18 patriotic activities for seniors of all ability levels

These patriotic activities for seniors will make for a seriously fun summer.

Alesandra Dubin

Independence Day, Veteran’s Day, Memorial Day, Juneteenth... There are so many occasions throughout the year to celebrate America. On many of these holidays, the sun is shining and the weather is warm so it’s a great time to get outdoors for a patriotic activity.

With a bit of inspiration, you can help your older loved ones enjoy some good ol’ American fun no matter their mobility level or cognitive ability. To get you started, here are 18 fun and patriotic activities for seniors of all ability levels.

Patriotic activities for seniors with limited mobility

Enjoy fireworks from the comfort of home

“Watching streamed fireworks shows, such as Macy’s 4th of July Fireworks or ‘A Capitol Fourth’ will allow the tradition to continue without COVID concerns, extreme noise stimulation or unnecessary movement,” suggests Glenn Lane, president of Westchester Family Care in New York.

Suzanne Blankenship, an eldercare expert and author of “How To Take Care of Old People Without Losing Your Marbles,” agrees that fireworks can be a great bet. “If an older loved one has no cognitive impairment, then attending a fireworks display is a good outing for the family. My mom’s favorite holiday was the Fourth of July, and she made it to a fireworks display every year as long as she could.”

Still, there’s an important caveat about fireworks: “Discourage fireworks attendance if an older loved one has cognitive issues,” warns Blankenship. “The sounds can be very disturbing and can cause anxiety.”

Host a themed game night

Try a game of holiday bingo, American trivia or any other classic board and card games your family enjoys, Lane suggests. “Game nights can be held virtually or wherever is most comfortable for your loved one,” he says. “So the fun is as easy as you make it.”

Patriotic activities for seniors with cognitive challenges

Set up a parade

“Have family members decorate the walkers, wheelchairs or doors of their loved ones and let them enjoy each other’s decorations or have a contest,” Blankenship says.

Create art or sensory projects

Organize a patriotic craft project, suggests Bill Dunk-Green, the founder of Eldercare Digest. Designate someone to pick up supplies from the local dollar store for everyone in your group. “It’s a great intergenerational activity and ensures everyone socializes with each other,” he says. “The seniors in the group are particularly appreciative of the time spent with the children.”

Plus, these activities can provide mood-boosting mental challenges. “As we age, it’s both incredibly important to keep our physical selves, as well as our brains, occupied,” says Sabrina Beaumont, CMO of Passion Plans and a family caregiver in Raleigh, North Carolina. “Artistic activities are great ways for seniors to keep their heads going.”

Blankenship adds that artwork and other tactile projects can be a great way to engage those living with dementia.

Get them cooking

Get your older loved one involved with whipping up some American comfort classics for the menu. “Allowing them to have a hands-on task in food prep will make them feel central to the festivities and make the cooking experience a whole family activity,” Lane says.

And think beyond the entree! Desserts are another fun and hands-on way to bring in a patriotic theme: Think red, white and blue Jell-O or American-themed cupcakes. Decorate cookies or cakes in red, white and blue using food coloring, frosting and candies to bring in the color and the fun.

That said, you’ll want to make sure you keep nutritional restrictions in mind when making desserts and other food, Lane notes.

Put on a classic American movie

“Nostalgia is an effective treatment for memory loss, so for seniors with dementia or Alzheimer’s, watching classic films or TV shows from their past will be beneficial to their health and an activity the whole family can enjoy,” Lane says. Looking for film recs? Consider:

- “Yankee Doodle Dandy”
- “Singing in the Rain”
- “No Time for Sergeants”

Or anything else patriotic goes. “You know your loved one’s favorites best,” says Lane.

Do an American-themed puzzle

Pick a puzzle showing a classic American landscape, food or flag. “Puzzles provide a sense of control and safe stimulation to seniors who have dementia or Alzheimer’s and choosing an American-themed one can turn it into a holiday activity that the whole family can enjoy,” Lane recommends.

