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opening extract from

Are We There Yet?

Great Car Games to Keep Families Sane!

written by

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Introduction

Nobody likes long car journeys, especially children. Since becoming a mother, I've realised that your kids will soon let you know if they're bored; so on a long journey, various strategies have to be adopted to keep them entertained. And make sure you don't forget the perennial job of preventing them from going to sleep on each other, from picking small fights and car sickness.

Car games not only help solve the boredom of a long journey, but they can help to keep children's minds focused, so they don't fall sleep when you want them to stay awake.

In the 60s and 70s car journeys meant long hauls, uncomfortable roads and even less comfortable cars. During the summer months – when it used to get really hot and sticky – car journeys with bored kids were enough to drive anyone mad. Playing car games with my parents and brother made the trip pass that much quicker – my dad always refused to break any kind of speed limit, ever. A lot of the games you'll find in the book are the classic games that everybody played as a child (but may have been forgotten) while some I played as a child may have been unique to my family. Then there also are a few – like Bridge Baseball and Cow Football – that I've made up and then played on my own unsuspecting children to keep them happy.

I've tried to include games to cover almost every situation. Some of the games rely on busy roads with lots of vehicles around you; some are best played on empty country roads where you pass few vehicles; some are lively games; and some are designed to be quieter, calming games.

In the last few years the rise of in-car DVD players has helped to keep children entertained on the road, but they're far from a perfect solution. You end up leaving a house where the kids are hooked up to a screen, travelling in a car where they're hooked up to a screen, and then when you arrive at your destination they don't know what to do other than find another screen to watch. Car games are cheaper, far more interactive and let the children either entertain themselves, or involve others. Mostly though car games are just simple fun, designed to make you enjoy the time you spend couped up in a car together, rather than dread it.

Car games can test their imagination, too. I've included a number of easy word games that you can play together to help pass the time – whether it's in the car, on the train or waiting at an airport – helping to enrich your children's vocabulary en route.

So, let your car journeys become a voyage of discovery for every member of the family.

Jo Pink



Spotting Games

No matter where you go on a car journey, whether it's in the city, deep into the country or on a never-ending stretch of road, there's always a spotting game you can play. But you've got to be quick, because many of the objects are gone in the blink of an eye!

The Animal Game

For the animal game, you split the car into two halves. The right-hand side of the car takes the right side of the road, and the left-hand side of the car takes the left. This works well for a family of four, but it's up to parents how you split up three (or five) kids.

Whenever you spot animals in fields on your side of the road you have to count them out loud. So if you pass them too quickly, before you've got to fifteen – too bad!

The winner is the side who has counted the most animals. You can continue it in town, too, with domestic pets being walked or cats that dare to cross the street.

Variation

If you're passing through an area with few farm animals you can adapt it to any four-legged animals you see, provided you can shout out what they are. Try including animals you see on billboards – again their names must be shouted out loud to score points.

Instead of counting the animals out loud, you can make mooing, baaing or oinking noises. Great fun if there's more than one type of animal in the field!

So, What Am I Counting?

One player decides to count something outside. It could be street lights, telegraph poles, green signs, single-storey houses, ponds, dogs or roadkill. What they don't do is tell anyone what it is they're counting.

Instead, whenever they pass the object they've selected, they count out loud, adding to their score. The other players have to guess what it is that's being counted.

Playing Tip

To keep the game moving, ask players not to choose really rare things to spot – such as piebald horses, juggling sheep or houses with a ladder on the roof!

Variation

If the object a player has chosen doesn't appear within the next three miles then they lose their go.

Special Number Plates

This number plate game sets players the task of finding different things when they scan their eyes across the road. You can play just for fun or give points each time someone spots one of the plates.

Words

Watch out for plates that spell out real words – no matter how short. There are endless three-letter examples, and quite a few short ones, too: IT, OR, OF, AS, AT, IS, TO, IF, US, UP, IN.

Remember, when playing for points, repeats aren't allowed!

Palindromes

Palindromes are words that can be read the same backwards, such as BOB or PIP. You can ask players to spot letter palindromes on number plates – they don't have to be real words – for example THT, GNG or LYL will score. Or you can try and spot number palindromes such as 121 or 848 or 999 or 2002.



Personalized Number Plates

There are a lot of personalized or "vanity" number plates on cars these days – registrations that spell out a word. See if you can spot one.

Variation

You can play the games on this page singly, or you can combine them depending on how much traffic is around at the time.