

## **Cousin Camp**

### **Making Family Memories for the Grandchildren**

You're no sooner done with the hard work of raising children than they turn into teenagers on you. And you think those halcyon years, when the children look to you as the source of all wisdom, when they have the potential to be anything and to do everything, are over.

Just wait. You'll get your just rewards when the grandchildren start to arrive. Only this time you know what a narrow window you have. Just a few years to make memories, to have a little influence, to help build some values that may shore up their resources when life starts tossing them around.

Our tradition of annual Cousin Camp gatherings was designed for our large, geographically dispersed family. Our kids live so far apart that they want to come home when their siblings do and see everybody at the same time. So we have a big crowd of young adults, along with eight grandchildren, in our house for a week in the summer.

The kinds of activities have changed over the years as the children get older. As they have moved from trikes to scoot-bikes to bicycles, we have accumulated a motley assortment of used vehicles. There are more options for games and outings as the kids move through elementary school. But the basic structure of Cousin Camp has remained fairly constant over the years.

For all the bad films and sad stories about awkward and unsuccessful family reunions, there's nothing like a full schedule to keep everybody out of trouble.

Whether your family is large or small, local or dispersed, you may find some ideas here for making your family gatherings more meaningful.



It's a camp: I can't remember why we started calling it Cousin Camp, but it has helped to make it an identifiable experience for the kids. Consistent with the concept of Cousin Camp, we often have printed t-shirts or caps to make it feel more like a special event.

Routine: Children love to return to places they remember. It's a confidence-builder to repeat experiences they remember from past visits. For our grandchildren, the routines of Cousin Camp will always be linked to fun times at Grandma and Grandpa's house.

Structure: If you only have a few days together, your adult children may want nothing more than a quiet respite from their jobs and a chance to visit with their siblings. But with young children around, the idea of a quiet respite is illusory. The children will do better with a little structure and that will make it a better vacation for their parents too.

Cousins: There will be a natural pecking order among the grandchildren based on age. If you can get the older grandchildren to buy into the traditions, the younger ones will happily follow suit.

Cruise Director: If Cousin Camp is to work as an organized event, someone – usually Grandma and Grandpa – has to act as cruise director, to plan activities, call camp meetings, set up games and rules.



The Schedule: To avoid cabin fever and chaos, you should get everybody out of the house to another location at least once a day. We also recommend an hour of quiet time during the day for the kids to let down and for the parents to relax. We plan the program in advance and send out colorful programs to each adult and child. That way the kids know what to expect and can look forward to this year's activities. [Click here](#) for sample programs.

Flake-Out Time: The hour from 1:00 to 2:00 p.m. is Flake-Out Time, when everybody is quiet and off their feet. Some of the little ones may still be napping. The older kids can go hang out in the tree house or the hammock, as long as they are quiet and not running around. Sometimes an adult will read a story in the living room. Once the ground rules are established, the older cousins will keep the younger ones in line. There's a sign-up sheet on the refrigerator for who gets to ring the bell (an old yoga meditation bowl with a striker on a padded cushion) to begin each day's Flake-Out Time.

KP Duty: Two parents and two children (generally not of the same families) are on KP duty each day. There are KP badges for the two children who are "bosses of the kitchen" that day, enforcing the rule that everyone take their plate to the sink after a meal and helping set up and clean up. The KP parents set out the usual breakfast and lunch buffets and put them away afterwards. They also help with dinner preparation. As the grandchildren are getting older, their parents have more time to help in the kitchen.

Arts and Crafts: We keep crafts materials in boxes in the garage between Cousin Camps, but there's always something new and special every year. Several parents are assigned responsibility for planning and supervising arts and crafts. The crafts tables are pretty much set up in the back yard all week. One recent craft project that was quite successful: Boats made out of old milk cartons with sails and decorations (both adults and children really got into this one and there were some amazing boats). There was a championship boat race across the pool, propelled by vigorous blowing from the edge of the pool and the luck of the winds.



Rules: Rules should be built into the program and made part of Cousin Camp structure. Parents are amazed to see their youngest ones comply with the rules. The authority of an older cousin bears a weight that no parent or grandparent could ever match. In addition to pool safety and the requirements of Flake Out and KP duty, our rules have evolved as needs arose. For example, if any child wants a toy/bike/inner tube that someone else has, all they have to do is call out “Dibbs.” Dibbs only works if there’s an adult nearby with a watch. The child in current possession gets to keep the desired object five more minutes. Then they have to turn it over. The original possessor can then call Dibbs herself and get it back, but they usually move on to something else.

Games: The games get more interesting as the children get older. “Go Fish” and “War” are successful card games even among the youngest. After the grandchildren are asleep, their parents like to play “Up and Back” (sometimes called “Oh Hell”), hearts, speed solitaire and board games like “Pictionary.” By middle elementary school, the grandchildren can start to learn some of these games. Grandpa’s always good to teach a little chess. For the first time last summer, we divided into teams (“Purple People Eaters,” “Yellow Jackets,” etc.) with an appropriate mix of athletic fathers, strategic mothers and children of comparable ages. The team contests continued through the week, with everything from timed swim meets to egg tosses to charades to “Most Helpful Cousin” awards, with credit given to the team of the winner.

Plays: Since a couple of the older grandchildren have done children’s theater, a play has been performed by the children every year since the first Cousin Camp. The oldest cousin is director and has sometimes planned the plays. An old sheet provides a curtain in front of the gazebo, rehearsals are held, playbills printed out and chairs set out for the dutiful parents in attendance. An ample dress-up trunk is critical. Pester your friends for their discarded fancy clothes, especially anything with sequins, bright colors or fur. Get a few pirate masks and rubber swords (sometimes essential to get the boys engaged). The older kids have come to realize that some of the younger ones will just wander off the stage, no matter how well planned the event. The play works best if a parent or grandparent writes a very simple script.



Other Favorite Activities: Treasure hunts, kite flying, s'mores, Goin' on a Lizard Hunt with Grandpa, bike outings to sweet shop and parks. And there's always the blind wine tasting event for the parents.

