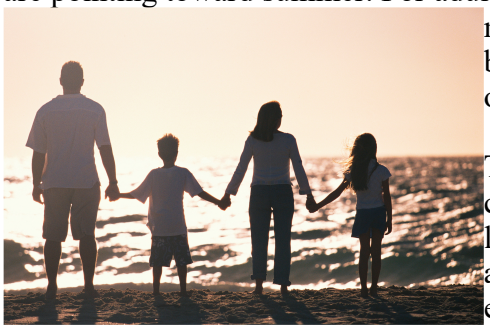
Happy trails: planning a family friendly vacation

The days are growing longer, scarves are being swapped for sunglasses and school is almost out. All signs are pointing toward summer. For adults, the hottest season is a time to kick back, relax and erase distant memories of wind chill factors and frozen toes. For kids, it means a break from homework and indoor play. For both, it can mark the start of the family vacation season.



Though taking a break from daily routines and exploring new places can be a re-energizing experience, the stress of organizing time off can leave you feeling like you need a vacation from your vacation. Below are some tips that can help you plan a memorable family holiday for everyone.

Before your departure

Before you and your family begin your travels, there are many trip-related considerations that you should address:

Choose wisely. Be sure that your vacation time offers a little something for everyone. Though your idea of a great holiday might be a gripping book and a comfortable hammock, your children might be bored senseless after the first day. Ask family members what activities they'd like to do so that you can create a holiday that has something for everyone. Variety is not only the spice of life, it's also a key ingredient in a great family vacation.

Plan in advance. While spur-of-the-moment activities can be exciting, you'll be more likely to do the activity and avoid disappointment by creating a plan and sticking to it.

Let kids choose. From restaurant picks to selecting a ride at the amusement park, children savour the chance to have their say. Allow kids to create a short list of activities and the chance to realize at least one. If your children are too young to create their own to-do list, offer up two or three options to choose from so they feel part of the decision-making.

Pack snacks, games, books, activities, etc. There's no better way to keep your children in the holiday spirit than with healthy food and entertainment. Even if meals are included in your travel plans, it's wise to have a few sandwiches up your sleeve (not literally of course) should the food not be to your kids' or your own liking.

Leave time for mishaps. Allow extra time for life's little delays such as traffic jams and toddler temper tantrums. Start your holiday off on the right foot and follow the 30-minute rule: Estimate the maximum amount of time you anticipate it will take to get to your destination and add 30 minutes.

Leave notification. Rely on a trusted neighbour or friend to collect your mail, pick up phone messages, water plants and check on the house if you're planning on being away for more than a few days.

During your trip

Just because your vacation is underway does not mean the planning stops. Be sure to note the following suggestions regarding your family’s safety and well-being throughout your voyage.

Keep it simple. Don't make the mistake of trying to see and do everything while on a break. Remember, a vacation shouldn't be work. Allow each family member to choose one or two activities and spare some space for spontaneity.

Capture memories. Take pictures of the action, write down impressions of places visited in a journal or create a scrapbook that everyone can contribute to, for future journeys down memory lane.

Aim for nothing less than imperfection. Realize that problems you and your family had before the holiday, are not going to evaporate over the course of a few weeks. Accept that parts of your time off will work out better than expected, while others are bound to fizzle. Take a deep breath, take it all in stride, and take the time to relax and enjoy yourself.

Give your family time to recover. Avoid a shock to your relaxed and rejuvenated system: Plan at least a day or two of recovery time so that you and your family can ease back in at work and school.

Staying well on vacation

Pack a first aid kit. Ensure it's equipped with bandages, gauze, Aspirin, disinfectant and any other items you may need to treat minor mishaps.

Drink lots of water. Though eight glasses a day is a reasonable minimum, you'll need more if you're hiking, biking or even just sightseeing. An active person should drink four to eight ounces (120 to 240 millilitres) of water every 10 to 20 minutes depending on the walking speed and the temperature outside. Drink up before you feel thirsty as the body usually doesn't signal thirst until it's already dehydrated. If you're not sure about the water quality at your destination, drink bottled or boiled water.

Wear sunscreen or a hat, even if it's overcast. It may seem like a harmless, grey day, but the sun's rays can penetrate the clouds and leave you feeling burned. Choose a sunscreen with an SPF 15 minimum and slather it on every few hours—more often if you're in the water, perspiring a lot or are out between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m., when the sun is at its most intense.

Protect yourself from insect bites. When in areas where bugs are an issue—such as in forests and near water—wear light-coloured, long-sleeved shirts, long pants, closed shoes and a layer of insect repellent. Avoid being outdoors at dusk and in areas where there is stagnant water. Seek medical support right away if —after receiving a bite—you begin to feel feverish, headachy, weak, sensitive to light or if there is extreme swelling around the bite.

Keep your hands clean. Carry moist towels or anti-bacterial gel to avoid exposure to unwanted bacteria and germs while out and about.

Watch what you eat. Opt for cooked and peeled vegetables and avoid raw salads if you're in an area where tap water is undrinkable. Steer clear of street vendors and run-down (i.e., dirty) looking restaurants where your chances of being exposed to bacteria are higher.

International travel

If going abroad for your vacation, additional considerations should be made:

Get medical advice from a physician. If you require vaccinations, you may need to get them six to eight weeks before the trip, so seek medical support well in advance.

Stay informed. Health Canada and the World Health Organization offer up-to-the minute information, warnings and advisories on their websites for potential health hazards nationally and abroad.

Bring documentation. Carry a copy of your prescription with your medicine (in its original labelled bottle) so you don't run into trouble when crossing international borders. Remember to keep medication with you for easy accessibility.

Whether you're staying close to home or venturing overseas, your summer holiday can be the perfect opportunity for you and your family to relax, reconnect and recharge. But with every vacation comes a list of advanced measures and safety precautions to consider. Try to stay organized by keeping a checklist of items to take care of before, during and after your travel.