

## Things To Do for Absolutely Free

By Mary Marsh

In our house we have a big piece of paper with a wish list of things we hope to someday get. There are lots of wonderful things that we could spend gobs of money on - telescopes, microscopes, CD-ROM's, etc... When we see something else that we "really need" we write it up there. It feels a lot better than saying we can't afford that right now because the ideas go right up there with what we "really needed" last week.

When my reasonably good income went so I could spend more time with my kids, so did a lot of extras. At first it was pretty traumatic (especially for some of our creditors), but now we have found some pretty good ways to keep our days lively and our budget balanced. With three children, even low-cost activities can add up and sometimes that's more than we have. In the list below are things we have found to do that cost absolutely nothing.

- 1. Go to the library.** There is more to do here than just checking out books. Here's a partial list of ideas: read a new magazine without buying it, look up phone numbers in any city in your state, get a book on a new craft idea, check out a new cookbook, attend or put together a children's program or story hour, and volunteer.
- 2. Take a walk through a cemetery.** It is peaceful and interesting. This is an actual piece of our community's history. The tombstones tell their stories and it may just spark some curiosity that you can carry into your library trips.
- 3. Stargazing.** Try to go out of the city to do this. Spread out a blanket and see how many constellations you can identify. Or just lay there and develop your own personal philosophy about life, the universe and everything.
- 4. Write a story and illustrate it.** Let your imagination go. Make a picture file of magazine clippings and write group stories about them---with everyone contributing.
- 5. Make music.** This can be singing a song, playing the piano or dusting off the guitar you have stuffed in the closet. Make some homemade rhythm instruments from found objects and keep time to songs on the radio.
- 6. Draw.** Contrary to popular belief, drawing is not a special skill that only some people possess. While you are in the library, look for books by Betty Edwards or check out the Lee Ames "Draw 50..." series. If you get PBS check out Mark Kistler's "Imagination Station."

**7. Read a book.** Reading a book is wonderful, but you already know that. Add a little spice - can you and your family read 100 books this week?

**8. Go to the Arboretum.** You can feed the ducks, learn about native plants and have a picnic. Because it's on the UCD campus, parking can be difficult during the week, but it is a great place to ride your bike.

**9. Visit an art gallery.** Most galleries are free to the public. It can be very interesting and inspiring to see new artwork. This campus has some wonderful galleries.

**10. Take a bike ride.** This is a fantastic place to live if you like bicycling. You can even pick up a free bicycle map from the city to find the best paths.

**11. Play a game of cards or pull out that dusty Monopoly game and have a rousing game.** Pop a big bowl of corn, pour the apple juice and spend an evening without the television. Make sure you have extra pieces or old decks with different backs if you have a toddler who likes to be included.

**12. Go for a walk.** It is not necessary to wait until you can afford \$300 walking shoes. Put on whatever you have and go out the door. If it is cold, grab a coat; if it is hot, grab some water. It's that simple.

**13. Have a candlelight dinner.** Even if you are having meatloaf, get out the fancy glasses and good table cloth. Everyone dresses up and the kids can make place cards and the centerpiece. Why save the good stuff only for special occasions? Celebrate Thursday this week!

**14. Visit a fish store.** They often have large aquariums filled with interesting and unusual fish. It isn't quite as exciting as the San Francisco Aquarium, but it is a whole lot cheaper---Free!

**15. Visit the university campus.** There are a wealth of resources that often are only publicized on campus. Watch the campus publications to see what is happening. Many things are free to students only. Be sure to check.

**16. Keep a journal.** Grab some paper and a pen and write. Write it all down, you will never be thinking exactly this way again.

**17. Go to the park.** Find a group of other families with kids of similar ages and try to meet regularly at the park.

**18. Volunteer.** There are a thousand places for you to volunteer your time and efforts. This is an especially good thing for young people who are preparing to enter the workforce so they can gain some job experience.

**19. Start a discussion group.** Watch movies or read books and then discuss them. Invite another family to join you. Have fun talking about things of interest.

**20. Be a member worker at a food coop.** You will get a discount on your grocery bill, make new friends and learn new things.

**21. Visit your local cable television studio.** You can learn about the world of broadcasting by attending one of the regular orientations.

**22. Write a letter to the editor.** Is there a local issue you are fired up about, a recent injustice you experienced or someone who deserves public thanks? Write it up.

**23. Become an expert on something.** Go to the library and research something, anything. Watch the newspaper for articles on your interest, look for places where you can put in volunteer hours to learn more.

**24. Look for freebies from your city.** The Parks & Recreation department, the telephone book and the local paper are good places to check. They will have listings of free events and activities around town.

**25. Hold an art show.** Maybe in someone's garage, the library, a church, any place that might be willing to let you display works of art by a group of people. Invite other families to frame a special piece of art and then hold a potluck reception.

**26. Have a friendship soup party.** Everyone brings veggies and "what-not" to be cooked into a big pot of soup. Have people bring an idea for a craft from found objects (with some of the objects, of course), and you can share ideas and have fun creating while the soup cooks.

**27. Spend a day without power.** Can you spend a whole day without electricity? What will it mean? What about running water and heat?

**28. "Publish" a family newsletter.** This could be a one time thing, or an ongoing project. Everyone can be involved in putting this together and it will be free unless you decide to send it out to others--even then your cost will only be for duplication and postage. Anyone who can read and write can be an editor so you can rotate the responsibility. Non-writers can certainly put in artwork!

**29. Free gardening.** Make your own compost, save seeds from your pumpkins, tomatoes, beans etc.... Grow plants from veggie ends (sweet potatoes and carrots are great). You can also exchange seeds with other gardeners to get more variety.

**30. Trade and borrow.** This can go for skills as well as educational items. An especially helpful trade is child care. Toddler troubles? See if you can find another family with a toddler, give each other a toddler-free morning each week.

**31. Storytelling.** Tell real life adventures or folk tales you have learned. After one or two good tales the kids are eager to join in. For a real treat add firelight - candles will do if you don't have a fireplace.

We haven't bought very many of the things on our wish list yet. When I look at what is written there I see a list of objects. When I think of the places we go and the things we do that cost little or no money, I see my children's faces. I have memories of our family, our lives. Isn't that what this is all about anyway?

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*Mary Marsh is a freelance writer, educator and mother of three (9,6 & 3) who lives in Davis. After ten years in the Early Childhood profession, she has recently chosen to stick close to home and explore the many wonders, delights and challenges her own children have to offer.*

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