

[A note from Toni: These columns/Email newsletters aren't archived at Disney's Family.com, so I've compiled a small sampling to show the writing style for an ongoing project for this client.]

Boredom-Busting Blanket Forts

*A "Dream Team Daily" column and email series by Toni McLellan for Family.com
April 3, 2008*

"BORING!"

My middle child doesn't sugarcoat his dissatisfaction with our lack of rainy-day fun.

My go-to solution on days like this is to return to my own childhood, a healthy part of which was spent huddled beneath the canopy of a blanket fort reading Nancy Drew novels by flashlight.

In fact, my current love for tent camping was probably born on a day much like this one, and I wonder if having a hiding place you've constructed yourself serves some sort of latent evolutionary purpose, or if fun is fun, no matter your generation.

My ponderings are cut short -- "Dere's nothing to DO, Mom!"

"Let's try something not-boring," I say.

I head downstairs, promising they'll like what I have planned. Nolan the middle child is suspicious, but follows anyway.

Because our basement doubles as our family room, we've stored an assortment of blankets for movie-night comfort or overnight guests there.

I open the storage ottoman and select a dark flannel sheet, because any blanket fort worth its cloth is dark inside, providing the perfect excuse to break out the flashlights. I face a couple of high-backed chairs away from the sectional couch and drape the sheet over everything.

"Who forted?" I joke, realizing I'm contributing to the bodily humor delinquency of my three minors.

Laughing, the boys drop to their knees and crawl inside our secret hideout.

"Can we have a picnic in here?" asks Nolan, his brown eyes wide in the dark.

More work for me, but at least he's not bored.

What are your tried-and-true tricks for relieving boredom? Click the comments link below to find and share ideas.

Winter Hiking Safety

*A "Dream Team Daily" column and email series by Toni McLellan for Family.com
March 21, 2008*

In one last effort before giving way to spring, the winter sky unleashed what looked like the world's biggest pillow fight gone wrong over our minivan. I kept my cool outwardly, but the slushy snow on the highway made me grip the steering wheel just a bit tighter. Fortunately, it was a short drive to the conservation area where our winter hike awaited. Enough snow had fallen to cover everything in a seamless blanket of white, but not so deep to require snowshoes. As we were getting out of the car, a conservation district patrol jeep approached.

"A Peel-EECE car!" shouted 3-year-old Aaron, a fan of all things vehicular.

"Just checking to see if you folks needed any help," the officer said as the boys climbed out of the van.

"We're good, thanks. Just going for a hike," I said, adding that I'd already called my neighbor and husband to let them know where we'd be and about how long we'd be gone -- a standard safety precaution every hiker should take. (For more, search "winter safety tips" on www.aap.org, the American Academy of Pediatrics website.)

The synthetic "vrrwip!-vrrwip!-vrrwip!" of snow pant legs rubbing together drowned out the officer's wishes for a safe hike as the boys raced to the trailhead. Swaddled in layers of breathable fabric (long underwear, fleece) with a waterproof outer shell (snow

pants, parkas, hats and mittens), I'd dressed the boys for comfort in the snowy outdoors. (I find gear at www.rei-outlet.com, www.campmor.com, www.PlayItAgainSports.com, and through my friends-with-older-kids connections.)

I'd chosen a familiar trail that I knew 3-year-old Aaron could manage, because every family hike is only as do-able as the youngest hiker's abilities. On the trail, we relished the peacefulness of the snowfall: the whole outdoors seemed muted. We stuck out our tongues to taste snowflakes and were careful to hike to one side to allow cross-country skiers to carve grooves later on.

We discovered that the snow was wet enough to make snowballs, which also meant snowmen and snow boulders. Hiking to the top of a hill, the two older boys rolled a snowball into a boulder and we cheered and clapped as it, well, snowballed downhill.

"This is my favorite day of the whole year!" said Jackson, who scurried downhill to the boulder, which had cracked in half at the bottom of the hill.

"Mine too, buddy," I said. And I meant it.

What special safety measures do you take for winter activities? Click the comments link below to share ideas.

Putting Your Neighborhood on the Map

*A "Dream Team Daily" column and email series by Toni McLellan for Family.com
February 22, 2008*

As the middle of three brothers, 5-year-old Nolan sometimes -- okay, maybe often -- gets lost in our family's hustle. But his tendency to broadcast random facts to the family made me suspect there was a leader hidden beneath that introverted exterior.

On a hike at a nearby conservation area, I handed Nolan the trail map, which featured multi-colored elements depicting green trees, blue water, and brown trail. He was just on the cusp of reading, and I wanted to strengthen that connection between images and text that is so important to early readers.

He took to map reading like a healthy kid to germ-laden doctor's office toys. Once he connected what he observed to the symbols on the map, Nolan became our guide for the hike, pointing out with authority when the trail would curve near water and when to expect a stand of trees.

After returning home, Nolan carried that trail map everywhere. I asked him if he wanted to learn more about maps, and his enthusiastic "Yeah!" burst forth before I could finish the question.

"Would you like to draw a map of our neighborhood?" I asked. Without replying, Nolan ran to get paper and a pencil. His tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth, Nolan drew that familiar rectangle/triangle combo.

"Dis," he said, pointing to the center of the paper, "is our house."

"And where is Carol's house?" I asked, referring to our neighbor. He grabbed the sheet of paper and drew a house next to ours. We talked about the house on the other side of us, and the houses across the street, and Nolan drew those, too, with a gray line in between to represent the street. "It's a hiking map of our neighborhood!" he said proudly.

To round out what he'd learned so far, I went to Google Maps (www.maps.google.com), typed in our home address, and found a map of our neighborhood, including landmarks like his school, train tracks, and our Victorian town square. I printed it out in grayscale, so that he could color it with his crayons.

While I'm proud of the connections Nolan made between the printed page and the real world, I'm also thrilled that stuck-in-the-middle Nolan is now at the front of the line.

Do you use maps as a teaching tool with kids? Click the comments link below to share ideas.