

Minh's Things to Do with Kids in New York City

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I raise children in Manhattan, and contrary to popular belief, New York City is an amazing place to raise them. I argue it's one of the best places to raise children. There is soooooo much to do in NYC with them — you are always within walking distance of tons of playgrounds, children's activities, access to family restrooms, etc. Children get exposed to other kids from different cultures and cultural things.

People often ask me what is there to do with young children, so here's an unofficial list of things I accrued over the years. Feel free to leave some comments if I missed anything.

Cheers,
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Things to do in Manhattan

- Playgrounds
 - You are often within just a few blocks of some playground.
 - Central Park has some 21 playgrounds, but [Heckscher Playground](#) is probably the best playground in the city.
 - In downtown, [the Rockefeller Park Playground](#) and [the Battery Playscape](#) is a fun one. [The SeaGlass carousel](#) is a different kind of carousel. [Teardrop Park](#) is very secluded, small but has a very large slide. [Complete Playground](#) is a bit on the expensive side, but completely indoor.
 - [26 Science Playground](#) is pretty cool, but crowded.
 - [Governors Island](#) is an island with lots of outdoor space, “away” from the hustle and bustle of the city and is pretty chill/relaxing. It takes a short ferry ride from Battery Park or Brooklyn. You can bike around there and it has NYC's longest slide (alright, it's not that long, but still fun), the very experimental [Yard Adventure Playground](#), and great views to the Statue of Liberty. Open year-round.
- Museums
 - [Children's Museum of Manhattan](#) - Can be crowded, but they will be moving to a larger location in 2028.
 - [American Museum of Natural History](#) - Extremely large natural history and science museum. It's a must visit if you've never been, but

can be very crowded, especially on rainy days.

- [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#) is mostly geared towards adults, but there is a [81st St Studio](#) for kids there. It's an art/creativity-based studio that comes free with your museum access
- [Play Street Museum](#) in the Upper West Side is a recently-opened one
- [Sugar Hill Children's Museum](#) - children's museum with lots of activities (free to kids under 8)
- [National Museum of Math](#) sounds very fancy, but really is just a normal children's museum
- [Central Park Zoo](#) - small/cute zoo in Central Park. Note that there are two parts to this zoo separated by the open walkway through it, so make sure to visit both, especially the petting zoo on the north east side.
- [Intrepid Sea, Air, Space Museum](#) for some cool planes / flight carrier
- [Museum of the Illusions](#) - small, gimmicky optical illusions.
- [Museum of Interesting Things](#) is actually just this guy's apartment near New York University. He has collected a large collection of random old things such as old cameras, nickelodeon (those old machines where you put coins inside to watch a flipbook), and toys. It's a very cool trip down memory lane for adults and interesting for kids.
- [Holographic Studios](#) - a bit expensive, but something different
- Central Park
 - Bike around, walk around, climb around. Other things to visit
 - Climb up the [Belvedere Castle](#)
 - Tons of playgrounds with [Heckscher Playground](#) being the best one there. It's next to these giant boulders (Rat Rock) to climb around. [Billy Johnson Playground](#) has a nice slide as well
 - The [Central Park carousel](#) near Heckscher Playground
 - Walk/hike around/get lost in [the North Woods](#) (find the hidden/small waterfall)
 - [Swedish Cottage Marionette Theater](#)
 - In the summer, swim in the free/public pools there (the new Davis Center is set to open in Summer 2025)
 - In the summer, let your kid [steer a model sailboat](#)
 - In the winter, go ice skating there (the new Davis Center is set to open in Summer 2025)
 - Go on [a row boat](#)
- Pop-up museums
 - [The Color Factory](#) - gimmicky, pop-up museums but kids love the giant ball pit at the end
 - [Museum of Ice Cream](#) - slightly gimmicky
 - [Sloomoo Institute](#) – you know those slimy things? Yeah, let the kids do it there and not at your home
- Cool stores
 - The [several CAMP stores](#). The stores themselves are free, but they also have pretty good paid/rotating experiences, especially the 5th Ave one.
 - [Lego Store at Rockefeller](#) and [Lego Store Flatiron](#) are pretty fun for children
 - [FAO Schwarz](#) is a very large children's store with staff demo-ing various toys too
 - [Nintendo NYC](#) is a gaming store in the city
- Shows

