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Issue 72 January/February 2026

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NEXT ISSUE: MARCH/APRIL
Booking deadline: 3 February
Feature: Early years, Easter holidays



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Editor's Welcome

Happy New Year! I hope you enjoyed your end-of-year festivities and are excited about the year ahead and the adventures that it could hold.

One of these adventures might include joining in a family festival, and you will find a roundup of some of the best of these around the country on page 16: something to look forward to!



Closer to home, we go to St Neot's Prep School to meet the Headteacher there. He tells us about the school's past, present and future, as well as some of his favourite things outside school – see page 7.

At a time of year when we often think about our health and resolutions, we look at the mental load that parents bear and the importance of emotional rest: check out our article on page 12 for more information.

I hope you have a great start to 2026!

Lesley

Competition winner:

Congratulations to Caroline Williams, who won a family ticket to see Aladdin at The Anvil in Basingstoke, which was our local giveaway in the November/December 2025 issue.



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Children's Booker Prize announced

The Booker Prize Foundation has unveiled the Children's Booker Prize, a major new award celebrating contemporary fiction for children ages 8 to 12. Supported by the AKO Foundation, the prize launches this year, with the first winner announced in February 2027.

The award carries a £50,000 prize for the winning author, equal to the adult Booker Prize and aims to inspire a new generation of readers at a time when children's reading for pleasure is at its lowest in twenty years.

A shortlist of eight books will be announced, with at least thirty thousand copies of shortlisted and winning titles gifted to children across the UK and Ireland.

Chaired by Frank Cottrell-Boyce, the UK's Children's Laureate, judging will involve both adults and children.

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Families Hampshire North is For Sale!

Since 2023 I have been the editor of this magazine and it has been a wonderful experience. I have enjoyed the feeling of uniting a community and sharing useful local information with thousands of families in a publication that I love reading myself as a mum of two children.

I have always been a big reader, and I still feel that there is something special about words on paper; the relaxation it provides is so much more than I get from scrolling or reading from a screen. Families magazines are proud to be print and have been since 1990.

I love completing projects, and putting each issue together is like a project that comes to fruition every other month. Also, the flexibility of being my own boss has been ideal at a time when I've wanted to be there for children's concerts, sports days and helping out at school.

Nevertheless, children grow and our focus shifts – which is why I am ready for the next challenge and am hoping to pass this fantastic role on to a new editor.

Being part of the Families network means great support and training at the same time as being completely independent as a franchisee!

If you are interested in finding out more about how you could be the next editor of Families Hampshire North, please drop me a message at editor@familieshampshirenorth.co.uk



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NHS App Simplifies Child Healthcare for Busy Parents

Parents across England can now manage their family's healthcare more easily thanks to a new update to the NHS App. Announced in September 2025, the feature allows adults to switch between profiles for their children or dependents, similar to how streaming services like Netflix handle multiple users.

The update means parents can book GP appointments, order prescriptions, and view vaccination records for their children without needing separate logins. NHS England says the change is designed to simplify access and reduce administrative barriers, particularly for busy families juggling multiple healthcare needs.

The update means parents can book GP appointments, order prescriptions, and view vaccination records for their children without needing separate logins. NHS England says the change is designed to simplify access and reduce administrative barriers, particularly for busy families juggling multiple healthcare needs. A full rollout is planned for 2026.



Parents are Happier but Younger Parents Suffer, UCL Study Finds

A new University College London analysis finds that parents report slightly higher life satisfaction than adults without children, but the effect depends strongly on age at first birth.

Using national survey data and controlling for income and relationship status, researchers show that people who become parents in their teens or early twenties experience markedly lower wellbeing and higher psychological distress than similarly aged childless peers.

As age at first birth rises, the net effect on life satisfaction becomes more positive. Those who start parenthood in their late twenties and thirties tend to report small gains in life satisfaction, while older first-time parents often report the most favourable outcomes, likely reflecting greater financial stability, relationship security and career readiness.

The study highlights gender differences, with younger mothers especially at risk. Authors call for targeted support - affordable childcare, mental-health services and flexible work - to close the parent happiness gap and reduce age-related inequality.

More info: www.ucl.ac.uk/news

If you have some local news to share with our readers, email it to editor@familieshampshirenorth.co.uk



Big Garden Birdwatch Returns

The UK's largest citizen wildlife survey, the **Big Garden Birdwatch**, will take place from 23-25 January 2026, the RSPB has announced. Now in its 47th year, the event invites people of all ages to spend one hour counting the birds they see in their gardens, balconies, or local parks, and submit their sightings online.

In 2025, more than 590,000 people took part, recording over 9.1 million birds. The house sparrow retained its top spot as the most commonly sighted species, followed by the blue tit and woodpigeon. Organisers say even reporting "no birds" is valuable, as it helps track long term population changes.

Launched in 1979 with the help of children's TV programme Blue Peter, the Birdwatch has grown into a national tradition. The RSPB says the survey highlights both declines and recoveries in common species and shows the power of communities coming together for nature.

More info: www.rspb.org.uk



See Learning in Action at St Nicholas' School

Set within 30 acres of Hampshire countryside, **St Nicholas' School** is a vibrant and nurturing community where every pupil is known as an individual. Welcoming children from Nursery through to age 16 (boys 3-7 and girls 3-16), the school offers traditional entry points alongside occasional places across its Nursery, Infant, Junior and Senior Schools.

A recent routine ISI inspection praised the school's 'well-planned curriculum,' teachers' 'secure subject knowledge' and pupils who 'talk about topics confidently and demonstrate curiosity.' Inspectors also highlighted the strong culture of respect, pupils' wellbeing and the many opportunities for leadership and personal development. The Good Schools Guide describes St Nicholas' as 'a small, supportive school where girls are encouraged to be themselves and grow at their own pace.'

Families are warmly invited to attend **Nursery, Infant and Junior School Working Open Mornings** on Thursday 15 January, Thursday 29 January and Thursday 12 February (9-11am). The **Senior School Working Open Morning** takes place on Friday 13 February (9-11am). Personal tours are also available. Register online to attend.

www.stnicholas.school

Redefining educational success

By Gavin McCormack

In my twenty-five years as a school teacher, I've had hundreds of conversations with parents about what would be best for their children. What all those conversations had in common was that no matter what was happening at home, in the classroom or with the children's learning, what parents wanted most from education was for their children to be happy. And why not? Nothing is more precious than seeing a child truly happy and content in being who they are.

