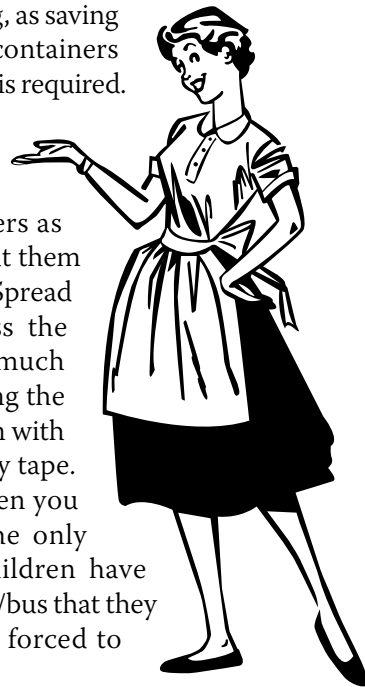
Having just promised the kids they can go to the park, you pull back the curtains and see sheets of rain falling from the skies. You'll need to think quickly to stem the flow of wailing and protesting from your little gems, who just don't seem to understand why rain should stop play.

But all is not lost. All you need is a little imagination and a lot of patience, and a wet afternoon can be a joy for ever.

Junk Modelling

This needs some forward planning, as saving cereal boxes, washing-up liquid containers and the inside tube of kitchen rolls is required. Other useful packages include Pringle tubes, egg boxes, yogurt cartons and Smartie tubes.

Grab as many empty containers as you can lay your hands on and put them in a pile in the middle of a table. Spread out sheets of newspaper across the table, so the kids can make as much mess as they want without ruining the surface beneath, and provide them with child-safe glue, scissors and sticky tape. Your preparation work done, then you can safely leave them to it. The only drawback is that once your children have presented you with the car/rocket/bus that they have lovingly made, you will be forced to



treat it as a Rodin sculpture, put it on display, and promise *never* to throw it away. Of course, if you allow a respectable amount of time to pass you can hide it and, eventually, when they've forgotten about it, consign it to the dustbin (only joking!).



Home Cinema

Rather than sticking them in front of the telly, make a cinema experience in your own front room. Rent a new video or DVD, or find an old one you haven't seen for a while, then draw all the curtains and turn the lights out.

Popcorn, ice cream or ice lollies will make it feel more like a cinema, and, if you have a popcorn maker or a microwave, making the popcorn can be part of the fun. If your children don't like popcorn, cut up pieces of fruit and put them in a popcorn bucket or large drinking cup.

OK, so they're still sitting in front of the telly, but at least you've put some thought into it!

Chart Hit

Ask your children to make a chart about themselves. Each chart should contain the name and age of the child and some

personal details, such as height, hair colour and eye colour. Then they can add a list of their favourite things, including favourite colour, animal TV programme and pop song.

They'll have loads of fun making the charts, and, if they make them at regular intervals, they will be a novel way of seeing how your child changes as he or she grows up. Keep them all together and, when they are older, you can spend another rainy afternoon going through them together.

Designer T-shirt

Kids love to decorate clothing and they will enjoy wearing the result. Give each child a light-coloured, plain T-shirt and a packet of fabric crayons or paints, which can be bought in most big supermarkets or in a craft shop. Insert a large piece of cardboard into the T-shirt, as this will stop it from bunching up.

For best results, make sure the kids work out their design on a piece of paper first, otherwise you'll end up with a designer dog's dinner which nobody in their right mind would wear.

Dressing-up Day

When you clear out the wardrobe you may want to chuck most of your clothes away or give them to the local charity shop, but keep a few choice items aside to use for dressing up.

Dresses and skirts are ideal, as are a few loose tops, old jewellery and the odd pair of trousers. If you can spare the space, put them in an old suitcase or a toybox and the kids have an instant game on any wet day.

If you add a few cheap wigs and old hats that you've picked up cheaply at a local charity shop, the comedy effect is well worth it!



