

# A Child's War Chest

Would you want to participate in a hobby where you are told to sit and be still while the other people visit?

Why, then, do we expect our children to be satisfied with sitting quietly in the shade while adult women wearing funny clothes visit and sew? With some care and arrangement, your entire family can be active and engaged in living history activities. This preparation takes time, and in some cases, a bit of money, but the rewards are fantastic: children who have a connection to history, are excited by their activities, and can speak intelligently about their life as an 1860s child.

The first provision you can make to engage children is to carefully select the events you attend. Ideally, these will be events with pre-planned scenarios and activities for civilians as well as for the military. Mainstream "Battle & Ball" events will have little to engage the mind of a child—plan to provide your own, and anticipate other children flocking to your area.

If you will be attending immersion events, prepare your family ahead of time with the impression details, planning for as many logistical possibilities as possible. Talk about what the family will do if it rains, how meals will be found, where everyone will sleep at night, what is going to happen around them, and some ideas on how they might react. This preparation helps a child cope with the difficulty of an out-of-the-norm situation with good grace. Most children will become quite stressed if they do not know when they will eat, and where they will sleep. Talk about the family impression, and what a child in their situation would do, how they would act, what they might feel, and what their daily tasks may be.

Plan to do some touring of the event; if it is not a first-person immersion event, your children have an excellent opportunity to ask questions and learn new information about the people and events of the time. Encourage critical thinking skills.

Choose events that allow the space for children to play, and provide adult supervision at all times. Even when there are no planned activities, it's simple to get together some races and contests in a bit of open field. Children, engaged in being "children at play" with period activities, make a wonderful impression presentation.

Involve your children in the physical realities of caring for a family. Hopefully, your children are in the firm habit of daily chores

at home; these tasks should continue at events as well. Assignments made previous to leaving home for setting & clearing meals, washing, drying, & putting away the dishes, hauling water & firewood, and other camp tasks, not only gives children something to do during the day, but takes a great deal of the work off you. (Don't forget to say "Please" and "Thank you" to your children, frequently and sincerely! Common courtesies should always be extended to the younger generation, and will promote a congenial air about your family's "home base" for the event.)

Even young children can dress themselves (perhaps with help), straighten their sleeping area in the morning, and be responsible for keeping track of and putting away toys and games. Toddlers can be taught to pick up the toys, find their shoes, and tattle on the naughty activities of the older kids. If you have several children, consider assigning an older one to look after a younger one for part of the day. Children need vacations as much as you do, though, so try to be sensitive to the off-duty time requests of older ones.

What to do after chores are finished? A small selection of appropriate toys will serve better than a trailer full; select the toys with the help of your children (one per child, plus one for all to share, if you have the room; otherwise, one or two toys for the family to share.) Period toys make wonderful birthday and holiday gifts, so it's easy to build your collection slowly. Some are easily made at home, or by talented friends or relatives, providing still more family involvement and opportunities for first hand experiences.. You might explore:

- Cloth *dolly* or porcelain head/cloth body lady doll and clothing. Making the clothes at an event is a good sewing project for girls able to handle a needle and thread.
- Wooden building *blocks*
- *Skipping rope*
- *Slate and pencils*
- *Musical instruments* (drums and pennywhistles are very popular)
- Reproductions of period *story books* and *school books*
- *Tea set and dishes* (these need to be porcelain to be correct, and in an appropriate pattern, but can lend hours of fun for groups of little girls having grown-up "teas" on the porch of a historic house)
- Carved wooden *Noah's ark and animals*, typically a Sunday-only toy
- Soft *sock balls*

- Cat's cradle and other *string games*
- *Hopscotch stones and marbles*
- *Checkers and chess* (make sure you use a wooden or canvas playing surface, and wooden pieces)
- *Kites*
- *Graces* (the hoop tossing game)
- *Pick-up sticks*
- A small *wagon*, which can also be used for hauling wood, water, and small tired people
- *Sewing* projects, such as small quilts, doll clothes, embroidery, or mending
- "Wash Day" laundering game
- *Jacob's Ladder*
- *Clothespin Drop*: children take turns tossing or dropping non-spring wooden clothespins into a wide-mouth jar or small bucket. Those who have tried it say it's amazing how long a two year old will stand there, dropping in pins and taking them out again.
- A similar activity is *Ring Toss*: spike a metal stake into the ground, and take turns tossing wooden hoops over it. Again, small children can stand above and drop the rings onto the stake.
- Construct a *blanket tent* over chairs for small soldiers and little mothers.
- Miscellaneous wooden *boxes* to sit in
- Large *buttons* to string (develops hand-eye coordination in small ones)
- *Playing School*, older children tutoring the younger in letters and numbers
- *Reading aloud* to other children and adults occupied with handwork
- *Sing-alongs* with popular historic songs and hymns
- When all else fails, and you have spare clothes handy, *Mud Pies* (or French Swamp Bakery) is always popular

Store your amusement materials in a covered wooden crate, large basket, or canvas bags. Some parents keep historic toys fairly exclusive to use at events. This keeps the novelty of simple items intact for a much longer time. We tend to let our children play with their historically appropriate toys on a regular basis, simply because they are *fun*.

Mr. Michael Mescher of the Ragged Soldier Sutlery ([www.raggedsoldier.com](http://www.raggedsoldier.com)) has published an inexpensive book on games and pastimes of the Civil War era, and also stocks a wide variety of documented, appropriate toys and amusements.

When children are adequately prepared, and have at hand some period amusements, the likelihood of success and happiness increase dramatically. And there's no need to bring along a single modern item to accomplish it.