

SET YOUR SIGHTS HIGH

BEST SUMMER EVER!

Those lazy days of never-ending summer are here. The kids are psyched, the parents are panicked. Relax! Here's how everyone can have the...



By Naomi Buck, Jackie Davis, Anita Lahey, and Christine Sismondo

Photography Daniel Ehrenworth

Is there a better place to spend summer than at the lake?

Having been blessed to grow up with family cottages, I take great pleasure in introducing the cottage experience to friends who did not. So I was delighted when a German friend of mine, Beate, who had no experience of cottages whatsoever, announced that she and her husband and daughter would be alighting upon our island for a visit.

On our first morning together, as we three adults sat overlooking a tranquil swath of islands and water, my two sons (three and five years old) and my friends' daughter (four) played on an outcrop of granite beneath us. Beate's husband, a successful software entrepreneur, drank deeply of the fresh air (and a beer) and pronounced that he had a business idea: an app that would chart children's whereabouts at a cottage and beep parents' cellphones if a child were approaching water or other hazards.

I didn't say what I was thinking—not on day one of a 10-day visit—but had I, it would have been “*Quatsch!*” (German for “nonsense”). If there's one thing that children should experience at a cottage, it's freedom—from school, schedules, and the overbearing supervision of parents and caregivers.

Middle-class urban children lead pretty intense lives. Gone are the days of climbing over backyard fences to play with neighbours; gone the amble to school under the protection of an older sibling (pretending not to know you); gone those loose after-school hours spent exploring ravines or the cavernous corners of someone else's basement. Today we have play dates blocked into



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HALL OF FAME
We love technology. (A smartphone is just straight-up better than a box of crayons on a long car ride.) But the lake is the place for classics, like these time-tested toys and activities.
—Jackie Davis

USE POOL NOODLES!

An enthusiastic fist bump to whoever invented this multi-purpose floating wonder. What else can kids—and, c'mon now, adults—use for hours of water-logged hilarity? Plus, noodle. Heh.



EAT HOT DOGS!

Kid friendly? Kid intended. Cookable over a campfire, hand-held, and completely appropriate drowned in ketchup. Don't get too bothered about what, exactly, is in them. (But it's mainly small cuts of meat, plus spices, water, and some curing agents. No lips. No eyeballs.)

SKIP STONES!

Whether or not you achieve multiple bounces, or even one, doesn't really matter. The fun is in searching for and finding those perfectly smooth, beautiful, flat disks—and then chucking them into the lake!

PUCKER UP YOUR TOES!

PROF. STYLING: CATHERINE DOHERTY

cluttered family calendars, nanny vans and after-school bike-riding academies, French tutors and creative-movement classes. According to recent research from the University of Toronto and Ryerson University, one-fifth of grade five and six students in Toronto spend less than half an hour playing outside on weekdays. This shift in children's lives has broad implications. With doctors and scientists pointing to increases in childhood obesity, diabetes, and behavioural disorders, the structure of contemporary childhood has become a public policy concern.

There's no small irony in the fact that while we love our kids to death, we're depriving them of one of the richest aspects of our own childhoods: freedom. It's a function of the times. As people have fewer children, have them later in life, and then scramble to combine parenthood with careers, they have increasingly outsourced child care to third parties that operate under the banners of structure and safety. That's at parents' behest. If our kids are not with us, we at least need to know that they are safe, a concern that looms especially large if we don't have a whole slew of little ones. It's understandable. But left unchecked, the structured and safe regime casts a shadow that obscures, among other things, the precious commodity of free time and the essential state of being that's doing sweet nothing.

And this is where the cottage comes in. After all, it's the doing nothing aspect of summer that makes it so special. My fondest memories of childhood cottage summers are truly unspectacular. Lying belly down on the dock, one eye wedged between boards, inhaling wet cedar, and counting fish swimming below. Spending entire afternoons scouring bushes for 12 wild blueberries. Watching a thunderstorm approach from miles away. Scratching lichen off rocks and scabs off knees. Feeling the soles of my feet gradually transition to leather.

