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How We Can Afford To Be A Cultured Family: We Barter

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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Keeping our kids “cultured” is exhausting. For one thing, their interests seem to change daily depending on their age or what their friends are into. I've noticed there's also a de facto competition between parents to see who can register their kids for the coolest after-school activity.

Over the last couple of years our kids have been invited to try parkour, rock climbing, pickleball (Google it), yoga, cartooning, trampolining, belly-dancing and 3D-printing. There's no limit to the range of classes kids can take these days. And yes, all of it is expensive.

Last year, my wife and I landed on a strategy that would allow our kids to experience new things without breaking the bank: we barter for lessons.

Relevant Reading: How I Learned to Entertain My Child When Funds are Low (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-to-entertain-a-child-with-no-money>)

A friend of mine is an audio engineer and musician, so when our eldest daughter expressed interest in piano, we asked him if he'd teach her. His time these days is pretty valuable and exchanging money with friends is always a little weird, so we came to an agreement: he would teach our daughter piano and I would teach his wife a personalized version of the entrepreneurship course I teach at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies.

On Sunday mornings during the school year, we'd meet at our house one week and their house the next. We'd pour some coffee and get to work: piano lessons in one room, entrepreneurship lessons in the other. The parents who weren't teaching would watch the kids. Afterwards we'd cook up a tasty brunch and the kids (five between the two families) would scurry upstairs to play.

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Aside from being easier on the pocketbook, there are some unexpected benefits of this arrangement. As parents well know, finding time to see friends is a rare luxury. This way we designed it into our children's schedules. We also get to share knowledge back and forth, allowing us to reveal previously hidden parts of our lives. I had no idea my buddy was such a killer piano player; and his wife has a great idea for a business that I'd love to see succeed.

The kids also get to build solid relationships with their parents' friends, a valuable lesson in itself on building social bonds. It also helps them to see their own parents taking lessons and learning new things. This is an attitude that will come in handy for our children who will inherit a world in which many of the jobs they will hold don't currently exist.

The trend towards trading is increasing, especially in Canada's urban centres where the cost to buy new goods or services is skyrocketing. The Bunz Trading Zone, created in 2013 as a private Facebook page for Torontonians Emily Bitze to trade stuff with her friends (<https://bunz.com/about>), is now a stand-alone app for iPhone and Android. There are dozens of spin-off Bunz zones on Facebook devoted either to geographical locations in cities or types of goods like musical instruments.

You'll Also Love: Finding Art Activities For Boys When There's Limited Options (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/finding-art-activities-for-boys-when-there-are-limited-options>)

Over the past year or so, I have successfully bartered for a new cell phone in exchange for a subway Metropass and brokered some direct trades for musical instruments. The main rule is simple: no money exchanged (or risk banishment from the group).

As the year wore on, I eventually exhausted my store of lessons with my friend's wife. Our daughter wanted to continue piano lessons, so my wife and I made a list of all the things we could offer. Turns out my wife trained as a lifeguard when she was in her 20s and taught swimming lessons. So my wife and I pitched the idea of taking his two daughters (plus our three) for a week of swimming in the summer – our very own swim camp.

We ended up swimming in a new pool every day including one day at Lake Ontario from the beaches of Toronto Island.

When my wife and I made our lists, we were surprised at the skills we'd amassed over the years. Here are some examples of high-demand skills that you might be able to share with your network of friends and their children:

- **Art lessons:** Skills that go beyond paper-mache or egg-carton creatures are useful when engaging kids. Parents will certainly trade something valuable for a week of decent art instruction.
- **Cooking lessons:** A crash-course in the basics (how to hold a knife, how to use spices) is super useful for an adult who did not grow up in a kitchen. Kids also love to combine ingredients to make a meal.
- **Music lessons:** Learning a new instrument is on most people's bucket list. Playing music is also purportedly good exercise for your child's growing brain. If you know some basic techniques on guitar or piano, offer them up for a trade.
- **Photography lessons:** These days everybody thinks they are a professional with their iPhone, but working with a nice camera and knowing some basic lighting techniques makes a world of difference. Alternatively, if you have some decent equipment yourself, offer to shoot head shots for a burgeoning actor or musician.
- **Yoga lessons:** Without a weekly schedule or a decent teacher, sticking to a routine in yoga is tough. Kids tend to enjoy yoga, because copying a teacher at the front of the room and pretending they are animals or trees is fun.
- **Employment lessons:** Most of my friends are cobbling together a salary from various contracts and teaching jobs, so they are always on the hunt for their next gig. If you've got experience in HR, offer to look over your friend's CV. Better yet, offer to take them through a mock interview for their next job.

- **Writing lessons:** Everybody thinks they've got the next great novel hidden in them. If you got experience writing or editing, encourage your friends to get started and offer to read their work. If you've got a child who devours books like candy, a structured writing program makes a good companion.
- **Homework help:** Helping our own children with their homework can be stressful. Sometimes it's better for them to get advice from a friendly adult who is not their parent. Skills in math are particularly valuable to offer up for trade.
- **Car engine lessons:** I just feel like I should know more about how a car works. Anybody know anything about cars? I could teach your child how to play drums ...

Have you ever traded one skill for another? Are you inspired to try? Let us know of any successful trades in the comments!

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