Yet many of us still enrol our children in schools that boast about achieving the highest grades, having the biggest swimming pools or ranking highest on national league tables, without considering what these schools do to make our children feel content, purposeful and passionate.

The reality of being number one

In 2022, the OECD's **PISA rankings** named Singapore as the number one school system in the world regarding academic attainment. The country has a regular spot in the top five, alongside Taiwan, Macau and Japan.

But does that mean those children are getting the best start in life? Paradoxically, the OECD also releases **The World Happiness Report**, which ranks the world's happiest countries. If academic rankings were linked to happiness levels, surely we'd see the same countries in the top positions on both reports? But that's not the case.

Iceland, Sweden, Denmark and Finland all top the happiness rankings. How can that be?

There is **a clear mismatch between our children's academic grades and their levels of happiness**. Although Singapore's education system is renowned for its academic rigour and high standards, I've heard numerous firsthand accounts that this desire to be the best comes at a cost.

Several studies speak to this same cost - alarmingly high levels of anxiety among Singaporean students, primarily attributed to academic pressure - including the 2017 OECD study that found eighty six percent of Singaporean students were worried about getting poor grades - even when well-prepared, compared to the OECD's global average of sixty six percent (which is still very high).



The study revealed that the pressure stems from various sources, including parental expectations, societal emphasis on academic achievement and the competitive nature of the education system itself, which is not unique to Singapore. **A fear of failure and internalising expectations** doesn't sound like a healthy childhood to me.

The consequences of chronic stress can be severe, affecting students' mental and emotional wellbeing, sleep patterns and quality of life. The focus on academic achievement can also lead to losing interest in learning, where the joy of discovery is replaced by the anxiety of performance.

Simply put, if we put too much emphasis on our children getting the top grades, competing against each other and avoiding failure at all costs, they will inevitably become more anxious.

Interestingly, Iceland, Sweden, Denmark and Finland - the top four countries on the 2022 OECD's happiness ranking all have one thing in common: their citizens have **immense personal freedom, choice and high trust levels within their communities** - qualities that all work together to prevent the development of anxiety and depression.

If we really want to put children's happiness first, then we should choose schools that trust them to make their own decisions, learn from their mistakes, have agency over their learning and engage with the real world.

This article is an abridged extract from the book *Raising Resilient Children* by Gavin McCormack, published by Simon & Schuster, available in all good bookshops now.

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What do the words 'best school' mean?



Before you enrol your child in any school, you have to decide what 'best' means to you.

Is the 'best' school dictated by the grades, points, scores, facilities and reputation? Or is a successful school journey not about 'what' your child becomes but 'who'?

In my view, it's the latter. For me, education is about allowing a child to find their passion and attend a school that embraces the same values and visions for the future that their family holds dear.

School Open Days January-February 2026

Sherfield School

Sherfield-on-Loddon, Hook,
RG27 0HU
01256 884 800 sherfieldschool.co.uk
Friday 27 February, 9am:
Discover Sherfield Senior School

St Neot's Preparatory School

St Neot's Road, Eversley, Hook,
RG27 0PN
0118 973 2118
stneotsprep.co.uk
Friday 30 January: Open morning

St Nicholas' School

Church Crookham, GU52 0RF
01252 850121
stnicholas.school
Thursday 15 January, 9am:

Nursery, Infant, and Junior School Working Open Morning
Thursday 29 January, 9am:
Nursery, Infant, and Junior School Working Open Mornings
Thursday 12 February, 9am:
Nursery, Infant, and Junior School Working Open Mornings
Friday 13 February, 9am: Senior School Working Open Morning

Wellesley Preparatory School

Hook, RG27 0AR
01256 882707
wellesleyprepschool.co.uk
Friday 6 February: Whole School Open morning

Open days may need pre-booking. Please check before visiting.

Meet the Head: St Neot's Prep School

We were privileged to be able to catch up with Mr Jonathan Slot recently. Mr Slot is the Headteacher at St Neot's Prep School in Eversley, which covers nursery, pre-prep and prep school, and is set in beautiful grounds.

When did you become Head at St Neot's, and what did you do before that?

I have been Head at St Neot's for the last 4 years. Before that I have been a Deputy Head and a Year 4 class teacher. As much as I love being a Head, being a class teacher will always be the highlight for me. I've been teaching now for 15 years; before that I worked in the Advertising and Marketing world in London. It's quite something to compare how much more fulfilling one of my careers is over the other.

What makes St Neot's unique?

Good question, and one I could rabbit on for ages about! I do think St Neot's is unique, and that is why we have seen such a surge of interest in our product over the last 4 years. If I had to sum it up, I would say it is our culture that makes us unique.

All stakeholders in the school (including parents) contribute to this culture. We are happy and hardworking, we are supportive and kind, we all embrace the school's values and character, we care deeply about the children and most importantly, we all love coming to school - that is the parents, staff, Governors and of course, the children.

How has the school changed over the last ten years?

Not much really. There is something special about our happy school and you can feel it when you wander around the site. Smiley and charming children, passionate staff, beautiful grounds, world class facilities and really engaging and impactful classroom learning. This is what St Neot's has always been about. We're just a bit bigger now and are thrilled to be part of the Lord Wandsworth College Family of Schools.



How does the school work with the local - and wider - community?

I have always positioned St Neot's as a local hub and not just for our parents. Our parent body do enjoy being part of the St Neot's experience, but we also encourage local state primaries to use our facilities, we work with local charities and are looking into how we can make an impact beyond our shores.

Having a St Neot's education is a real privilege, and I am determined that our children see the value in this and give back; not in a box-ticking kind of way, but in a genuine and meaningful way.

What sort of music do you like to listen to or play?

Sadly, my music playing days are long gone, although I was Grade 5 on the clarinet back in the day. I didn't see this having much impact on my social life, so I gave it up; something I regret. Today I listen to everything apart from maybe

thrash metal and grunge. I am happy to flick between classical, pop, heavy metal, rap and musicals. As long as I can sing along (and I do struggle to keep up with Eminem), I'm happy.

If I could only listen to one band for the rest of my life, it would probably be Oasis. They were the theme tune to my youth.

What is your favourite place in the world?

North Cornwall, 6pm, on the terrace of a favourite bar with a drink in my hand and in the company of friends....and of course, The Emirates Stadium in North London, home to the mighty Arsenal Football Club.

Are there any exciting changes coming over the next couple of years at St Neot's?

Oh yes, there are always exciting changes happening at the school!

