



Free and low-cost fun activities for children

“In bringing up children, spend on them half as much money and twice as much time.”

Author unknown

As the cost-of-living crisis starts to take hold, many families will be wondering how they can offer their children low- or no-cost play opportunities in the home this winter.

A key message to share is that it’s not what you have, it’s what you do. The simplest of activities, with little or no cost attached to them, can become magical moments when they are shared with children. Often, the key ingredient is our time. Children thrive when we as adults show them that they are worth our time and that we value and want to be a part of their world of play.

Our time is the greatest gift we can give our children. That doesn’t mean going on expensive trips out – it could just be playing a family game, going for a walk, jumping in puddles or reading a book together.

As parents and carers, spending time with our children brings so many benefits, including:

- **Building** our children's self esteem
- **Strengthening** family bonds
- **Encouraging** communication
- **Teaching** children how to interact with others socially
- **Developing** children's interests

Low-cost/no-cost activities can be indoors or outdoors: why not give some of these a go?

Borrow a book

Have you taken a trip to your local library recently? So much happens in a library: not just books to read and borrow, but story-time sessions, local information and advice, music sessions and craft activities. You can find out where your closest library is on the government's [gov.uk website](https://www.gov.uk).



There is nothing better than snuggling up with a good book alongside little ones. This is a great chance to connect both physically and emotionally, discover new worlds, talk about what is happening and giggle as you introduce silly voices and expressions to the characters in the book.



The BookTrust offers [advice and ideas](#) for reading to children and there are free downloadable guides for different age ranges.

You can also extend your reading into wider activities with your child. For example, you could see if your local library has *Whatever Next* by Jill Murphy – a story about a bear who wants to go to the moon – and then go on a space adventure.

Do you have some old cardboard boxes and other waste packaging that you could use to make a rocket ship to journey to the moon and stars? What would you need to pack: a torch, a snack, a map?

Get creative

From cooking to art to horticulture, there are plenty of ways to get creative with your child this winter at little or no cost. Cooking is a great way to get children understanding more about food and why it is important to eat healthily is to get them involved in preparing a meal or snack with you. There are lots of new words to learn and use such as mix, mash, stir and chop. There is also a chance to develop mathematical understanding as well as core strength and motor skills.

You could also consider planting seeds on your windowsill and watch them grow together. Cress, apple seeds, carrot tops can all be grown easily. If you don't have any soil, some damp tissue or kitchen roll works well.

There are also plenty of creativity activities that can be done using ingredients from your kitchen cupboard. [Make your own playdough](#) using flour, water, oil, salt and food colouring – or alternatively, whip up some [DIY fingerpaints](#) using cornflour, water and food colouring.



You can also head outside and try your hand at waterpainting. All you need is a bucket of water and a big brush to paint dry pavements and walls (with no cleaning up afterwards!). Similarly, you could try playing follow the line and other playground games: some chalk and a pebble is all you need for old favourites such as hopscotch.

You could also try making your own natural artworks using free and found resources from nature, or even [make your own perfume](#) using petals and water (remember to check for allergies first).



As it gets colder and the water outside starts to freeze, there's also a chance to explore making your own ice art. Not only does this use free and found natural resources, but it also prompts lots of conversation about why water freezes and what happens when it melts.

Go back to basics

Sometimes the simplest activities are the best! Create your own home cinema with tickets, your favourite movie and health snacks, such as some [piri-piri pomegranate popcorn](#) or some [chocolate cherry popcorn cakes](#). You can always use your choice of film to inspire further activities – for example, after watching *Paddington* (or *Paddington 2*), you could pack a suitcase like Paddington. What would you take with you if you were going on a trip?



Don't underestimate the magic of bubbles. They seem to have a universal attraction – people both young and old are fascinated by them. Blowing bubbles, chasing bubbles, watching bubbles and popping them all engage children and helps support their physical development. Why not try making your own bubble mixture? Lewisham Children and Families Centre has a [quick and easy recipe](#).

Hide and seek is also great to play indoors and out, and can help young children learn in a fun way that just because they can't see someone doesn't mean they are gone forever. Alternatively, unleash your inner disco diva: put some music on and get ready to boogie with all your best moves!

You could try also try building a den outdoors in the park or indoors using chairs, tables and sheets, as a cosy corner for reading a story or simply for sharing a snack. The Woodland Trust has [advice and guidance](#) on how to build a den, and you can find out more about the benefits of den building on the [Family Corner](#) website.

Things that seem like mundane everyday tasks to adults can also be incredibly engaging activities for young children. Why not head to your local postbox or Post Office and post letter to a friend or family member – perhaps send a picture and then wait for the reply? Alternatively, take a bus ride – small children can often travel for free and the world looks very different from a bus. Perhaps they can help buying the ticket themselves? They can then retell the story of their adventure to you, using the ticket as the story prop later.



And never forget, when it comes to rainy day activities, there's simply nothing better than jumping in a puddle!

Explore the great outdoors

The cold temperatures in winter can make it tempting to hide away in indoors – but there are a wealth of fun activities that can be enjoyed outside, as long as you wrap up as needed!

Why not go on a teddy bears' picnic? Simply prepare and pack up some snacks and drinks and head outside. This creates lots of opportunities to talk together about what is needed, planning ahead and problem solving. Which teddies are going to come along? The NHS Healthier Families website has some great [picnic recipe suggestions](#) you could use.

You could also to look for bears in the park or a nearby wood, or see if there are fairies at the bottom of the garden? The book *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen is a great place to start. If you need help to find a wood near you, the Woodland Trust have a [wood finder search tool](#) on their website, while the Family Corner website has some more fun [woods-based activity ideas](#).



While outside, you could try your hand at making mud dough (a recipe is available [here](#)). Mud is nature's playdough and provides a great sensory play experience. Best of all, it can just be placed back in the garden or flower bed when you have finished with it. More information about [the benefits of muddy play](#) can be found on Family Corner. Alternatively, you could make your own tracks in the mud and search for animal tracks as well – who else has walked by here recently?

Journey sticks are also a fun way to keep a record of a journey or adventure you've been. They also help to prompt conversations about what you seen building memories and boosting language skills. The Wildlife Watch website has a [quick and easy visual guide](#) on how to make one.



Finding and collecting leaves, twigs, pinecones, pebbles and then sorting them into groups can also support children to develop the skills needs to spotting similarities, differences, patterns and in turn, support their mathematical understanding.

During the colder months, the animals around us often need a helping hand. Perhaps you could make a bug hotel, hedgehog house or bird feeders? The [Wild About Gardens](#) and [Woodland Trust](#) websites have some great ideas. In doing so, you will also support children as they learn to care for others and connect to the natural world around them.



Finally, with the sun setting earlier and earlier, why not give stargazing a try? Being outside at night-time and seeing the stars together is a great free and fun activity at this time of year. The air is colder and sounds seem different at night-time, and by being together, you can reassure your little one that there is nothing to be scared about being in the dark – and of course, there is the chance to come back in and snuggle up with a hot chocolate and a good book!

Useful websites

- [Family Corner](#)
- [50 things to do before you're five](#)
- [Healthier Families](#)