



By Jennifer Wise

Your Staycation: A Top Ten List

Ahh, *Winter Break*. Those glorious ten days each year when the kids have vacation and hopefully, you do too. Heading off to Florida sounds pretty amazing right about now, huh? *What? You're not going anywhere? Staying home?* Yeah, that was us – every single year.* Affording a warm-weather vacation with a bunch of kids is pretty much out of the question for many families and this year is no exception. So instead of taking a *vacation*, plan a *staycation*.



That's right. You can stay home and still relax. And if you can get yourself in the right frame of mind, staying home can sound pretty good – no dragging suitcases through crowded airports, no waiting on endless lines for a ride your kids will chicken out of at the last second, and no waiting for what seems like hours for a table at a crowded pizza store near a certain beach whose name rhymes with Miami.

We've been doing it for years and we always have fun. Last year was the first year that we did "real" things with the kids – we drove to the Crayola Factory, we headed into the city to an amazing class at the ChocolateWorks Factory and we popped into FAO Schwartz. And we had a great time. But we have a great time staying home for days on end too – and it's all (mostly) free.

Here are my top ten ways to keep the family busy and happy at home:

1. **Turn up the heat.** Literally. Crank up the thermostat and drag the lounge chairs out from the garage. Dig out some summer clothes and relax, sipping a fruity drink with an umbrella, right in your living room. One year we even bought a very large and shallow rectangular bin with a lid from Lowe's, filled it with sand and let the kids play for hours. When they're done playing, make like a hotel maid and vacuum the living room.

2. **Drag the sleeping bags** down from the attic, build a fire in the fireplace (or just use the micro-

wave) and make some s'mores. Hand out flashlights and some library books the kids haven't yet seen. It's amazing how long a child will read if he can do it by flashlight.

3. **Bundle the kids up** and go for a walk. Yes, it's freezing outside, but you'll be okay. Don't know which way to go? Cover an empty square tissue box in white paper and draw arrows on all six sides. Once you're outside, let the kids take turns rolling the die at each corner. Follow the arrow and see where it takes you. If you hit an ice cream store, go in. It's not like you can get any colder, right?

4. **Plan an indoor herb garden.** Take a few moments when you're in Lowe's picking up your DIY sandbox and head over to the garden center. It's likely pretty empty for the season, but you can still pick up several packets of seeds and some soil. Use a few Styrofoam cups and plant basil, parsley, sage, really whatever herbs you like. Keep the cups on a windowsill and in a short amount of time, you'll have more herbs than you'll know what to do with. And planting will remind you that spring is indeed on the way.

5. **Feeling crafty?** Shrinky Dinks can usually be found in an arts and crafts store, but making your own is half the fun. Using #6 plastic (the kind that your take-out salad from the pizza store might be packed in – ask nicely, they may give you a few clean ones), cut away the edges so you have a flat sheet of plastic. Use assorted colored Sharpies to sketch and color in your pictures. Cut the picture out, leaving a small border around the edge. Place your plastic cutouts on a piece of foil in the toaster oven, on the toast setting. At first the plastic will curl up like crazy and you will get nervous that you are doing it wrong, but you're not. Just wait until the plastic unfurls and lays flat. Stop the toaster and take out the foil but don't touch the pieces until they cool off.

If you have a hole puncher, you can punch holes in the plastic before you bake it – add some string after baking and you have a necklace. Or a charm bracelet.

6. **Go swimming.** No really. Taking the kids to a local hotel for one night can be surprisingly inexpensive. Just be sure the hotel has an indoor pool and a game room and you're set. Pick up some Chinese food on the way and your husband will be set too.

7. **Bake challah,** but don't just bake for that Shabbos. Fill that freezer with challah and you'll be smiling on *erev Shabbos* for weeks. It sounds like a lot of work, but with the kids home, you can sit back and watch as they shape the challah themselves. Teach them to braid. Learn how to make a six-stranded braid together. And then give them a mini-lesson on how to scrape the extra dough off the kitchen table. And for extra fun, bake snowman shaped challah – form three rolls, each one larger than

the next, arrange them on the pan like a snowman – and you can even add details such as a scarf, a hat and eyes and a nose.

8. **Declare a snow day.** It's okay if it's not actually snowing right this minute. A pretend snow day is even better than a real one because no one has to shovel. Spend the day in the house with the family, stay in pajamas, drink hot cocoa, make pancakes, teach your kids to play cards, Pictionary and charades and when you're ready for a nap, pop your wedding video into the DVD player and set the kids up with some popcorn. You'll get a kick out of watching it – maybe even a little teary-eyed too – and it's likely that your kids have never seen it, or at least haven't for a long time.

9. And the ultimate in staycations? **Turn your house into a hotel.** Have the kids create a menu for "guests" to use in the restaurant/kitchen, make "do not disturb" signs for bedroom doors, hang signs on the wall with arrows pointing to the veranda, the pool, the upper deck and the dining room. Hang a no-smoking sign and set-up a concierge desk near the front door. You can even make elevator buttons from cardboard and bottle caps and hang them near a closet door. My kids played this one out for days – and a year later they still ask when we can do it again.



10. Okay, I was kidding. The real ultimate in staycations? Send the kids to their grandparents for the week and you'll forget what Florida even is.

*Well, until this year. We moved to Florida last summer. I highly recommend it.