Q: How can my family really reconnect during our summer vacation?
A: Vacations are unquestionably an essential part of reconnecting with family. Whether long and luxurious or short and simple, a vacation has the potential to break the stress cycle and provide time for positive family bonding.

Activity-oriented experiences strengthen the family connection more so than passive entertainment, such as watching TV or spending time with other electronics. Developing lasting memories that promote positive well-being often leads to satisfying family relationships. These positive memories produce a deeper level of commitment, which enriches the family bond.

Everyone needs vacation time to rejuvenate, energize, and engage in open communication, so don’t feel guilty about using your family’s resources to take a vacation. The time, energy, money, and effort to reconnect with family is well spent. Treat your mental health with the same importance as your physical health.

To achieve your goal of connecting as a family, it is important to prepare. “Upfront preparation saves aggravation” is one saying. When the entire family takes part in planning the vacation, each member feels ownership toward that goal.

Counselor Corner, on Back

6 Tips to Stress-Proof Your Family Vacation

By Melissa Conrad Stöppler, MD | MedicineNet.com

Summer is here. Are you looking forward to getting away and having a worry-free family vacation? Advance planning can help you to stress-proof your family travels so that you can have the most fun and relaxing experience possible without undue worry.

A vacation with the family, while intended to give everyone a break and some relaxation, can be a stressful event in itself. Several factors can increase everyone’s stress levels—the actual travel, unfamiliar surroundings, and perhaps a different language and culture. If all family members are dealing with their own stresses related to the different surroundings and lack of familiarity, the potential is heightened for conflicts among family members.

Lack of communication is one factor which can greatly increase holiday stress and worry. It’s important to discuss the trip in advance and talk about what everyone’s expectations are in terms of activity vs. quiet time, time spent alone, and the degree to which your days are planned or scheduled in advance. You should discuss your expectations of the vacation as well. One family member, for...
Example, may crave activity and diversion while others may simply want to rest.

Finally, people often get caught in the trap of unrealistic expectations while on vacation, for example, expecting anxiety and stress over work-related problems to magically disappear, or thinking that a conflict-ridden relationship will work itself out on vacation. Financial issues are often a source of stress for families on holiday. If you’re on a budget, discuss how you’ll handle things such as impulse purchases and eating out in restaurants.

If you are traveling with young children, it is important not to overload your schedule and to allow plenty of time for spontaneous activity. Location is not as important as the way your time is spent. “Kid-friendly” can be what you make it. It’s perfectly possible to have a relaxing city holiday with children, visiting parks and zoos and taking leisurely walks. It’s also possible to turn a tropical paradise into a tense and stressful place if your days are overscheduled and you’re constantly tired and quarreling.

Children can become stressed by a vacation just as adults can, although they may show their stress in different ways. It’s not surprising that children may experience stress when they are in an unfamiliar environment and confronted daily with new experiences. Since many children are not able to recognize or verbally convey their feelings of stress, their stress may manifest itself in their behavior. For example, children may behave in a way that is inappropriate for their age, or they may appear to be moody or temperamental.

While a “worry-free” vacation is likely an unattainable goal, an ideal vacation is one in which the “good” stresses (i.e. dealing with unfamiliar cultures, increased contact with family members) are not outweighed by the “bad” stresses (arguments, tiredness, resentment).

Here are six vacation survival rules:

1. Accept others’ wishes and be prepared to compromise. Everyone should have some opportunity to do things he or she wants. In most families, this means compromises on everyone’s part. Recognize that you may have to take part in some activities that wouldn’t be your first choices, for the sake of group harmony.

2. Give yourself plenty of time for the trip. Rushing to catch a plane or train only increases everyone’s stress level and leads to conflicts. This is especially true when traveling with very young children who are likely to require more breaks and cause unpredictable interruptions.

3. Don’t overextend your schedule. Very few people can do a “whirlwind tour” of five cities in seven days and remain relaxed, and trying to do so would be unthinkable for a family with young children. Likewise, don’t try to fill your days with too many commitments and activities. Leave time to see where your whims and moods take you.

4. Communicate without being confrontational with other family members. Don’t sulk and act resentful if it seems that nothing is “going your way.” Kindly mention to the others that you’re feeling disappointed that you haven’t been able to see or do whatever it is you feel is important to you. Suppressed anger and resentment can easily ruin your dream vacation.

5. Be realistic about your expectations. If your children misbehave at home, they’re not going to behave perfectly just because you’re on vacation. Interpersonal differences and conflicts won’t magically disappear.

6. Relax and have fun without expecting the very state of being on vacation to “cure” any difficulties or problems you may be facing back home.

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Counselor Corner, from Front

Here are suggestions to help you accomplish that goal:

Plan ahead
• Hold a planning meeting to talk to family members about a possible destination.
• Reflect on your favorite memories from previous vacations.
• Assign various duties for preparation.
• Research available activities.
• Make and confirm reservations. Consider a suite or adjoining rooms.
• Certify necessary documents.
• Check weather and pack appropriately. Pack for contingencies, including a first-aid kid and maps.
• Make a back-up plan.
• Create excitement.

Make it an adventure
• Step out of your comfort zone with new challenges.
• Make positive ties with new friends.
• Appreciate the environment. Take nature walks.
• Slow down and take time to relax.
• Laugh often and create joy.

Be truly present
• Disconnect electronics.
• Talk face-to-face with eye contact.
• Be flexible with expectations.
• Engage all five senses. Take in the sights, sounds, and smells. Feel the sun on your face or sand between your toes. Taste the local cuisine.

Embrace the memories
• Take pictures.
• Discuss your daily adventures as a family each evening.
• Gather souvenirs.
• Make a personal keepsake, like a scrapbook or music video.
• Relive the experiences. Share memories with friends and peers.
• Reflect on this vacation when planning the next.

Breaking the daily routine and leaving stress behind promotes growth as you take on new challenges and experiences. New experiences heighten the five sense and renew faith, hope, and commitment to the family bond. Family bonds are built around creativity, which involves openness, imagination, and cooperation among family members. The lasting memories you’ll make will create excitement when you relive your past trips and plan future ones. Reconnect with your family – take a vacation!