At the cottage, we could read deep into the night and sleep deep into the day. We could also play for hours on end. There were indoor games—cards, Monopoly, and hair salon—and outdoor sports galore. There were beauty pageants and diving contests and a whole catalogue of unsanctioned activities, from spying on skinny-dipping {Continued on page 116}



A place to learn the basics

Bestow upon youth your wisdom! Or at least a few standard cottage skills. This gives your offspring independence, and it gives you a break (fewer chores). Teach your kids how to:

Build a fire

"I don't think there are any skills that are too outlandish for kids to learn," says David Masters of Luna Adventures outfitters. Building a fire is especially kid-appropriate because there's a payoff come nightfall: s'mores! Spider dogs! Acoustic guitar! Kids of all ages can help with this multi-step task by gathering kindling and balling up newspaper. They only need arms and the ability to walk. Teaching proper fire-building is also a chance to impart know-how—use dry logs with crisp bark; don't burn garbage—and proper fire safety. As Masters points out, "It's not just, 'Here's your Zippo lighter, go for it.'"

Paddle a canoe

Paddle Canada instructor Becky Mason was canoeing solo by age five or six. Dad Bill taught her by attaching a long line to the boat and letting her play around while safely connected to the dock. Kids don't even need a paddle; have them propel their craft with their hands or a bailer. You want your kids to get comfortable on the water. "There are lots of things you can do in a canoe," says Mason, who regularly plays Scrabble in hers. Combining canoeing and board games? Can't get more cottagey than that! (BTW, you can buy replacement Scrabble tiles through hasbrotoyshop.com.)

If you used to tie your infant to yourself with a length of rope every time you came within sight of water, hey, no judgment. What else were parents supposed to do? Regular PFDS just do not work on a human that weighs nine pounds and has no neck. Now there's Salus Marine's award-winning Bijoux vest.

BUST OUT THE BABY LIFEJACKET!

Maintain the boat

Don't dump the knowledge on them all at once. "You take a 12-year-old and say 'Today, you're going to learn about outboards,' and they'll just stare at you," says Brendan Keys, a cottager, the father of three, and the general manager at GA Checkpoint, a motorsport and marine dealer in Vancouver. But do involve them with maintenance right from the beginning, bit by bit: have them check the oil level, read the fuel gauge, or, heck, even squeeze the primer bulb. Everything counts. The point, says Keys, is to teach kids that, "if you want to play, you need to be involved in the maintenance. Or else it's 'Oh, that's somebody else's job.'"

Read a map, for crying out loud

Who taught the ancient geographer Ptolemy to make maps? Probably his parents. At the cottage. To school Luna Adventures' seven- and eight-year-olds in the art of navigation and map-reading, David Masters first takes them on a tour of the property and then has them draw a diagram of their surroundings. "They learn to pay attention to the landscape and trust their instincts." These skills will be incredibly handy when your GPS fails—or goes rogue in the robot apocalypse that the *Terminator* franchise keeps warning us about.

Bait a hook

When you're fishing with soft bait, you can't get around the ick factor. And then there's that hook. Maybe Junior's not ready to thread a wriggling critter onto a sharp instrument (or even cut the bait into bits beforehand—a smart strategy for baiting small hooks for small fish). You can at least pull out the rubber boots and the flashlight and teach him or her Worm-Finding 101. Go at night, after it rains, and look in soft, rich soil.—J.D.