Patriotic activities for seniors seeking companionship

Bring the barbecue to them

“Hosting a classic Fourth of July barbecue at your older loved one’s house will let them join in on the fun and festivities while providing the opportunity for safe and comfortable rest and relaxation if they begin to feel tired or overstimulated,” Lane says.
Listen to music
"Music is a wonderful way to connect with those who have memory decline," Blankenship says. "Have a concert with family musicians, or [listen to] recorded music that features patriotic songs. Let the whole family join in: Even those that can't play an instrument or sing can shake a tambourine or bang on a drum or drum substitute!" Of course, she says, don't forget to "leave room for dancing or moving to the music."

If possible, check out live music together. Lane says to "choose a show in the evening to avoid midday heat and arrive early to choose a good spot."

Visit a local fireworks show and parade
Neighborhood events will be less stimulating than nationally oriented events in major metros — which can be overcrowded, overstimulating and require substantial mobility. "Show up early and bring chairs, water and anything else your loved one might need to make the experience safe and enjoyable," Lane says. "For fireworks, make sure to bring a blanket as seniors get cold quickly as the temperature drops."

Plus, when seniors are out in the local community, it's a chance to meet new people. "It can also be incredibly lonely as people age — perhaps they lose their friends or their spouse," Beaumont says. "These activities may be great ways for seniors to meet other like-minded individuals."

Have a picnic
"For more mobile seniors, leaving the house, especially after this past year, is an instant mood booster," Lane says. "However, you still need to minimize intensive activities, which is why a picnic is perfect!"

Bring classic American food like burgers, watermelon and ice cream and find a shady place to sit outside. Make sure to have lots of water and chairs for safety and comfort.

Patriotic activities for seniors who are veterans or family members of veterans

Share military stories
Many veterans and military family members have tons of stories to tell — and you can comprise an engaged audience that means a lot to them. For games and activities around this theme, Blankenship suggests asking them to tell you what branch of the military they served in and where they served. Then ask questions like:

- What was their favorite assignment and why?
- What motivated them to serve their country (understanding that some were drafted)?
- Do they have a special memory of someone they looked up to in the military? Someone who was especially dedicated or served with distinction?
- Do they have a remarkable memory of a loved one who served that they want to share?

"My mom's brother served in the Navy and was killed in the attack on Pearl Harbor," Blankenship says. "She loved to talk about his service and the patriotic gift her family gave to the nation."

Or gather photos of U.S. historical figures (presidents since Roosevelt, for example), and let them tell you what they remember most about that figure.

Patriotic activities for care communities and families

Have a hot dog buffet
Offer as many toppings as you can think of: chili, sauerkraut, Chicago dog toppings and all the rest of the fixings.

Have a patriotic costume contest
Dress up as the Statue of Liberty, Uncle Sam, the Flag, Rosie the Riveter, Betsy Ross, Harriet Tubman, MLK Jr., a U.S. president — whatever ideas you have!

Bring a holiday card
Make a splash by bringing your loved one an oversized card with a holiday or patriotic theme designed by the children in the family. Use butcher paper, poster board — whatever makes a big impact. The kids can spend time together with their senior loved ones, talking about what they made and their favorite parts.

Play telephone
For an Americana twist, start with the older adult's favorite patriotic story. Have each person repeat the story in the ear of the person next to them, all around the circle. When it gets back to the last person before the older adult, have them say what they heard aloud. See how the story has changed when it gets back to your older loved one, who can clarify the original story! (Note: Those with hearing impairment might find this challenging.)

Have a potluck
Blankenship suggests adding an element of patriotism to a potluck party by assigning each family member a classic American food to bring in a specific color of the flag: red, white or blue.

Share memories of a favorite patriotic holiday for each family member
"Take a trip down memory lane with photos of past celebrations," Blankenship says. Savoring favorite holiday memories all while making new ones... what's better than that?

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