

Summer's running short: Plan a backyard campout!

By JENNIFER COLTON

Summer is winding down, but you still have time to squeeze in a few more snuggles, campouts and s'mores before the school year starts — especially if you do them in your own backyard.

Just like taking a camping trip, start with preparation. You're only steps from home, but for the most authentic feeling, make sure you have everything you need, and have kids pack a backpack with any special toys, activities or snacks they want to make sure to take on their "trip." Set flexible guidelines for what you'd like to see and do and eat but, unlike roughing it, backyard camping keeps you close to any supplies you forgot — and a working bathroom.

On the day of the campout, have your kids help set up the campsite. If you are feeling particularly brave and adventurous, create a tent as a family, hanging blankets or other materials; if you're using a pop-up tent, teach the kids how to set it up. Kids can help roll out sleeping bags and set up pillows, stuffed animals and blankets. As a side note, putting a comforter, a yoga mat or an extra blanket under the sleeping bags is more comfortable than sleeping on the ground.

It will get dark eventually, so have some lighting prepared. You can hang strings of lights or lamps, or use tea lights and glow sticks around the camp to give it a magical, festive feeling. Be careful if you are lighting a campfire or using candles with open flames, especially if camping during the summer when it's hot and dry.

Once you have your campsite established, focus on activities that bring everyone together. Since you

are camping and spending family time, that means no electronics allowed, even for adults. Some exceptions may be made for cameras and a projector if you're watching a movie as a family. Here are a few electronic-free activity ideas:

- Make a scavenger hunt for items to find in your backyard from sticks to seeds to clover leaves.
- Take a hike (even if it's around your neighborhood).
- Do a craft — bonus points if it's camping-related.
- If you don't have a campfire,

consider making a fake one.

- Play bug bingo.
- Blow bubbles or have a bubble making contest.
- Play tag — your favorite variety or try a new one, such as flashlight tag after dark
- Water balloon toss.
- Play a board game.
- Make shadow puppets in the light of the fire or flashlights.
- Tell stories — spooky or not.
- Stargaze or use a telescope to explore the night sky.



Strategies

- Watch a movie. (Although it may not be possible when camping out of town, backyard camping has a couple advantages: WiFi and electricity. Use a projector to broadcast the movie on a tent, a blank sheet, or the side of the house, or have everyone cuddle up in sleeping bags and watch the movie on a laptop or other portable screen)

While you are planning the activities, don't forget about snacks. If you have a fire pit or feel like running a barbecue, use them. Otherwise, pack a cooler just like you would if you were heading out of town. Don't forget the drinks, including water, and no campout is complete without s'mores. If you have a fire pit or a grill, toast your marshmallows the old-fashioned way. If you don't, make solar ovens using a pizza box and watch the sun melt the chocolate or bake s'mores in advance. If you are planning on staying out all night, have a plan for breakfast and resist the temptation to let everyone back inside as soon as the sun is up.

When camping — even in your backyard — stay flexible. Sometimes things happen outside of your control, and that's okay. Roll with the event and, with any luck, you'll create great summer memories without running out of time — or money.

Jennifer Colton is news director of KOHU and KQFM, and mother of three, based in Pendleton.