Teach kids to plant a tree! Blipp the dock spider opposite to learn how

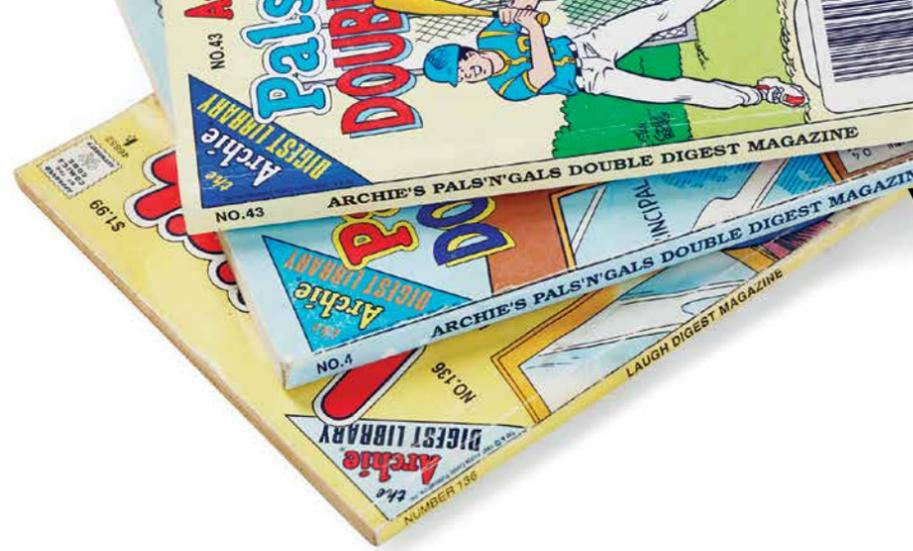


START YOUR ENGINES!



TOAST MARSH-MALLOW!

You'll need a good stick. Keep the business end away from your hair and wash it every so often. (Ants.)



READ, YOU KNOW, BOOKS!

Remember books? Or Archie comics? Or any words printed on paper?



HANG OUT IN NATURE!

A place to wonder at nature

Kids have a way of asking the big questions about the world around them. And parents don't always know the answers themselves. Until now!

Why do bats hang upside down?

If we tried hanging upside down in a bat cave or from a tree branch, our legs would get tired pretty fast. But bats are built somewhat in reverse from humans. While we typically use our five fingers to grab things, bats have five claws on each foot for grasping and just one claw on their thumbs. "It is much more secure for them to grab on with their toes," explains Robert Barclay, the head of biological sciences at the University of Calgary. There's another reason bats like to hang out so much. "Bat wings are attached all the way down to the ankle, so flying is much easier for them than walking or standing," says Barclay, meaning that most bats can't take off from the ground like a bird does. Rather, they fall into flight—which is way more efficient when you are hanging upside down. —Christine Sismondo

Why can you sometimes see the moon during the day?

Although we think of the moon as a nighttime thing, it actually spends roughly 12 hours a day above the horizon. The moon has no light of its own; it's only visible when reflecting sunlight. Here's where things get tricky. The moon orbits Earth about once a month, while Earth takes a year to orbit

the sun. But our planet also rotates daily. Place two balls on the ground, one small (the moon), the other larger (Earth). Aim a flashlight at Earth while moving the smaller ball around it. When does light reach the moon, and where would you need to be on the Earth ball to see it? Next time you see a partial moon in the sky—look for it in the afternoon the week before it's full or in the morning the week after—know that the sunlight is like those flashlight rays, zipping past Earth to bounce off its little sister. —Anita Lahey

Why do my fingers and toes pucker after I go swimming?

Your skin is dehydrated. Or waterlogged. Too much time in the water. That's what your parents told you as a kid about wrinkled fingers and toes. Turns out those common explanations weren't even close. The real culprit? Evolution.

Have your child try picking up both dry and wet marbles before swimming, then after a half hour's frolic in the lake. Are the wet marbles and water-puckered fingers the most successful combination? If so, you've replicated recent research that suggests that wrinkly-digits-in-water is evolutionary. "Our body does it so we can pick things up in the water," says Julie Fisowich, the programming manager at the Saskatchewan Science Centre. The puckering—caused by blood vessels contracting—acts like a tread on your skin. When water runs down between the wrinkles, it allows for a better grip, useful for gathering food in a stream, for instance, or gaining footing on wet rocks. The process is involuntary, like sweating or getting goosebumps. — A.L.

Why is the sky blue?

To tackle this time-honoured query, first explain how sunlight contains all the colours of the rainbow, which flow through the atmosphere in waves. The red waves are the longest; the blue waves are the shortest. Try a simple experiment: fill a clear jug with water and shine a flashlight through one side. Slowly add drops of milk one at a time until you see a bluish tint emerge—that's the blue light, the shortest waves on the colour spectrum, scattering more.