Our curriculum is always being improved (does that come under exciting?), we are continuing to refresh all our teaching spaces (that's exciting for me).

We seem to be attracting the very best teaching talent (that's exciting for me and the children), we have a new 5-year campus plan about to be rolled out (that's exciting for everyone when they see it), Kaleb the Coffee Man is going to be present at drop off more frequently (that's exciting for me and the parents), but most importantly, we will change and adapt and improve our whole offering to make sure a St Neot's education remains exciting, engaging and relevant.



For more information, visit www.stneotsprep.co.uk or call 0118 973 2118.

Translating your baby's cries

By Tanith Carey

For parents, there's little more stressful or panic-inducing than hearing their baby cry. At first, your new-born's cries may all sound like general alarm calls. But by observing your baby over time, the good news is you can start to work out what they are trying to say.

The first thing I'd suggest is to simply **be open to listening to what they are communicating**, rather than dismiss crying as something that infants just 'do'.

As brand-new arrivals in the world, babies don't have 'wants'. They only have needs. Nor does your baby cry to 'exercise their lungs' or 'control' you. For the first few months, they are responding to the raw sensations in their bodies and communicating the only way they know how.

Put aside the myth too that your baby will get 'spoiled' if you pick them up when they cry. Instead, over time they will learn that grownups reliably meet their needs and this feeling of safety will mean they ultimately cry less.

To start to learn to 'translate' your baby's cries, the first thing to know is that babies tend to cry for five main reasons: **hunger, tiredness, overwhelm, loneliness, pain/discomfort and boredom/frustration**.

Although all your baby's cries may sound the same at first, as you tune in, you'll begin to notice subtle differences in pitch and intensity. Think too about the timings of their cries, asking yourself when they were last fed or changed.

Bear in mind too there is a peak in crying between three and six weeks. In this phase, babies may cry between one and two hours a day and often more in the late afternoon and evening, perhaps due to a build-up of overstimulation and tiredness.

Some babies also come into the world with naturally more sensitive temperaments which are harder to soothe. Avoid too many comparisons and know that as long as you and your caregivers are responsive most of the time, you are giving your child what they need most now.

Of course, there may still be times when your baby cries for a reason you can't work out and if your baby is hyper-aroused, it

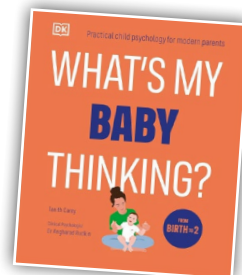


can take time for them to regulate again. Even if it doesn't seem to work at first, repetition - whether it's walking them up and down or rocking or singing to them - will help. One study found that walking a baby up and down for five to eight minutes is enough to start to reduce their heart rate, initiating the calming process.

At moments when you don't know what the problem is, it will help to remember that it's not crying that harms your baby. It's the feeling that they have been left alone with their distress. If you are holding and carrying and comforting your child, you are doing the best you can.

If you can continue to **respond to them like this consistently**, this will help your baby build a calmer, less reactive nervous system and they will be easier to soothe in the long run.

Tanith Carey is author of *What's My Baby Thinking? Practical Child Psychology for Modern Parents* with Dr Angharad Rudkin. Crying is one of eighty topics tackled in this book, published by Penguin/DK. Available in Flexibound and audiobook, this guide answers every question about your baby and toddler's development in their first two years. Find it at www.dk.com



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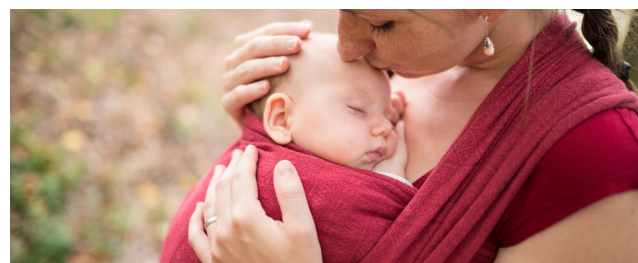


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Calming a crying baby



Research has found that putting your young baby against your bare skin helps them regulate more quickly. Using a baby sling will also meet their need to stay close and reduce crying episodes.

Step away: if your baby's crying is making you anxious, take a moment to calm yourself with some deep breaths. If you're dysregulated, your baby will sense this and they will take longer to soothe.

Don't be afraid to ask for help from other caregivers so you can take a break.

Overcoming bath refusal

By Claire Burgess

What do you do when a young child who loves having a bath suddenly stops wanting to go in? As a great 'wind down' opportunity before bedtime, it's natural to worry that this refusal might affect their bedtime routine. Please be reassured that some children go through this phase and it is connected to their stage of development at the time.

There are a number of reasons why your child may refuse the bath. These could include a previous experience that upset them, bath times being too long or too late, different sounds in the bathroom, a dislike of hair washing and even worries about being sucked down the plug hole!

The following successful approaches may encourage your little one back into the water again.

Make bath time fun

Use toys. These could be anything from toy animals to watertight balls and glow sticks, blowing bubbles, bath crayons or bath colouring tablets.

Use a bath mat

This helps your little one feels secure when sitting or standing and helps avoid slipping.

Having a bath in the day with no water

Think of this as practice in adjusting to being in water. Avoid doing this at a time when your child might be tired or hungry though.

Reading books about having a bath can be helpful.



Encourage 'sink play' in the bathroom

Fill the sink with water (possibly coloured with food colouring) and then put some toys in and around it. Use a step so your little one can reach the sink and let them play as they wish. This can emphasise the fun element of water and familiarise your child with being in the bathroom.

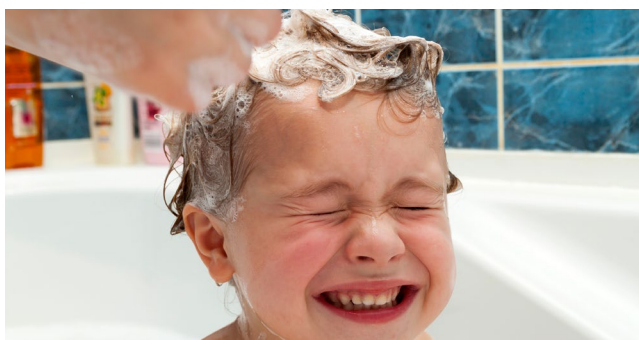
Let your child stand, rather than making them sit down

This lets you wash your little one while they are standing and playing with toys on the edge of the bath (this is why it is important to have a bathmat to avoid slipping). It's possible they may only be in the bath for a couple of minutes. This is absolutely fine and you can try to gradually build up the length of their bath. Hopefully, over time, they will feel confident enough to sit down.