- There are many Broadway shows for kids like Aladdin, Lion King, Wicked (use [the lotteries](#) that are not that hard to win)
 - [Swedish Cottage Theater](#) in Central Park has a marionette show.
 - The [New Victory Theater](#) has rotating shows especially for kids
 - The [Gazillion Bubble Show](#) is a kid show for the very young
- The art institutions often have free/discounted family days. Note that they can be very crowded though.
 - [New York City Ballet Family Saturday](#)
 - [New York Philharmonic Family Programs](#)
 - [Carnegie Hall Family Days](#)
 - [ABTKids](#) (opera)
- Active activities
 - [Chelsea Piers](#) has a ton of sports activities. Some require months-long signups, but some are also single pay-as-you-wish/public events (such as public skating on weekends year around).
 - Similarly, the [Riverbank State Park](#) has supercheap public ice skating in the winter and roller skating in the summer
 - There's a [Trapeze School](#) at Pier 40
- Observation deck
 - From all the observation decks, the [new SUMMIT One](#) at Vanderbilt One (next to Grand Central Terminal) is the most child-friendly one. It has some super fun experiences in different rooms including a one with tons of balloons that kids love. [One World Observatory](#) is also popular with kids.
- Miscellaneous
 - Take the cheap [tramway over to Roosevelt island](#) for cool views over the city. It's short, but cheap (price of subway fare). Maybe bike around on that island and swing by [Serendipity 3](#) on the way back.
 - At Times Square [Ellen's Stardust Diner](#) is this super-touristy restaurant with American food, but the diners there sing Broadway tunes. It's a long wait to get in (~1 hour), but kids love it.
- Regular aftercare activities
 - There are tons of regular/weekly aftercare activities in your area. They are usually associated with public and private schools, childcare centers. These are usually martial arts, chess, theater classes, various sports activities, language activities. Especially during school breaks (e.g., spring/summer breaks), schools often have day camps that are open to anyone. There are far too many to list them here, so just search for the ones in your neighborhood.

Things to do in the outer boroughs

- Brooklyn
 - [Coney Island](#) has many roller coasters and amusement parks. It's a very far trip from Manhattan, but such a fun place especially in the summer
 - While you are there, visit the [New York Aquarium](#) as well
 - [Brooklyn Children's Museum](#) - it's a bit hard to get there, but it's probably the best/largest children's museum in all of NYC

- In Dumbo, have the kids go on classic [Jane's Carousel](#)
- Prospect Park - similar activities like the ones in Central Park including the [LeFrak Roller Rink](#)
- [Prospect Park Zoo](#) has a nice petting zoo in the back
- [Forest Park Carousel](#) is a small place with an old-style/cheap carousel and nearby BBQ and some cheap kids rides.
- [Puppetworks](#) marionette theater
- [Twinkle Playspace](#) and [Space Club](#) are indoor playground for the younger kids
- [New York Transit Museum](#) for the subway geeks, including seeing some old trains
- The entire [Brooklyn Bridge Park](#) is very child friendly with many playgrounds, hills etc ([Water Lab](#) is small, fun one).
- [Area 53](#) and [Urban Air Trampoline and Adventure Park](#) for rides/climbing/paintball/laser tag
- [The Nature Company](#) has a bunch of animals your kids can visit and pet.
- There are a few cat cafes such as the [Brooklyn Cat Cafe](#) where you can sip on drinks while your kids pet cats
- [Flying Apple NY](#) is an indoor playground
- [Domino Park](#) is a nice park with a pretty awesome playground
- [Adventurers Amusement Park](#) is a pretty basic amusement park
- Queens
 - [Museum of the Moving Image](#) is a museum dedicated to film/movies
 - [Queens County Farm Museum](#) is basically a farm in Queens along with hay rides, feeding goats, etc. They have Halloween/winter events.
 - [Alley Pond Adventure Course](#) has a free Sunday program in the summer you need to pre-register for
 - The entire Flushing Meadows park is fun to bike around and can be combined with
 - [The Queens Museum](#) has this large panorama of the city of New York
 - [New York Hall of Science](#) - large children/science museum, but it's far/hard to get there
 - [Queens Zoo](#)
 - [Fantasy Forest Carousel Park](#)
 - [Peekaboo 21st Street](#) an indoor amusement play center that charges by the hour
- Bronx
 - [The Bronx Zoo](#) is always a hit for kids. It's extremely large and you can spend all day there.
 - The [Bronx Children's Museum](#) is geared towards younger kids
 - Take your kids to a baseball/soccer game at Yankee Stadium
 - [The New York Botanical Garden](#) has a few kids events throughout the year (Halloween/Holiday Train Show/Holiday Lights) and a tram
 - [The Wave Hill Museum](#) is a great place to take your kids in the summer. Lots of spaces to run and explore.
 - Explore the many trails and hikes in [Van Cortlandt Park](#) (there's a [stable](#) there too)
 - [Orchard Beach](#) is a very nice/clean sand beach in the Bronx (much less crowded than Coney Island) and a nice trail/hike
- Staten Island
 - Take the free [Staten Island Ferry](#) ride (great views to Statue of Liberty)
 - At the [Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden](#), visit

