

Plan a Picnic

We need a picnic most when we deserve it least.

Families often find themselves going through the motions, just getting through one day after another. When you need to find more meaning in your day with your family, you might find it on a picnic.

Picnics are especially needed in these pressure-cooker times. Families of every description are under stress. Mealtimes are often perfunctory—a time to hurriedly shove down food that we may not even take the time to taste. A picnic provides a great chance to step out of the rat race into an island of leisure.

Rather than waiting for a national holiday, picnics are perhaps the most fun when they occur at random. Choose a day, plan to leave work on time and head for the park. Bring along any family or friends—especially those whose faces have that pinched, stressed look. Declare your own holiday.

Food of some sort is a must, but difficulty of preparation is not. Homemade fried chicken and potato salad are great, but they may be too time-consuming if you're not committed to the whole Martha Stewart thing. If you don't have time to cook, pick up a few simple things at the supermarket deli. While I have no scientific evidence for this, it has been my observation that even the simplest food tastes better in the fresh air.

It's lovely to picnic outdoors when the weather is perfect, but even the climate needn't be a factor. One rainy evening, a dad I know removed the seats from his family's minivan where they picnicked and camped out overnight, safely tucked in their own garage.

I know a single mom who regularly treats her family to "Toothpick Picnics" with bits of fruit, vegetables and meats skewered on toothpicks—minutes to prepare for an evening of fun. She serves the whole thing on a plastic tablecloth on the family room floor, which becomes the site for board games after supper.

For parents, picnics are more relaxing than taking children to restaurants. There is no telling children to sit still and be quiet. Running and laughing add to the flavor of picnic food. Kids can be kids, and parents can enjoy their childish antics under the big wide sky.

Where better than on a blanket beneath a shade tree to relive our own childhoods, while connecting our children to their past?

So skip dinner tonight. Make it a picnic instead. Grab a blanket (preferably an old, raggedy one). Gather the kids and find a grassy spot in a park or even your own backyard. And as the stars come out to light up the evening sky, watch for children's—and adults'—eyes to light up as well.