Put on their swimming costume/trunks/armbands

This adds a fun element! You could also play the Cocomelon bath song to make things even more fun. Find it on YouTube.

Claire Burgess is a director and family consultant at Bespoke Family (www.bespokefamily.co.uk), which offers tailored support from newborns to teens.



Dealing with hair washing challenges

Many infants do not enjoy having their hair washed and if your child is suddenly unwilling to have a bath, it might be because they associate it with this.

You could consider the following options to help move things forward:

If you've previously used a shower attachment, use a jug or two of water for the hair wash instead - or vice versa!

Get your child to look up at the ceiling while you are washing their hair so that the water drains down their back and not down their face. You can also give them a dry flannel to hold over their eyes to prevent shampoo going in them and so that if any water does come down their face they are able to dry it.

Get the hair wash out of the way at the start of the bath; then your child can play and you are ending bath time on a positive note.



Other reasons for bath refusal

If there's been a previous occasion when the bath water was a little too warm or too cold, this may have contributed to your little one's bath refusal.

Always fill the bath with cold water and then top up with hot to ensure it isn't too warm. It should be around body temperature (37 degrees) and you can test it with your elbow. If you use a bath thermometer, make sure you re-test with your elbow afterwards. Never leave children unattended in or near water even when just running baths or sinks and always empty them as soon as they are no longer in use.

Young children often go through periods where they find bedtime worrying and they may associate bathing with bedtime. Having a bath at another point in the day may be helpful.

Remember also that what seems normal to adults doesn't necessarily seem so for young children. Reassure them they won't be sucked down the plug hole when the bath is emptied; nor encounter anything scary in the water.

Resolutions that stick for 2026

By Anna Houston



Plan with purpose

A little planning goes a long way. Set aside time each Sunday to reset so you feel calmer and more in control of the week ahead. Check the calendar, lay out uniforms and make a short to-do list. Pair it with a cup of tea, a podcast or a face mask, so it feels like self-care. Look at the bigger picture. Break your year into quarters and plan around family milestones. Avoid starting big projects in the busiest periods. Mapping goals to life's rhythm makes them more achievable.



Double up on healthy habits

Healthy habits can make life more fun. Meet a friend for a walk and takeaway coffee instead of sitting in a café or catch up at the playground and do a few squats while pushing the children on the swing. Pair up with a friend to start a mini 'cook-along club' where you try a new healthy recipe each week or introduce a 'vegetable of the week' challenge. Pick a fruit or vegetable you don't usually buy and find ways to add it to meals - it keeps healthy eating creative and fresh.



Greener living, simplified

Going green can feel overwhelming, so make one easy sustainable swap each quarter. If you commit to changing just four things throughout the year, by the end of it your life will have improved in four tangible ways. Last year we got a built-in water filter, swapped to an eco-friendly detergent, replaced plastic bottles with stainless steel ones and started growing herbs. They're small changes but they've made our home feel more aligned with the way we want to live.

Anna Houston is a freelance writer specialising in parenting and women's lifestyle



Just move - little and often

Regular exercise is a way to care for your body and lift your mood. Think 'little and often' rather than 'all or nothing.' Walk the school run, take the stairs or park somewhere that adds a fifteen minute walk to your destination. Consider a fold-away treadmill or exercise bike that you can use while replying to emails or watching a film. Twenty minutes of steady movement is far more realistic than a rigid gym routine - and it still counts.



Change your self-talk

Healthy living starts in your head, not your kitchen. Much of how we eat, move and care for ourselves depends on how we speak to ourselves. If your inner dialogue is self-critical, it's time to change the script. Instead of focusing on what you shouldn't eat, think about what will make you feel energised. Swap 'I've ruined it' for 'I enjoyed that; now I'll make my next choice a nourishing one.' When you stop labelling food as 'good' or 'bad', you stop labelling yourself that way too and you build a healthier, more forgiving relationship with eating.



Family check-ins

Life is busy and real conversation can easily go by the wayside. Eat together at least three evenings a week - no phones or screens - and ask everyone to share the best and worst part of their day. It keeps family life connected. Although big days out are wonderful, small, consistent moments through the week are just as powerful. This includes time with your partner. My spouse and I hug for twenty seconds every morning. It's simple but effective and helps us reset and start the day as a team.

January is full of big promises to ourselves - eat better, move more, stress less. But real growth comes from small, intentional steps that last. These ideas will help you build a calmer, healthier, more balanced life beyond the New Year.



Refresh your supplements

Many of us reach for multivitamins without much thought but focusing on specific nutrients can make a difference - magnesium is worth attention. Supporting muscle recovery, hormone balance and deeper sleep, it can also help ease anxiety and improve focus. Low magnesium can show up in countless ways and many people are slightly deficient without realising. Restoring your levels can help you feel more balanced and energised. Everyone's needs differ, so speak to a health professional if you're unsure about changes.



Lighten the load

Little routines make home life feel easier. Have a two-minute tidy-up to a song with the kids before bed or wear comfy 'house shoes' to signal it's time to get things done. The aim isn't a spotless house - it's a calmer one. Each month, clear one area - a drawer, your handbag, the car boot or your finances. Sort your purse, redeem old vouchers, cancel unused subscriptions. Decluttering little by little helps you feel lighter and more in control.



The school holiday savings pot

Put a little money aside each month for school holidays so you can enjoy them with less financial stress. Many banking apps let you set up savings pots to stay organised. I have a 'fun fund' for my kids that covers days out, café trips and rainy-day activities. I also keep a small 'pocket money' pot for myself - guilt-free spending on things I truly want but would usually push to the bottom of the list. It's a simple form of self-care that reminds me to look after myself too.



Keep a gratitude journal

Keep a notebook by your bed and write down three things you're grateful for each night or morning. When life feels hard, it helps you notice the positives that might otherwise go unseen and shifts your focus from what's missing to what's working. Sometimes I just write three short sentences but it always makes me feel thankful for the life I have with my children and partner. It can also create moments of clarity about your goals, helping you see what's genuinely important.



Time for fun

Set aside at least an hour each week for something that's purely for you - a dance class, a puzzle, a walk with a podcast or a hobby you loved years ago. Treat fun as essential, not an afterthought; it recharges your patience and motivation for everything else.



