

The Detritus of Childhood: Streamlining Your Family's Gear

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As a single woman, I could attend three and four day events easily with one small satchel. In modern life, I could travel for well over two weeks with that same small satchel. I was portable, fleet-footed, and on-the-go. Then, I married and had children.

Adding the needs of others to your list of Things To Be Responsible For does add to the “gear burden” of living history. However, with the Progressive attitude of “What did they use, and how can I do the same?” you can decrease the burden.

What You Must Have

A child requires food, shelter, and clothing, and loving guardians. Everything beyond the basics is gravy—and if you're participating in living history with your family, you'll want just a little gravy.

Your children will need a functional wardrobe of period-appropriate clothing, suited to the temperament of the child, and to the anticipated weather and activity. You will need adequate sleeping arrangements, suited to the same. You will need ways to transport things, and store them.

One wise investment any family can make is a good chamber pot. Chamber pots can be taken to the flushing or portable toilets after use and emptied safely. A small bottle of diluted vinegar water will keep the pot sanitary and clean-smelling between uses. Never dump human waste in trash bins.

Alternatives to Modern Things

Using historically-accurate clothing and bedding goes a long way toward streamlining your gear. Some other adjustments we've made include:

Pacifiers: rely on limited use (in private only), and attentive parenting at other times, as well as a clean maternal thumb when sucking is required. Dedicated thumb-suckers are already historically accurate!

Baby Bottles: use breast feeding, cup feeding, or spoon feeding if you are feeding baby in public. It is not safe to use a period-style nursing bottle, even if one could be found, and no amount of camouflage or cover can make a modern bottle look like anything but a modern bottle. Babies can be trained to take water from a regular tumbler at about 2 months; some babies can master swallowing this way even earlier. The key is to use a thin-lipped tumbler, very little liquid, and tip it to pass a minute amount of water into your baby's mouth at one time. Baby will try to “nurse” the cup's lip, and will be able to swallow small sips (this may or may not be adequate for feedings, but does work for overall hydration.)

Prepared Baby Foods: plan menus that include mashable foods for your babies, and child-pleasing foods for everyone else. Zero-refrigeration menus, and even zero-cooking menus will reduce your gear quotient tremendously!

Blankies & other Lovies: Ideally, make your child a period blanket for a “lovie” from birth. It need not be any more complex than a simple four-patch quilt lined with cotton flannel, and tied with cotton embroidery threads, but you'll avoid the trauma of wrenching the hot pink poly-fleece blanket out of a determined toddler's hands. A period-styled cloth doll hugged on a daily basis will still be loved at an event, and can be tossed in the wash at home.

Baby Wipes: I used to think these were indispensable! Then I realized they were only a substitute for something historically appropriate:

Bathing. Several huck towels and cloths fold compactly around a bar of soap, and can be used for sponge-bathing at any time, or for immersion bathing when the opportunity presents itself.

Tooth & Hair Brushes: buy replica wooden brushes with boar bristles as a stocking stuffer this Christmas, and keep them reserved for event use only. A bit of baking soda with a drop of mint extract will clean teeth efficiently for the normal course of an event, as will plain water. And even if your seven-year-old skips brushing for three days, he's not likely to need dentures by ten. Wooden hair brushes with boar bristles can be found through The Vermont Country Store, and even in Wal-Mart!

Diapers: modern cloth diapers are nearly as convenient as paper diapers; some companies are even making woolen soaker pants very similar to what was used in the mid-century. Your diapering choice is entirely your own; no one will be checking. Regardless of your decision, you will need to have a way to discard of solid wastes (use the chamber pot to carry solid waste to provided toilets), and a way to safely discard or store soiled and wet diapers. A covered bucket of water with washing soda (not bleach) will keep wet diapers (and soiled diapers with the solids removed) from smelling terribly until they can be laundered.

Toys: helping your children lead an “unplugged” lifestyle will be the most helpful here. The judicious inclusion of a few period-appropriate toys, plus care in selecting events where children will have natural activity opportunities, will also help. See *A Child's War Chest* for more in-depth ideas.

Bedding: a more extensive article is found under *Where to Rest the Weary Head*. Use quilts and ground cloths over straw or the ground, a tick stuffed with straw on-site, or other arrangements, rather than porta-cribs, army cots, or air mattresses. Those modern items are bulky, hard to hide, and unneeded. Recognize that the individual temperaments and needs of children vary, and you may need to choose day-trip events until your child can emotionally and physically handle sleeping at an event site.

Hauling the Detritus

There are several consideration for all the gear you end up toting: storage at home, transport, and use at events. The best solution is period-appropriate storage, so you do not need three different strategies!

If you will be on the go at the event, you will need to streamline your children's things to the extreme. Carpet bags and other period light luggage will be useful, if you do not have access to a handcart, barrow, or other small transportation. If you will use a static camp, you can bring a bit more in the way of personal belongings, but the prime considerations will be for security, and ease of access. Small wooden trunks, carpet bags, and other period containers will be useful.

It is rare that you will be able to bring and display every single period-appropriate item you own! Instead, “shop” from your own things; have each child choose one small toy, or have several children choose one thing to share at the event. One of the best ways to streamline gear is to camp for a weekend in your yard, or local park. Bring only the bare minimum, and keep everything in the house, until you really DO need it. At the end of the weekend, take a look at the few things you needed. You may be surprised by how little this is!

Make it a regular process to evaluate your gear—what do you need?



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