

Creating Smiles

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You've visited every museum and kid-friendly attraction in town—twice. All of the kids' books have been read multiple times, the current movies have been seen, and the crayons are worn to waxy nubs from months of regular use. You've watched "The Wiggles" so many times that you know all of the band members' first *and* last names. Your grandchild is starting to get bored with the routine, and frankly, so are you.

Does this scenario sound all too familiar? If so, it may be time to inject some life into your visits with the grandkid. One of the easiest ways to do this is to plan creative activities that you and your grandchild can do together. When thinking "creative," remember that there is no need to confine yourself to arts and crafts. True creativity involves making something new, whether it's an object, an idea, a skill, or even a garden. You and your grandchildren will love exercising your bodies and brains with these fun projects.

- 1. Build something.** Few things are as satisfying as building something from scratch. Share this pleasure with your grandchild by helping him or her to build something that will last. If following step-by-step instructions is your style, you might try a store-bought model or a make-your-own birdhouse kit. If you prefer to wing it, you might enjoy gluing graham crackers together with frosting to form edible houses or building log cabins with popsicle sticks. Perhaps you even have some experience with carpentry and can tackle more ambitious projects. Designing and building a treehouse or a wooden fort with your grandchild, for example, is sure to thrill. But you don't have to go all out to have fun; even a simple kid-size wooden chair will be a big hit. Just make sure to carefully supervise children during these projects and only give them tasks (and tools) you know they can handle.
- 2. Personalize a calendar.** Visit a bookstore with your grandchild and let him or her pick out a wall calendar that will be kept at your home. Then help your grandchild to personalize the calendar by filling in the appropriate dates with family birthdays, vacations, recitals, sporting matches, or anything else he or she thinks is important. Provide plenty of arts and crafts materials—pens, markers, stickers, paints, colored paper, glue, ink stamps, glitter, etc.—so the finished project will be a work of art. Hang the completed calendar on your wall and refer to it regularly to avoid forgetting important events in your grandchild's life.
- 3. Plant a garden.** Planting a garden is active, outdoorsy, and messy, all of which make this classic activity a natural for kids. Set aside a small plot of land for your grandchild's special garden, then let him or her decide what to plant. Fast-growing veggies such as green beans and tomatoes are always a good choice. Other children may prefer a garden of wildflowers, which is beautiful and may attract butterflies during the spring and summer. You could also

plant a “theme” garden, such as a salsa garden (tomatoes, onions, green peppers, and cilantro), an Independence Day garden (red, white, and blue flowers), or a monogram garden (plants grown in the shape of your grandchild’s initials). The more imaginative your approach, the better.

4. **Make a gift.** Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and other gift-giving occasions call for handmade presents. But it can be difficult for your grandchild to find the time and the privacy to create these surprises at home. Help out by turning your home into Gift Central when special days approach. Some ideas for Mom-friendly gifts: Make a matching bead necklace and bracelet, decorate a booklet of help-around-the-house coupons, or make a scrapbook that showcases fabulous family memories. For Dad: Decorate a plain T-shirt with fabric paints, make a custom picture frame for a favorite photo, or bake a yummy treat.
5. **Decorate your food.** Combine art and food—two of any kid’s favorite things—by indulging in an orgy of cookie decorating. Get your hands on some plain sugar cookies and some colored frosting (you can either make or buy both items, depending on your inclination). Then spend an hour or two decorating the cookies in any-season style. Frosting’s too messy for your taste? Pick up some FooDoodler food-coloring pens (available from www.amazon.com and many other online retailers) and use your imagination to turn blank cookie “canvases” into original works of art.

Oh, and on the subject of food decorating, who says dyeing eggs is just for Easter? Use seasonal colors to transform this perennial favorite into a fabulous Valentine’s Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, or Christmas activity. Surely Santa would appreciate a nice hard-boiled egg along with his cookies and milk.
6. **Learn a skill.** It’s always fun to learn how to do something new, and it’s even more fun when you share the experience with your grandchild. You could try signing up together for an age-appropriate crafts class—sewing, pottery, weaving, woodworking, and so on. You could even take music lessons and learn an instrument. Alternately, consider purchasing a how-to book and figuring out a new skill on your own. Origami, candle making, flower pressing, and paper making, for example, are all easy to do at home with a few inexpensive supplies. Each time you get together with your grandchild, spend a little time expanding on your shared knowledge. Before long you will begin to reap the rewards of proficiency in a new and mutually exciting field.
7. **Start a book club.** Foster both a love of literature and critical thinking abilities by starting a book club with your grandchild. Together, choose an appropriate book (ask a librarian or visit the Database of Award-Winning Children’s Literature, www.dawcl.com, if you need ideas). Read the book together or separately, depending on your grandchild’s age and both of your preferences. Then set aside some time to talk about your reading. For a livelier discussion, make sure to ask your grandchild some leading questions—did he or she like the book? Why or why not? What was his or her favorite part? Avoid probing too deeply unless your grandchild is clearly receptive; this is supposed to be fun, not school. By creating an easy-going, enjoyable atmosphere, you will free your grandchild’s tongue and perhaps learn something about his or her ideas and thought processes as well.

8. **Fix something.** Got peeling wallpaper, flaking paint, ripped screening, or squeaky hinges? Plan to fix the little things that ail your house with your grandchild's help. To the adult ear, this sounds suspiciously like work, but your grandchild won't see it that way. Kids don't get the chance to experiment with grown-up tools, paintbrushes, and other workshop items too often. There's a reason for this, of course: Tools are often expensive and sometimes dangerous. Also, an inexperienced, poorly supervised "helper" can compound a relatively simple problem. But kids will never learn if no one teaches them. By including your grandchild—carefully supervised—in your household repairs, you'll not only be passing on life skills, you'll also be turning chores into fun.

9. **Set the table.** You can make an event out of any meal by setting a fancy table. Choose a theme, such as color or season. Use runners, candles, seasonal fruits and flowers, ribbons, glitter, or anything else that catches your fancy to dress up the center of the table. (Websites such as interiordec.about.com/od/centerpieceideas can help you to get ideas.) Then brush up on proper silverware, placemat, and plateware positioning by visiting a website that addresses the subject, such as www.chinaroyale.com/manners.html. When the table is fully arranged, add placecards to tell family members where to sit. While you're at it, why not add a small gift at each setting to add the finishing touch? It's a creative and fun way to cap off a perfect meal.

10. **Get professional help.** If independent creativity isn't your strong suit, plenty of commercial ventures stand ready and able to help you out. Paint-your-own pottery studios, for instance, are becoming ubiquitous nationwide; check your local yellow pages for a listing near you. These businesses sell unadorned plates, cups, and myriad other clay objects. Your purchase price includes an all-materials-provided painting session plus firing in a professional kiln. Always fun for younger kids is Gymboree (www.playandmusic.com/b2c/customer/home.jsp), which offers hands-on music and crafts classes at hundreds of locations. Yet another creative option is Build-a-Bear Workshop (www.buildabear.com), where patrons can customize stuffed animals with various outfits and accessories to suit their personalities and interests. With outlets in many large malls, Build-a-Bear is guaranteed to put a smile on any child's face.

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