End the day calmly

Create a short bedtime routine just for you. We put so much effort into helping our children wind down - bath, pyjamas, story, lights out - yet rarely give ourselves the same care. Turn off screens thirty minutes before bed, wash your face, light a candle and wind down with a book, journal or quiet meditation. These small signals tell your body it's time to rest, creating better sleep, a calmer mind and a gentler end to each day.

The invisible mental load and psychology of rest

By Dr Sasha Hall

As a psychologist and a parent of two young children, I have seen both professionally and personally how easily the invisible mental load builds up. This load is the ongoing, often unseen mental effort required to keep family life functioning. It includes not only the physical tasks of daily life but also the constant background thinking that ensures these tasks happen at the right time and in the right way. It is the invisible spreadsheet running quietly in the mind, updated in real time as family needs change.

For many parents (generally mothers), this mental load can feel like carrying **an endless list of responsibilities in their minds**. It might include planning meals, remembering school events, booking appointments, checking that uniforms are ready and ensuring everyone has what they need for the day ahead. Alongside this are seasonal or longer-term considerations such as holidays, birthdays or preparing for school transitions. Even positive events, such as planning a family outing or helping with a costume for school, can add to the mental noise. These are all small, individual thoughts that combine into a continuous mental hum.

In homes shared with partners or older children, there can also be what psychologists call **cognitive unloading**, where others rely on one person to hold or manage the shared mental information. Questions such as: 'Where are my keys?' or 'What are we having for dinner?' might seem trivial, but they represent moments where someone else is temporarily renting space in a parent's mind.

Over time, these repeated small intrusions can add to feelings of exhaustion and reduce the sense of mental clarity that is essential for wellbeing. When this happens frequently, the parent may begin to feel as though they are the project manager of the household, responsible for doing, remembering, prompting and anticipating.

Research shows that cognitive rest is just as important as physical rest. **Rest is not merely the absence of doing**; it is the presence of mental recovery. When we rest effectively, the brain has the opportunity to consolidate memories, regulate emotions and restore executive functioning. These are the higher-order



skills that allow us to plan, problem-solve and make decisions. Just as muscles need recovery after exertion, our brains also need space to decompress and reorganise.

Without sufficient rest, the brain's capacity for emotional regulation and attention control diminishes. This can lead to increased irritability, forgetfulness and a sense of being mentally overloaded. For parents, especially mothers carrying multiple invisible demands, this may mean feeling less patient with children or partners and finding it harder to remain present in moments that should bring connection and enjoyment.

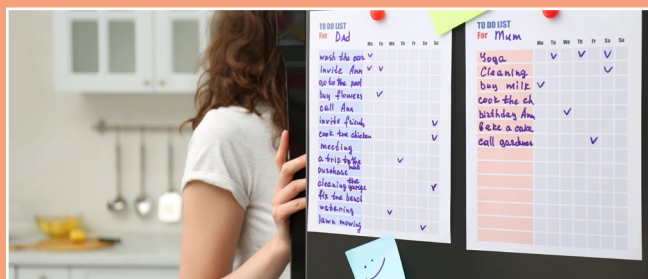
The psychology of rest reminds us that rest is not indulgence but maintenance. It allows us to sustain the very skills that underpin both parenting and professional life. Creating even **small opportunities for rest throughout the day can help regulate the nervous system** and restore emotional balance. This might include brief moments of quiet reflection, mindful breathing or simply allowing the mind to wander without purpose.

When rest is prioritised, parents often describe feeling more grounded, more able to engage meaningfully with their children and more confident in managing the continuous mental load. In essence, rest is not about doing less but about replenishing the mental space that allows us to think, care and respond effectively.

Recognising and sharing the invisible work that goes on in our minds is the first step toward valuing rest as a psychological necessity rather than a luxury.

Dr Sasha Hall is an HCPC-registered Senior Educational and Child Psychologist and founder of Hall & Co Educational Psychology Services (www.hallandcoeps.co.uk).

Make the invisible 'visible'



Much of the mental load remains unseen because it is carried silently. Psychological research shows that when cognitive effort is invisible, others are less likely to appreciate its weight.

Externalising these thoughts can help make them visible. This might involve sharing responsibilities through open discussion, writing down tasks that occupy mental space or gently drawing attention to how much co-ordination is involved in daily life. When the invisible becomes visible, families can develop a greater appreciation of one another's mental and emotional contributions.

The science of mental rest



Mental rest does not always require sleep or silence. Research into attention restoration suggests that simply engaging in gentle, absorbing activities such as walking outdoors, listening to music or spending time in nature allows the brain to recover from focused thought.

During rest, neural pathways related to creativity and problem-solving become more active. This helps restore a sense of clarity and perspective, enabling a parent to return to their daily roles with improved focus, emotional balance and a stronger sense of self.



An hour of moderate exercise every day for kids

By Andrew Campbell

The number of children meeting the recommended amount of physical activity for healthy development and to maintain a healthy weight, which is 60 minutes a day, drops by 40% as they move through primary school.

A new survey from Public Health England (PHE) and Disney looking at the effects of physical activity on children's emotional wellbeing, found:

- being active made the majority of 5 to 11 year olds feel happier, more confident and more sociable, according to their parents
- nearly all children said they liked being active
- the main motivations for kids to be more active were having friends to join in and having more sports or activities they liked to choose from
- children's overall happiness declines with age; 64% of 5 and 6 year olds said they always feel happy, compared to just 48% of 11 year olds

Currently, just under a quarter of boys and fewer girls meet the national recommended level of activity. Furthermore, 1 in 5 children start primary school overweight or obese, rising to more than a third by the time they leave. The survey identified the main barriers to physical activity and reveals that the worry of 'not being very good' was one of the most common. This increases with age.

Parents are being urged to try new sports and physical activities locally, whether at their local park, leisure centre or via a popular sport in an effort to help children get more of the 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity they need each day for healthy development and to maintain a healthy weight.

As part of its campaign to assist children to engage in enough physical activity, a national 10 Minute Shake Ups programme run by the PHE offers fun, 10-minute activities for kids, featuring their favourite Disney characters and shows as inspiration.

For more information visit www.nhs.uk/10-minute-shake-up

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Friendship, confidence and fun: Perform's spring-term classes

Looking for a fun way to boost your child's confidence this spring? **Perform** offers weekly classes in drama, dance and singing for ages 4-7 and 7-12, combining joy, creativity and self-expression.

Alongside learning new life skills each week, the children work towards a magical end-of-term performance that gives every child a chance to shine.

