

Put a spark in your campfire this summer

By Deanne Haines
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Whether you're nestled deep in the woods sitting on logs beside your tent or chilling out on chairs in your backyard, gathering around a campfire is often a highlight of Wisconsin summer nights.

The warmth of a crackling campfire creates the perfect setting for families to gather together, connect and make lasting memories. Want to put an extra spark in your summer tradition this year? Here are some surefire ways to enhance your campfire experience.

Put a twist on traditional treats

Roasting s'mores over the fire is a family favorite - and with good reason. Who can resist gooey marshmallow mixed with melted chocolate sandwiched between two graham crackers? This summer try turning up the heat on traditional campfire fare by switching out some of the ingredients. Instead of graham crackers, for example, smother the goodness between two Ritz crackers, chocolate chip cookies or the top and bottom of an Oreo. A s'moreo is sure to ignite the taste buds of

all ages. And while you're at it, exchange the regular chocolate bar with other variations such as a snack size Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, Nestle Crunch, or for a minty touch - Andes Candies.

A hot dog on a stick is a common meal to cook over a fire, but a variety of foods can be cooked on a stick. Wrap bacon or bread dough around a stick and watch the yumminess that ensues. Or for a healthier option, load up various chunks of vegetables and meat or fish for camping kebabs. You'd be surprised how much faster picky eaters gobble up veggies when they had a hand in roasting them over a fire.

Get creative with campfire activities

A campfire naturally inspires families to sit and enjoy each other's company. But it's also fun to engage in bonding campfire activities. Before dusk settles in, embark on an outdoor scavenger hunt. Be creative with items to search for such as: a stick in the shape of a letter, a heart-shaped rock, something in every color of the rainbow. You could even get help gathering kindling by adding "Find 10 good campfire sticks" to everyone's list.

Once the sun fully sets it's fun to huddle by the fire and tell stories. Some like scary ghost stories, while others enjoy humor-



ous tales. Memories from your childhood make for an enlightening conversation. Or fire up the group's imagination by having each person around the circle contribute a sentence to an on-going made-up story. It's fun to see how wildly different the story ends from how it started.

Music and campfires seem to go together like Simon and Garfunkel. Ideally someone in your group has a guitar they can break out and strum "Bridge Over Troubled Water," but even without an instrument, singing campfire songs under the stars can be an illuminating experience. From the simple ("Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star") to the sentimental ("Take Me Home, Country Roads" by John Denver) or the spiritual ("Pass It On" by Kurt

Kaiser), campfire songs create camaraderie and connection.

Scope out the star-studded sky

While enjoying the glow and sparkle of the flames in front of you, don't forget to look up and take in the glow and sparkle above you. Be mesmerized by the beaming stars and cool constellations. Stargazing helps develop a deep appreciation for the beauty and expansiveness of the sky - and the world.

Use your imagination and connect stars to form a specific scene or object. Find stars that are arranged to look like letters. See if everyone can spot the first letter of his or her name in the sky.

Many cool apps exist to help you locate planets and identify stars. The free

Star Chart app, for example, lets you see the stars and planets right on your phone. Just point your device up in the sky and it will tell you what you're looking at. You can also tap the star or planet and find out more information such as its distance, size and brightness.

There's something mystical about gathering around glowing orange flames in the dark of night, watching the smoky aroma rise straight to the stars, and listening to the logs crackle and pop. Campfires mesmerize and captivate, while tasty treats, singing songs and counting constellations enhance the experience for the whole family. Start a campfire tradition this summer and make memories that will warm your heart for years to come.

Practice campfire safety

Campfires are fun for the whole family, but they can also be dangerous. Follow these tips to stay safe while cozying by the campfire this summer.

- Keep the fire contained in a small pit with rocks around it or in a portable unit, making sure there are no low branches hanging overhead or bushes or tents too close.
- Never use flammable liquids to start your fire or keep it going.
- Set a safety boundary between the fire and the children.
- Never leave the fire unattended. An adult should always be present.
- Keep a water supply nearby in case the fire gets out of control.
- When putting out the fire, drench it with water, making sure all the coals and sticks are wet and the fire is completely extinguished.
- Don't touch remaining ashes even the next day. Leftover embers cause more campfire burns than actual flames and fire pits can retain heat for up to 12 hours after being extinguished.
- Teach children to stop, drop and roll if anything on them should catch fire.

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