- [Staten Island Children's Museum](#)
 - [Connie Gretz Secret Garden](#)
- [Staten Island Zoo](#)
- Lots of large parks and beaches such as the [FDR Boardwalk and Beach](#)

Things outside of NYC

- Upstate
 - [Playland Park](#) is an amusement park that is not too far from the city; requires car ride
 - [Legoland NY](#) requires car ride or [~\\$20 bus ticket](#)
- New Jersey
 - [The American Dream Mall](#) is this giant mall in New Jersey (just 30 minutes from Manhattan) with tons of theme parks and stores for kids including:
 - [Lego Discovery Center](#)
 - [Nickelodeon Universe](#) roller coaster park
 - An indoor [Dreamworks Waterpark](#)
 - A [large Ferris wheel](#)
 - An indoor [ski slope for skiing/snowboarding](#) with real snow (they have classes/camps for kids)
 - Minigolf, maze, small aquarium, ice skating rink
 - All of them are costly/not cheap, and you can spend all day there just with one of these parks. There is a [bus shuttle](#) from Manhattan there
 - [Field Station Dinosaur](#) is a park with moving dinosaurs just outside of the city
 - [Liberty Science Center](#) is easily accessible via public transportation from NYC
- Long Island
 - [Long Island Children's Museum](#)
 - [Cradle of Aviation Museum](#)
- Philadelphia
 - Alright, the [Please Touch Museum](#) has nothing to do with NYC, but it deserves a special mention, as I think this is one of the best Children's Museums in the greater area and is only 1.5 hours away from the city.

Cheap/Frugal things

- If you are a NYC resident, sign up for the [idNYC](#) card. It's free and it gives you access to a [ton of museums](#) for free.
- Some museums are also just donation-based/pay-as-you-wish for NY locals

- The [New York Public Library](#) (NYPL) has tons of free programming for kids of various ages. The [53rd St. Library](#) in particular is my favorite one (super clean, and you can eat at the large atrium in there)
- With the above NYPL card you can also reserve 1 free entry/year to a [ton of museums for free](#) through the [Culture Pass](#).
- Sign up for [the Broadway lotteries](#). Especially if you are a local, as they are actually pretty easy to win if you sign up every day. If you win, you pay a heavily discounted price (around \$30-\$40) for pretty good seats that might or might not have a slight obstructed view
- [Learn to Swim](#) is a free swim class in NY public pools, but you have to enter the lottery to win. Supposedly not that hard to win. In the summer, there are many swimming pools open for free in the NYC public parks, including this cool [Floating Pool](#) in the Bronx.
- The free [Staten Island Ferry](#) gives great views to the Statue of Liberty

Seasonal things

- General
 - Many of the large museums such as the [AMNH](#), [Intrepid Museum](#), [NY Aquarium](#), [Queens Zoo](#) have a sleepover/overnight stay that occur on certain days in the year. They are costly (\$100+), but can be a very unique experience
 - [The Urban Park Rangers](#) has various kids events throughout the year throughout all NYC parks, especially when school is out.
- New Year's Eve/Day
 - Children's museums generally organize a "Noon Year's Eve" party during the day on 12/31, so check with them
- Lunar New Year
 - For Lunar New Year, you will find activities in the touristy Chinatown, the non-touristy Chinatown in Flushing.
 - The [Vietnam Heritage Center](#) also puts on a yearly Tet Festival
 - The [Metropolitan Museum of Arts](#) puts on a Lunar New Year Festival with lots of free activities. It is extremely crowded though.
- Spring
 - On some Saturday in April, there's a massive pillow fight day at Washington Square Park
 - When your children are old enough, bring them along on the [TD Five Boro Bike Tour](#) in May. They allow kids on bike back seats/child carriers.
- Summer
 - Visiting the beach and amusement parks at Coney Island is a must in the summer. Yes, it's far, but it's very fun and makes for great summer memories. They are actually open year-round, but there are nightly fireworks there in the summer.
 - In the summer the [Fantasy Forest Carousel Park](#) in Flushing Meadows is open. It's small though, so combine it with the visits to the other museums there (Hall of Science, Queens Zoo, etc).
 - There are tons of free outdoor movie screenings. They are often in the parks like Central Park, Prospect Park, Bryant Park. Audio isn't the best, but it gives for a fun picnic experience
 - To view the Fourth of July fireworks, I recommend coming early and viewing it from [Gantry Plaza Park](#) (though this year in 2024 it's on the Hudson River side).
 - In Central Park, [Victoria Garden](#) opens as an amusement park