This term's programme is packed with confidence-building activities, from expressive communication and listening skills to learning how to be a great teammate - all delivered with Perform's signature energy and encouragement. Children can enjoy a free trial session before joining, allowing time to discuss individual needs. Productions this spring include:

Ages 4-7: *Midnight in the Toyshop* - a toytastic adventure.

Ages 7-12: *Outlaw* - a thrilling retelling of Robin Hood.

Visit www.perform.org.uk/try to book a **FREE, no-obligation trial** in **Andover, Basingstoke, Bramley, Fleet or Hartley Wintney**.



Spark curiosity through music and movement!

At **Vivace Music School**, staff turn curiosity into joyful learning with playful, movement-based classes - try a **FREE** class and see for yourself.

From babies to school-age children, every session is packed with singing, games, sensory play and real instruments - igniting imagination while building essential music skills.

Classes are active, engaging and rooted in the renowned Kodály approach, helping children discover their voices, develop confidence and fall in love with learning through music. Led by expert teachers, the curriculum supports your child from birth to senior school - nurturing creativity and musicality every step of the way.

Vivace Music School has entry level classes for ages 0-7 and children can join at any point during the term. Get off to a great start this year - try Vivace Music School for **FREE** in **Fleet, Farnham or Yateley!**

Book at www.vivacemusicsschool.co.uk/book or email info@vivacemusicsschool.co.uk

What's on

January/February 2026

All listings are correct at the time of publication. Please check with the venue before you visit in case anything has changed.

JANUARY

13 Jan

Timothy Tots - Winter Wonderland at Gilbert White's House

Join Timothy the Tortoise for interactive preschool sessions connecting your child to nature and the changing seasons. Sessions are outside when the weather allows, so bring wellies and coats. 11am-12pm gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk

14 Jan

Antarctic Explorers Home Educators Workshop at Gilbert White's House

Find out what it is like to be an Antarctic explorer. Get in a tent, pull a sledge and try on some clothing in this interactive workshop! For ages 5-12. 11am-2pm gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk

13 Jan-1 Feb

FREE Entry for Selected Postcodes at Whitchurch Silk Mill

This January, you are welcome to Whitchurch Silk Mill! With this January promotion, different postcodes are eligible for free entry to the Mill each week - see details on the website. 10:30am-5pm whitchurchsilkmill.org.uk

15-24 Jan

The Phoenix Players present: Dick Whittington at Phoenix Arts Centre, Bordon

Join The Phoenix Players for a magical, laugh-out-loud adventure with Dick Whittington! Packed with catchy songs, classic slapstick, larger-than-life characters and plenty of audience participation. All ages. phoenixarts.co.uk

16 Jan

Roller Disco at The Harlington, Fleet

The Harlington have combined with DISCO SKATE to bring the joy of Roller Disco to Fleet! 6pm-9pm theharlington.co.uk

16 Jan-1 Feb

Winter Woodland Lights at Hawk Conservancy Trust, Andover

Unlike any light show or owl flying display that you will have ever seen before, you'll experience beautiful illuminations and a live owl display set in a stunning, colourful woodland. Start 2026 with a sparkle and embrace the power of light to brush away the January blues at this immersive experience that will transport you into the heart of nature like never before. 6pm/8pm hawk-conservancy.org

19 Jan-15 Mar

The Very Hungry Caterpillar Trail at Mottisfont, Romsey

This charming trail brings to life the best-selling story of the tiny caterpillar who hatches from an egg and is so hungry he eats through a variety of fruits and snacks each day. Enhanced by illustrated trail markers, activities and games, this is an activity packed trail. 10am-4pm nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/hampshire/mottisfont

24 Jan-7 Feb

Beauty and the Beast at Holybourne Theatre

Packed with spectacular songs, dazzling dances, laugh-out-loud comedy, and plenty of audience participation, Beauty and the Beast is the enchanting panto experience the whole family will love. holybournetheatre.co.uk

27 Jan

Home Educators Art and Craft Day at Gilbert White's House

Drop into the Field Studies Centre and make the most of the space and the art and craft resources for a creative day. All ages welcome but children must be supervised. 10am-2pm gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk

28 Jan-1 Mar

Snowdrops at Welford Park, Newbury

The award-winning grounds of this glorious private estate are open to the public to enjoy the swathes of snowdrops, hellebores, aconites and winter flowering shrubs. Wrap up warm and enjoy a walk around the grounds of the picture-perfect Queen Anne style house, then head to the tea tent for a warming drink and food to round off a lovely day. welfordpark.co.uk

10-11 Feb

The Gruffalo's Child at The Hexagon, Reading

Follow the Gruffalo's Child on her adventurous mission in Tall Stories' enchanting adaptation of the much-loved picture book by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. One wild and windy night the Gruffalo's Child ignores her father's warnings about the Big Bad Mouse and tiptoes out into the deep dark wood. whatsonreading.com

13-19 Feb

Shrek the Musical at Arlington Arts Centre, Newbury

Following Looking Glass Theatre's success with Disney's Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast, they are delighted to bring Shrek the Musical to life, live on stage! Get up close to your favourite characters in this immersive retelling, the perfect family half term experience. arlington-arts.com

14 Feb

Tom Gates EPIC Stage Show at Corn Exchange Newbury

Based on the bestselling books by Liz Pichon, expect catchy tunes and hilarious performances. This fantastic stage show brings the best of the brilliant world of Tom Gates into one live show! 1:30pm/4pm cornexchangeweb.com

14 Feb

Crafty Fools: Adventures in Space at Phoenix Arts Centre, Bordon

Best known as one half of magic duo 'Morgan & West', 'The Magical Mr West' has travelled around the world performing to audiences of all ages with spectacular shows that include magic, science and a good deal of tomfoolery. Now he presents his most amazing show yet, with the help (or possibly hindrance...) of a wisecracking cartoon crow. 2pm phoenixarts.co.uk

FEBRUARY

1 Feb

Lions and Tigers and Bears at The Anvil, Basingstoke

Award-winning wildlife photographer and filmmaker, Gordon Buchanan, will hit the road again with his biggest ever live tour. Join Gordon as he recounts his thrilling encounters with pandas, grizzlies, tigers, jaguars and more. 7:30pm anvilarts.org.uk

14-15 Feb

Snowdrop Weekend at Gilbert White's House

The popular snowdrop weekend returns! Come and rejoice at the first signs of Spring. There will be half-price admission to the house and gardens over the weekend and tours of the garden and snowdrops. 10:30am-4pm gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk



A Spotlight on Gilbert White's House and Gardens

Gilbert White's House and Gardens offer plenty of family fun this January and February, with something for everyone.

