

"Grandparent's Camp ": an old-fashioned adventure for city kids

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It all started 11 years ago when my two granddaughters, ages 6 and 8, came to stay with me for a week. I called it “Camp Grandma.” I live in the Sierra Foothills on an eight-acre organic apple farm, with rivers and lakes nearby. The Milky Way shines down at night and huge pines and oaks reach into the sky.

My granddaughters live in an affluent neighborhood in Southern California with small, manicured yards and no rivers or lakes to be found.

They were excited by the thought of seven whole days full of fun with just Grandma and the adventures ahead. The first thing they did was to run around like wild things, through the orchard, down to the creek, into the chicken area, past the garden and down to the swing that hung from a giant oak tree. It was as if they were claiming all that space for themselves. The swing became a favorite spot.

But the most loved activity by far was going to the river. They marveled at the sparkling clean water and giggled to watch fish swimming around and nibbling at their toes. These girls had traveled internationally with their parents and stayed in 5-star hotels.

But based on their exuberance, that didn't seem to compare to sliding down a wet rock into crystal clear water, shrieking with glee. Or learning to let the gentle flow of the river carry them downstream, feet first. And doing it day after day.

"Again, Grandma!" they would chorus, and up we'd swim against the current, to float back down.

Back at home, we baked pies with blackberries we picked from the garden. We baked a cake, using the eggs just gathered from the chickens. We picked tomatoes and zucchini, carrots and peas from the garden and ate them with our dinners.

We spent hours doing art projects. I let them paint a giant refrigerator box with 'wash off easy' latex paint, their hand prints decorating the outside. I snapped a picture of their paint-splattered faces peeking out of the 'window' we'd cut out of the cardboard.

Then I hosed them down, much to their delight. In their busy and structured lives at home, there was not a lot of time and space to be messy like that.

On the swing, they soared high in the sky, squealing "higher, grandma" as I pushed them up and away.

We slept out on my deck, under the stars, watching for shooting stars.

We watched old movies that their mom had enjoyed as a child and some from my childhood, "Anne of Green Gables," "Pollyanna," "Swiss Family Robinson," "The Parent Trap." They marveled at how 'old-fashioned' it all was.

Each night, I'd fall into bed myself, just after I'd tucked them in, worn out but happy from all the sun and fun of our days.

They came back each summer for years. It seemed like the old farm was energized by their joy and exuberance.

Those two gradually grew up and out of Camp Grandma and in the meantime, I married a great guy with two granddaughters and garnered five more grandchildren of my own, three of them local. The 'non-local' four came from Southern California, same scenario, lovely homes, small yards, no rivers or lakes nearby.

Now it is "Grandparent's Camp" and is the highlight of our summer. The ages, last summer, ranged from 6 to 12, three boys and four girls, and here are some of the fun activities we all enjoyed together:

- Paddle-boarding on our nearby lake, which included them trying to push each other off the paddle board and into the lake.
- Jumping off rocks into the river, the locals showing the visitors the best places. And of course, sliding down the slippery rocks, giggling as they went and floating down the river.
- Sewing simple projects. The girls each sewed a sun dress, which involved a side seam, a hem and straps. Then, voilà, the four of them had matching dresses. The boys enjoyed making pillows from Grandma's stash of fabric.
- Picking blackberries and then creating a pie for us all to enjoy together.
- Gathering fresh eggs from the chickens.
- Cruising through the garden to harvest plump, ripe tomatoes, zucchini, carrots and other treats we could enjoy for dinner, then cooking it all together.
- Swinging on the swing, sometimes while reading a book.
- Playing games together.

The parents joined us at the end for a special family reunion, everyone pitching in with the cooking. One night, the shrieking from the kitchen and the 'kid's table' was so loud, I thought the roof was going to fly off.

“Go outside!” I yelled, and they all scampered off, their laughter and voices ringing out into the late summer evening, echoing up into the tall pines as the sun set over the orchard and the old farm.

Tips for planning your own “Grandparent’s Camp”:

You may not have the same setting I have, but there are still so many fun things you can do with your grandchildren. What fun activities can you share with them out in nature? Hiking, swimming, gardening? What old-fashioned skills can you teach them? How about:

— Baking a pie crust and pie or a cake from scratch

— Sewing something simple with them

— Teaching them a craft, like knitting or crocheting

— Reading to them and with them. This could include a trip to your local library

— Teaching them simple wood-working skills

— Letting them dress up in old clothes. I had a few dresses from my teens and two 1950s ‘poufy’ prom dresses I’d scored at a yard sale. The girls adored dressing up in those.

— Exploring your town and area. What is unusual about where you live? We have a gold mine that is now a state park, for example. Our town has historic buildings that date to the 1800s.

— Let them participate in meal preparation and help with chores and clean-up.

If you have a garden, share the fun and wonder of that with them. You could even plant a sunflower in a pot that they could take home with them at the end.

It can be a time to slow down and savor the little things, whether it is cooking or baking together, exploring nature, reading a story, digging in the garden, or snuggling on the couch as you watch a movie.

Just know that the skills that you help them to learn and the experiences that you share can enlarge their worlds and their sense of confidence in themselves.

They grow up so fast, and this time that you spend together will create precious memories that you will share for the rest of your lives.

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