The sky is just like that jug. When white light from the sun enters the atmosphere, the shorter waves of blue light interact with minute particles and scatter all over the sky, colouring it blue. —A.L.

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USE YOUR
NOGGIN!



A place to play all day long

Once you've exhausted all the go-to cottage pastimes, try one of these games, culled from the hive-brain of Cottage Life fans.

Challenge accepted

We love family-challenge weekends when even our teens get into the games. One that is always a hit is cheese heads. One participant dons a shower cap, and someone covers it completely with shaving cream. Then the kids line up and try to throw a Cheezie in the shaving cream.—Robin Holmes

Hide and go freak (out)

We play leprechaun in the dark outside. The game consists of the kids hiding and my husband looking for them, finding them, and then chasing them around with a flashlight held under his chin, all the while laughing like a maniac.—Pamela Ann Monk Renaud

Glow on

We play tag in the dark wearing coloured glow sticks as necklaces.—Kim Bechard

This is hot

We build homemade steam baths. We start by getting the kids to collect about 40 fist-sized rocks and pile them in a ring about two to three deep. Then we build a fire in the centre and let it burn for at least 45 minutes—long enough so that the stones are nice and hot. After dousing the fire, being careful not to wet the stones, we wait for the smoke to clear before kicking the stones into a pile. We erect a big tarp around the stones, supported by canoe paddles or 2x4s, making sure to get a good seal at the edges by weighing it down with more rocks, to create a steam room. We make it big enough so about six of us fit in. Last, we splash water onto the rocks and enjoy the heat! You can't even see your hand in front of your face from the steam. Then we all run into the lake to cool off.—Simon Foster

Spin classic

We made a "what-to-do-matron" spinning wheel (like on *Wheel of Fortune*) out of old plywood with typical cottage activities in each section: archery, canoeing, hiking, camp out, rock hunting, forest-house building, etc. We spin it when we hear "I'm bored!"—Michelle Caddey Maclean

Star power

On late August nights we do a midnight dip then lie on the dock to watch for shooting stars.—Jackie A. Francis

Bowl of fun

Use glow sticks and old water or pop bottles to make a nighttime bowling set. Fill each bottle about two-thirds with water, add the Sticks, cap the bottles, and line 'em up. Use a basketball to knock them over.—Anonymous

Jump around

We put two chairs at the end of the dock and place a pool noodle between them. My son takes a running leap and has to launch himself over the noodle into the water. Hours of laughs!—Katy Durdan Kelly

Water winner

We always have paint stir sticks, balloons, and oversized sponges on hand. Shove the stick inside the bottom of the sponge to make a racquet with which to swat around the balloons. The sponges also make for an ideal tool in a water fight (the balloons too), or you could even use them for painting.—Christina Ko

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Disregarding the potential for pain—smokin' hot black rubber vs. leg flesh—the inner tube was a classic water toy for every cottager, and it's still awesome. (But seriously: don't leave these things out in the sun.)

GRAB THE INNER TUBE!

Some footwear—um, the wedge running shoe?—is weird. But anything that goes from rocky shoreline to slimy lake bottom to snacks on the dock is always a yes.

EMBRACE WATER SHOES!



Blipp the sunglasses for video from our shoot and to share kooky kid games

A PLACE TO PLAY ALL DAY

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Use your noodle

Once our pool noodles get old and start to rot in the middle, we cut them in half to make bats and play baseball using a Nerf ball. We also use them for pool noodle races, running or swimming with the noodle between our legs.—Pat Bauder

Rainbow connection

We make pattern-dyed T-shirts using colours made from plant material that the kids find around the cottage.

—Nancy Anderson

Night moves

My kids play flashlight tag at night with all the neighbouring kids. Sometimes parents drop their kids off via boat so they can play too.—Erin Bridgeford-Zepetell

Light idea

We put fireflies in a jar to make lanterns.