Start the week with Wild Wednesdays, where families explore the gardens, spot seasonal wildlife and enjoy themed nature activities that inspire curiosity and outdoor play. For younger visitors, Timothy's Tots sessions provide gentle, sensory-rich experiences for toddlers, with stories, songs and crafts inspired by nature.

January and February also see the return of Snowdrop Weekend, inviting visitors to wander among carpets of delicate white blooms as the garden awakens from winter.

New this year, a special exhibition explores the history of the South Downs and the people who live and work there through fascinating portraits. Home-educating families are welcome at the Home Educators Craft Day event and the Antarctic Explorers workshop.

www.gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk



14-22 Feb

Spring Half Term at Finkley Down Farm, Andover

Say hello to spring and come to Finkley to meet the little lambs and many adorable animals. All our activities are included in the all-day entry to Finkley Down Farm. finkleydownfarm.co.uk

14-22 Feb

Pirate Puzzle Challenge at The Vyne, Basingstoke

Swash-buckling fun awaits on this interactive family puzzle trail for ages 6+. Collect your trail sheet from visitor reception, work together to find and solve 6 pirate-themed puzzles hidden in The Vyne's gardens. Normal admission applies. nationaltrust.org.uk/the-vyne

15 Feb

Dinosaurs Live! at The Anvil, Basingstoke

For the first time since 1881, the home of dinosaurs, London's Natural History Museum, is going on tour! Ever since they were first identified in the 1800s, dinosaurs have sparked the imagination of kids and adults alike, so come on a prehistoric journey like no other to the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods and watch the life-like dinosaurs come alive right on stage! 1:30pm anvilarts.org.uk

16 Feb

Play in a Day at Watermill Theatre, Newbury

Celebrate the upcoming production of Swallows and Amazons on a day all about devising theatre, learning performance skills and having fun. Participants will work with two fabulous facilitators to create their own short play in just one day, which they will perform. 9am-4pm watermill.org.uk

16-18 Feb

Rabbit on the Run at Reading Rep Theatre

A fun and touching story all about friendship; you won't want to miss out... so join the search! Using song, BSL, shapes, colours, numbers and more, it's time to find the Rabbit on the Run! readingrep.com

17 Feb

Stage Combat Workshop at Watermill Theatre, Newbury

Interested in learning about how epic battles are staged in theatre (without any injuries!)? You'll work with an industry expert who'll cover the basics, teach you some dynamic fight moves to practice, and perhaps help you turn your newly learnt skills into your own fight sequence by the end of the day! 9am/1pm watermill.org.uk

17 Feb

Cirque Entertainment at The Anvil, Basingstoke

Step into a frozen circus wonderland, where a talented cast of aerialists, thrilling fire performers, jaw-dropping acrobats, jugglers and hula hoopers are combined with beautiful choreography and West End live vocals. 7:30pm anvilarts.org.uk

17 Feb-1 Mar

Family Tree Planting Days at Hinton Ampner, Alresford

These tree planting sessions for families take place on the picturesque Hinton Ampner estate and will introduce kids, parents and grandparents to the hands-on, earthy delight of planting saplings

that hopefully will grow into glorious native woodland. The little saplings you will plant will grow into glorious native woodland, and each tree will provide homes, shelter and food for hundreds of species of wildlife, from barbastelle bats to purple emperor butterflies.

nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/hampshire/hinton-ampner

18 Feb

Family Fun Day: Swallows & Amazons at Watermill Theatre, Newbury

There'll be craft activities, youth theatre taster sessions, storytelling, a secret trail around our gardens and much more. This isn't a day to be missed! 10am-2pm watermill.org.uk

18 Feb

Wild Wednesday: All Things Spring! At Gilbert White's House

The race towards spring is on! Find out which birds to listen for, which plants get a head start and who in nature is doing what as Spring starts to arrive. Wild Wednesdays are an hour of hands-on activities for families to experience local wildlife. Using the range of habitats at the site, each day has a different theme to introduce the creatures large and small who live alongside us all the time. You will be outside when the weather allows, so please bring wellies and coats. gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk

19 Feb

Justin Live at The Anvil, Basingstoke

Get ready to sing, dance, and laugh along with BAFTA Award-winner Justin Fletcher in his brand-new live theatre show, Justin Live - Justin Time to Rock! When DJ Engelbert, the coolest canine in the dog-house, launches a contest for the best rock song, Justin's band is determined to win, but the mischievous Rock Lord has other plans! 11am/2:30pm anvilarts.org.uk

19-21 Feb

Let's Glow 2026 in Basingstoke Town Centre

Let's Glow will be back to illuminate Basingstoke town centre during February half term. This is a FREE light trail. lovebasingstoke.co.uk

19-21 Feb

Cinderella 2: After the Ball at Kennet School, Thatcham

It's panto time (oh yes it is!) Cinderella, Prince Charming, their eccentric Uncle Hazy, and the ever-hungry Rumble are set for an exciting new adventure! kats.org.uk

20 Feb

Tom Gates EPIC Stage Show at The Haymarket, Basingstoke

Based on the bestselling books by Liz Pichon, Tom Gates EPIC Stage Show brings alive the illustrations and music that makes it hugely popular around the world with catchy tunes and hilarious performances. 1pm/3:30pm anvilarts.org.uk

20 Feb

Roller Disco at The Harlington, Fleet

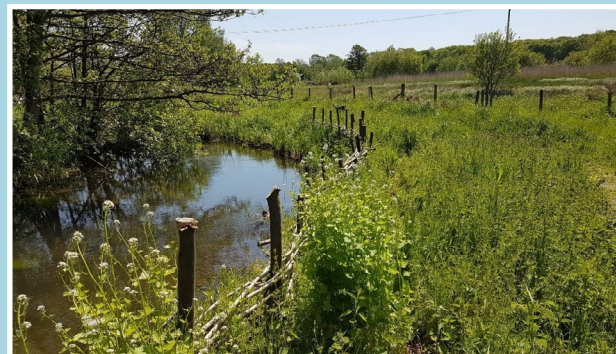
The Harlington have combined with DISCO SKATE to bring the joy of Roller Disco to Fleet! 6pm-9pm theharlington.co.uk

Don't forget to say you saw these events in Families Magazine!