Taste Test

Select eight different foods and put them in small bowls. Then label them with numbers 1–8. The best foods include yogurt, mousse, mashed banana, porridge, pasta or pizza sauce, salad dressings and lemon curd.

Allow each child to taste a tiny bit from each bowl and write down (or tell you, if they are too young to write) what they think each one is. This works better if you blindfold them or, if you prefer, add some colouring to disguise the food. The winner is the one who guesses the most correctly.

Treasure Hunt

Hide gifts or treats around the house for each child, and lay a trail of clues. Each clue should lead to another until the final hiding place is found, but make sure that you take each child's age into account.

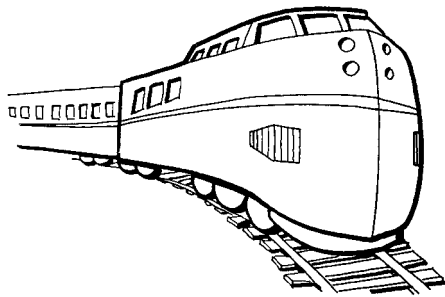
To make it more fun (for you as well as them) try writing the clues in rhyme. For example:

*By a mirror, near a door
You will find clue number four*

Outdoor Fun with the Kids

The sun is shining, the weather is mild and *still* the kids would rather sit in front of the TV than go out and play in the garden. Theme parks and fun fairs are a great idea to get them out of the house, as long as you don't mind spending an absolute fortune to get in, before queuing for an hour on each ride. But if your idea of fun is ending up terrified out of your wits and soaked to the skin because the kids want one more go on the log ride, go ahead.

If your nerves and your finances are important to you, however, try some of the safer and cheaper suggestions below.

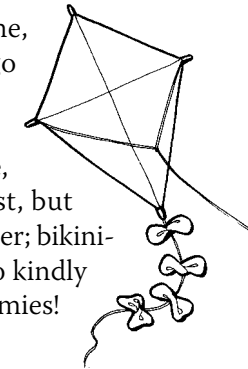


On the Buses

In the age of two-car families, it's surprising how exciting public transport can be for children. Get a bus or a train to your local town and look round the shops or just have a coffee. The journey is the thing and the kids will love it. Make sure you check the timetable first, though. They won't be quite so happy if they have to wait half an hour at the bus stop or on a blustery platform!

Let's Go Fly a Kite

An obvious and traditional family pastime, it's surprising how few people actually go out and do it. Kites are very cheap these days and then all you need is a windy heath or field. The beach is an ideal place, as winds tend to be stronger on the coast, but they're best avoided at the height of summer; bikini-clad sun worshippers tend not to take too kindly to a kite dropping on their well-oiled tummies!



A Walk in the Woods

As long as it's not tipping down, a long walk can be loads of fun with the whole family. If it is a little wet, get the kids wrapped up in macs and wellies.

To make it more fun, provide them with a list of things to look or listen out for in the woods and get them to cross off the items on the list as they go. They can look for easy items like twigs, bluebells and toadstools, as well as harder items like ladybirds, sparrows, conkers and specific trees or berries, or listening out for specific birdcalls. A word of warning though – don't encourage them to take too many things home with them, unless you want a house full of creepy crawlies!

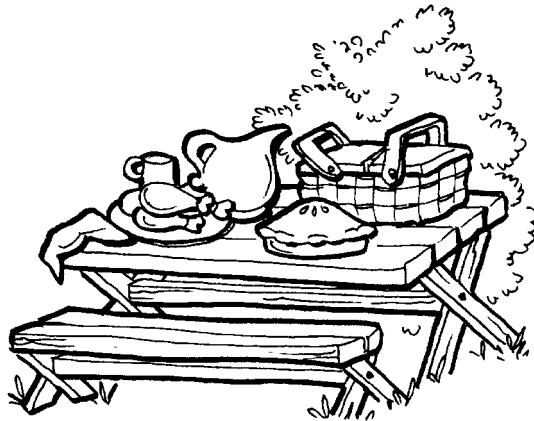
You don't have to go it alone. Invite along some friends who also have children and you'll find the moans of 'Oh Mum, I hate walks!' soon die down.