—Frank Merfort

Going buggy

Build a simple bug hotel so that your kids can learn about bugs at the cottage and hopefully get over feeling squeamish about them. All you need is a plastic bottle and some twine. Lop the top and bottom off the bottle so you have a plastic tube that's open at both ends. Cut the tube in two. Stuff each tube with nature debris from around the cottage: sticks, pine cones, pine needles. Use twine to hang each tube on a tree or leave them on the ground and see what kind of bugs check in.—Anonymous

Eggcellent trick

Fill a balloon about halfway with water and stuff a small plastic toy inside—those mini-dinosaurs from the dollar store are ideal. Then put the balloon in the freezer. Once frozen, cut and peel off the balloon and present your kids with their very own ice egg with a surprise inside. The eggs are neat in themselves, but the best part is smashing the egg to get the toy out.—Anonymous

Grow op

Plant a simple and low-maintenance herb garden at the cottage with your kids. It will give them a super-easy way to help out with preparing a meal (they can run out to the garden to gather “secret” ingredients). An herb garden will help them to become interested in cooking and kitchen activities too.

—Richard Thompson

A PLACE TO WONDER AT NATURE

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Do plants have feelings?

Since plants don't have brains and nervous systems like humans do, picking a flower probably doesn't hurt the plant the same way it stings when we get a paper cut or a bug bite. But Clarence Swanton of the department of Plant Agriculture at the University of Guelph tells us that, even though they don't have pain, plants sometimes do experience “stress,” and, when they're feeling stressed out, they sometimes try to “talk” to each other. “When plants are attacked by insects, some species will emit a special hormone to warn other nearby plants,” explains Swanton. “So we now know plants can communicate with each other.” He goes on to say that plants are more active than we think; they send messages through their roots and learn about their environment through light patterns. “Recent research even shows that plants might be able to tell their siblings apart from other plants and help to protect them, which is super-cool.”—C.S.

Do fish sleep?

It's hard to get a little shut-eye when you literally can't shut your eyes. That's the problem that fish appear to have—largely because they don't have eyelids. But even though fish don't sleep exactly the same way humans and other mammals do, research suggests most fish manage to find a way to catch a few zzzs, so to speak.

Mike Friday, who works as a fisheries assessment biologist for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, explains: “Fish slow down their metabolism and decrease their movement. So if they were in a river, they might find a backwater area where they could “nap,” or, if they were in a lake, they might find a quiet, rocky area. Once they find a safe spot, they go into something like a suspended animation state in which they're still aware of what's going on around them, but they can rest.”—C.S.

A PAIL AND SHOVEL!

Enough said.

BEST SUMMER EVER

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elderlies to stealing cookies from elevated cookie jars. The only rule I remember, and it had the heft of a Biblical commandment, was that an adult always needed to be told if we were going down to the water.

Our activities overlapped regularly with those of the adults, but their lives ran parallel to and not on top of ours.

I remember one summer joining forces with a senior cousin to chart the vast territory of our property. We kept the map hidden, convinced that adults had no idea what fern jungles and collapsed outhouses existed in the outer reaches of our kingdom. These were good times and important times as well. Evolutionary psychologist Peter Gray argues that unstructured play is more important to children's development than formal education. Why else, from an evolutionary standpoint, would all young mammals spend so much time wasting energy and risking injury to play? They do it to practise survival skills and to learn social competence. Play requires negotiation, compromise, and empathy—tough lessons and invaluable life skills. The more kids practise, the more skilled they are, and the more skilled they are, the less they need their parents—which ultimately is our mandate. There will be splinters, whether we are there or not. But it's as important that children have their own time as it is that we have ours.

At the cottage, parents should be able to kick back—have a beer, a snooze, or a real conversation. And that pretty much describes the holiday we had with my German friends. Having lost his cellphone to the lake, Beate's husband settled in to a more natural existence of brush-clearing, fishing, and pontificating. Beate did a lot of sunning and sleeping with a book propped next to her. And the kids, well, the kids fired cannons made of driftwood, learned how to dump a canoe (not entirely on purpose), built forts out of blankets and towels, found a deer skull, fought over Lego, and reconciled over ice cream. In other words, they had a summer. 🐸

Naomi Buck grew up with two cottages, on Stony Lake and Lake Muskoka. Lucky kid.