- Urban Park Rangers organize [overnight family camping](#) in NYC parks. It's free, but there's a lottery.
- Fall
 - Some time in October there is [Summer Streets NYC](#), where for 3 consecutive Saturdays, a very large stretch of Manhattan (usually Madison Ave from Harlem to Brooklyn Bridge) is closed to cars, so everyone gets to bike along the street with tons of activities and free things along the way. The Department of Transportation (DOT) gives out free bike helmets for kids + adults too. Highly recommend it.
 - The [Vietnam Heritage Center](#) also puts on a yearly Mid-Autumn Lantern Festival
 - Go apple picking outside of New York. Search for farms.
 - The various Jack O Lanterns events (around Tarrytown) upstate require reservations and fill up very quickly, so book in advance.
- Winter holidays
 - Visit the [New York Botanical Garden Holiday Train show](#). It's a model train show where tons of NYC buildings are rebuild with plants and other organic material
 - Ride an [actual old nostalgia/vintage train](#) on certain times in December
 - The [New York Transit Museum Gallery](#) inside Grand Central Terminal puts on a small model holiday train show
 - Watch the [Rockettes](#) in December. Expensive, and touristy, but actually pretty fun for kids
 - Usually around this time the [Big Apple Circus](#) comes to the city. It's a traditional family circus.
 - Rockefeller holiday lights (the "show" at Saks Fifth itself is very short, so maybe combine with trip to Lego store or FAO Schwarz there)
 - Various holiday light events like [Astra Lumina](#) at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden or [the NYBG Glow](#). There are tons of others around the city.
 - Ice skating at various places. Tons of them are popping up. The [Bryant Park Winter Village](#) one is free if you bring your own skates and reserve a week in advance, [Wollman rink](#) in Central Park is the large one. [Glide BK](#) is the one right under Brooklyn Bridge. Avoid the expensive/crowded one at Rockefeller Plaza.
 - Walk around [Dyker Heights](#) (fancy holiday lights from private homes)
 - [The Paley Center](#) has a winter holiday festival with hot chocolate/arts and crafts/trains and kids holiday movies
- Special events
 - Look out for special one-time events for children that tour different cities around the world. NYC (or nearby NJ) will always be a stop on those tours. Check the calendars of event venues like Barclay Center or NJ Performing Arts Center. We've seen shows like [Disney on Ice](#), [Bluey](#), watching ["E.T." the movie](#) with a live orchestra, etc.

Traveling with kids

- Going with a stroller? It's tough, very tough. Most subway stations do not have elevators. Subway trains will announce in the train if an upcoming station is wheelchair accessible (which implies there is an elevator). Look for the blue wheelchair sign next to the subway station on the map. Or just read the [accessibility section of my subway guide](#).

- Find public restrooms at
 - Most playgrounds (though they are not very clean, and usually don't have diaper-changing stations)
 - Most large train stations and shopping malls have clean ones (The Shops at Columbus Circle, Grand Central Terminal, World Trade Center Oculus)
 - All New York Public Libraries (search for NYPL)
 - Large stores (Whole Foods, Target, etc)
 - Or walk confidently into a large hotel. You often find restrooms in the lobby or near the conference rooms on the 2nd floor
 - At Times Square in particular, walk confidently into the [New York Marriott Marquis](#). Take elevator to lobby and you'll find restrooms, resting places there
 - At Grand Central, the diaper-changing station is at the Station Master's office (near the Transit Museum Gallery)
- Yes, NYC is very crowded and loud, so sometimes you need to find some places to chill/relax.
 - The various NYPL are great for that (especially the [53rd St Library](#) or the [Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library](#))
 - Or search for "Privately Owned Public Space" on Google Maps. These are basically company lobbies that are open to the public. [The Olympic Tower](#) for instance is a good place near Rockefeller (with restrooms).

Finding more info

- Read up at [mommypoppins.com](#). Curated and updated articles on what is happening for kids in NYC.
- Depending on where you live, there is likely a Facebook/Google Group for parenting in your neighborhood, such as the [UWS Moms](#) or [Harlem4Kids](#)
- Read Minh's [NYC Subway Guide](#)
- Read Minh's [other local NYC tips](#)

Comments/Feedback

- Send them to minh@minh.org