Pick Your Own

Many a happy childhood hour has been whiled away picking strawberries, raspberries, and blackberries. If you are lucky,

this might just mean strolling down a country lane with a basket or bucket, but if there are no wild berries nearby, try to find a farm in the area that has a Pick Your Own policy.

The kids have loads of fun and it even encourages them to eat the fruits of their labour, which is never a bad thing. The hardest part is getting them to put the fruit into the container before they put it into their mouths!



Party in the Park

Whether you live in a town or a village, there will nearly always be a park just around the corner – and that's all you need for a party. Invite some friends, ask everyone to bring along some picnic items, then you can make a day of it. Organize games of rounders, catch or just take a football. The kids will be happy, and you and your friends get to have a good natter.

Alternatively, if you have a big enough garden, why not make the most of some decent weather and the open space on your doorstep. Prepare some picnic food, take a blanket out into the garden and have your own little family party there.

Be a Tourist

We all seek out the local attractions while we are on holiday and usually end up armed with hundreds of leaflets with ideas of what to do. But how many of us every do it in our local town?

Whether it's London, Manchester, Glasgow or smaller towns throughout the country, many may have hidden gems you never knew were there. Even if you've lived there all your life, it's worth popping into the Tourist Information Centre and finding out what is going on. There will be child-friendly museums, art galleries and attractions which are cheap, if not free, and you'll have a great time exploring your own city.



Farm Them Out

Many areas, even in the inner cities, now have farms that welcome visitors, where kids can get close to the animals. For city farms in your area log on to www.farmgarden.org.uk or contact the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens on 0117 923 1800.

A word of warning: Children love to pet farm animals, but it is not always hygienic. If they are allowed contact, the farm has

to have washing stations so do make sure the children wash their hands properly after touching each animal.

Also, some farms have animals for sale. Be sure you can resist pester power – or you might find yourself with a cute little lamb in the back garden, which will quickly become a grown-up sheep!

Swim For It

Local swimming pools are usually quite cheap and kids love to play in the water. Take toys for the children to dive for, and a small floating ball to play catch with. If you don't fancy swimming, find out what else is on at the local leisure centre, as many have trampolining, soft play areas, and tennis and badminton courts.

Have a Ball on the Beach

If you don't fancy kite-flying, why not grab a bucket and take your kids on a hunt for different types of seashells. They are great to take home to decorate boxes, to stick on card to create interesting collages or just to give a finishing touch to a carefully constructed sandcastle. Buy a little sea-life guide and take your kids exploring in the rock pools and streams around the beach, identifying the plants and



creatures living in them. (If you don't want to buy a book, have a look on the Internet and print off some relevant information.)

Alternatively, if there are three or more of you, bring along a cricket bat and a tennis ball and have a game of French Cricket (but watch out for those pesky sunbathers).

The Rules:

The first batsman should draw a circle around himself, using the cricket bat at arm's length. Then one fielder bowls (underarm) from a few yards in front of the batsman, who must hit it away without moving his feet. The next fielder bowls from wherever the ball falls, even if it is behind the batsman – and the batsman must *never* move his feet.

His legs are the wicket and he will be out if:

- (a) the ball hits his legs;
- (b) his feet move;
- (c) he falls and his hand touches the floor;
- (d) he fails to hit the ball out of the circle;
- (e) he hits the ball twice;
- (f) the ball is caught before hitting the ground.

If he is not out, he scores one run. The bowler gives the batsman a run if:

- (a) the ball bounces outside the circle before entering it;
- (b) the ball is not bowled between the batsman's feet and shoulders;
- (c) the ball is bowled overarm.

The fielder who gets the batsman out is the next to bat.

It's a great game and often ends up looking like you're playing Twister, especially when the batsman tries to hit a ball from behind without moving his legs or falling over!