Local reviews

by Josie Baronne

If you or your child would like to write a review of a local place, please get in touch. Email us for more details at editor@familieshampshirenorth.co.uk

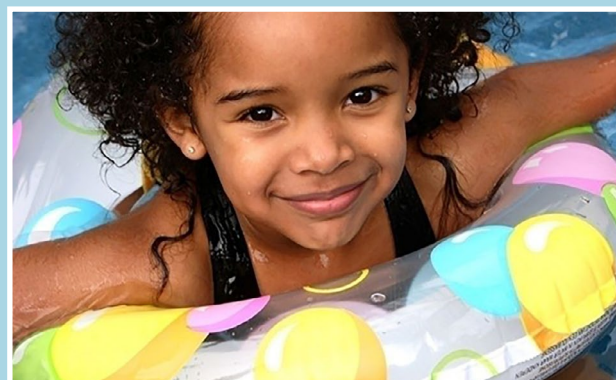


Bassetts Mead Walk

8 Twynes Meadow, Hook, RG27 9EH

This beautiful countryside walk is perfect for a family day out - visit in the summer to see the buttercups in full bloom. The River Whitewater is part of its course, and it is rich in wildlife such as crayfish, trout and ducks. At the end of the walk, you can visit The Crooked Billet pub and sit outside by the river that flows through the garden and watch the ducks while having a nice bite to eat.

hook.gov.uk/community-facilities/bassetts-mead



Alton Sports Centre

Chawton Park Road, Alton, GU34 1ST

Alton Sports Centre is a brilliant all-round destination for families looking to stay active, have fun and spend quality time together. The facilities are modern, clean, and welcoming, with plenty on offer for children of all ages.

One of the highlights for families is the leisure pool, complete with a splash area, water features, and a fun flume that keeps kids entertained for hours. It is a great way to introduce little ones to swimming in a safe, colourful environment.

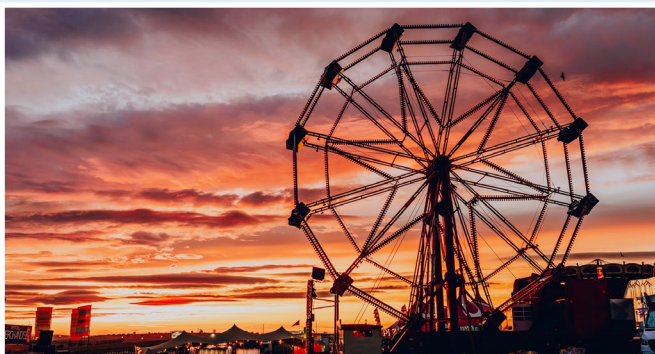
The 25m main pool is ideal for more confident swimmers or those working through swimming lessons. Beyond the pools, Alton Sports Centre offers a wide range of family-friendly activities. The soft play zone is perfect for toddlers and younger children to climb, crawl and explore in a safe and stimulating setting. There is also a café on site, making it easy to grab a snack or relax while the kids play.

everyoneactive.com/centre/alton-sports-centre

Best family-friendly festivals 2026

Compiled by Andrew Campbell

There's endless fun for families to have at family-friendly festivals across the UK in 2026. Our selection of festivals below all offer a fusion of music, arts, entertainment and outdoor adventures.



Y Not Festival 30 July-2 Aug Pikehall, Derbyshire

Y Not Festival is a lively music festival which offers a family-friendly experience with plenty of activities for children. Alongside its diverse music lineup, Y Not features a dedicated Kids' Area with arts and crafts, workshops, games and circus skills. There are also funfair rides, storytelling and interactive performances to keep younger festival-goers entertained. Families can also benefit from a dedicated camping area for a quieter night's rest. www.ynotfestival.com



The BritFest 2-5 July Ashley Hall, Altrincham, Cheshire

Designed with families in mind, activities include arts and crafts, face painting, an outdoor mini-cinema and classic funfair rides. There's also plenty of live music and entertainment suitable for all ages, plus options for camping or glamping for a full weekend adventure. www.thebritfest.co.uk

The Long Road Festival 27-30 August Stanford Hall, Leicestershire

A family-friendly celebration of country, Americana and roots music, fusing good time country music, U.S. inspired street food and great entertainment. Kids are entertained in a dedicated area with American camp style games, kids' tractor racing, crafting and evenings spent around open campfires listening to country music under the stars. www.thelongroad.com



DevaFest 6-9 August Cholmondeley Castle, Cheshire

DevaFest goes all out for families, especially kids, offering unlimited free fairground rides, circus skills workshops, magic shows, puppet theatre, dedicated kids' entertainment zones, interactive storytelling sessions, arts and crafts, face painting and themed parades. Additional highlights include family discos, character meet-and-greets

and treasure hunts. With extensive outdoor play areas and a focus on safety, DevaFest provides a structured, engaging programme to keep children entertained. www.devafest.co.uk

Shindig Festival 21-24 May Charlton Park, Wiltshire

Shindig Festival is a family-friendly event that blends music, dance and creative arts with a strong community vibe. The large kids' area is packed with free activities from 9am to 5pm daily, including arts and crafts, circus skills, workshops, games and interactive performances. There are also family-friendly shows, plenty of space for children to play and explore and a packed programme of entertainment for all ages. www.shindigfestival.co.uk



The Great Estate Festival 29-31 May Scorrier Estate, Redruth, Cornwall

Known for its eclectic mix of music, art, theatre and adventure. Families will find a wealth of activities for children, including circus workshops, storytelling, arts and crafts, vintage fairground rides and interactive performances. The festival's beautiful grounds host woodland trails, secret gardens and quirky entertainment, providing plenty of space for kids to explore and play. It's a vibrant, welcoming festival perfect for all ages. www.greatastatefestival.co.uk



The Green Man Festival 20-23 August Bannau Brycheiniog National Park, Wales

This independent music, science and arts festival nestled in the Brecon Beacons boasts plenty of large and small music venues, plus comedy, film, literature, art, science and playful mischief across dedicated zones. The festival's Little Folk area offers

hands-on workshops, nature activities, science experiments, arts and crafts and interactive performances. There are family-friendly theatre shows, storytelling sessions and dedicated play spaces designed for various age groups. www.greenman.net



Camper Calling 28-30 August Ragley Hall, Alcester, Warwickshire

Camper Calling is a true family festival for children of all ages. Kids can dive into creative workshops, music sessions and hands-on arts and crafts. There's a dedicated Kids Stage, circus skills, woodland walks and adventures. The festival's safe, friendly atmosphere means families can relax and enjoy live music while little ones explore, learn and play. Adults can enjoy an eclectic music lineup with acoustic sets and emerging talents. www.campercalling.com