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The Best Towns in Alaska for Young Families

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August 13, 2013

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When a family settles down, they look for a lot in a town: top-notch schools for their kids, affordable living and a healthy job market. We wanted to identify the best of the best for young families in Alaska, so we asked the following questions as we evaluated cities and towns across the Last Frontier:

- 1. Does the town have good public schools?** We measured schools' academic performance with ratings from GreatSchools. This non-profit compares a given school's standardized test scores to the state average to obtain a rating on a 1 to 10 scale (10 representing the highest score). Higher ratings led to a higher overall score.
- 2. Can you afford to live there?** We looked at both average home values in each town and ongoing monthly home costs, including mortgage payments, real estate taxes, insurance costs, utilities, fuel and other bills. Lower costs led to a higher overall

score.

3. **Is the town growing and prospering?** We assessed a town's economy by looking at average household income and income growth over the last decade. Higher income and greater growth led to a higher overall score.

The Best Towns for Young Families

1. Petersburg

Nicknamed Little Norway, the waterfront city of Petersburg is like the northern European country in both climate and culture. Each year, on the third weekend of May, Petersburg puts on a four-day festival for Norwegian Constitution Day or Mayfest, a celebration of its Nordic heritage. The [commercial fishing industry](#) remains a powerhouse in this city as well. The schools are also excellent. The Petersburg City School District earned a 9 out of 10 from GreatSchools and its high school maintains a [graduation rate](#) above 90%.

2. Cordova

Accessible only by air or water, Cordova is Alaska's hidden treasure – and a great choice for families who love the outdoors. The city's Mount Eyak offers residents panoramic views as well as great opportunities for skiing. In warmer months, Cordovans enjoy kayaking at Prince William Sound, which contains the densest concentration of tidewater glaciers in the world.

3. Palmer

Palmer is big on family fun. Famous for hosting the Alaska State Fair, this city annually [draws around 300,000 lovers](#) of the Alaskan agricultural spirit. The giant celebration features several large vegetable exhibits, dozens of food vendors, arts and crafts stands and even a concert series. This lively city offers more beyond fun and games, too. Palmer High

tests students with a rigorous curriculum – it earned a 9 out of 10 from GreatSchools – and it is one of few in the state to offer an [IB program](#).

4. Valdez

Valdez boasts a strong outdoors culture for young families. Surrounded by some of the world's tallest coastal mountains, the city's steep slopes are a haven for outdoor-sports enthusiasts. Indeed, Valdez has been named the [snowiest place in America](#), and along with come opportunities for dogsledding, snowmobiling, ice climbing and more – thrill seekers can even heli-ski.

5. Unalaska


Do not let the name fool you; like the rest of the state, Unalaska offers some of area's finest natural features: mountainous terrain, a volcano and an icy ocean. Unalaska is also home to the [busiest fishing port](#) in the nation and one of the best school districts in the state, giving opportunities for advancement to adults and children alike. The school district earned a perfect score from Great Schools, and its been honored by the U.S. Department of Education with a [Blue Ribbon](#).



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6. Homer

Homer is ideal for creative families. It may be the Halibut Fishing Capital of the World, but there is more here than an active port and harbor. It also has become prominent for its arts scene and culinary craft. The city's artistic community prides itself on a beatnik image and has established a variety of galleries and artisan shops throughout Homer's streets. Education here is great as well. Homer High students earned a perfect rating from GreatSchools and 37% of them take an [Advanced Placement test](#).

7. Kenai

Nature-loving families will love Kenai. The city may be best known as a sport-fishing destination. The Kenai River is frequented by residents and tourists alike because of its reputation for world-class salmon fishing. Wildlife lovers also reside here for a chance to bird watch, get a glimpse of a beluga whale on the city's lookout point and more.

8. Nikiski

There are endless recreational opportunities in Nikiski. The town is adjacent to the Captain Cook State Recreation Area, a 3,460-acre state park, where families can enjoy camping, hiking, boating, swimming and a bathhouse. In

addition, every year, all ages celebrate Nikiski's Family Fun in the Midnight Sun festival, which brings out families to enjoy the longest day of the year with contests, games food and music.

9. North Pole

Christmas brings together families around the globe, and that could not be truer in North Pole. At North Pole one day of Christmas just is not enough. Boulevards are lined with candy-cane streetlights and shops like Santa's Letters and Gifts. The local Santa Claus House is home to the real Mr. Claus and is a massive gift shop with Alaskan-made gifts and toys, Christmas apparel and a fudge factory. The building boasts the largest Santa statue in the world and nearby is Santa's sled and reindeer, ready for photo ops. If they want to get out of the city, families can access nature and camping spots at the nearby [Chena Lake Recreation Area](#). North Pole also has thriving tourism and oil industries that contribute to the town's stable economy.

10. Seward

The city of Seward is great for active, athletic families. With abundant parks, especially the beautiful Kenai Fjords National Park, the city's open areas provide plentiful opportunities to enjoy the surrounding wildlife. Seward is very bike-friendly, too. A paved bike path runs from the downtown, along the waterfront and through the harbor for a scenic ride.

Rank	City	Nearest big city	GreatSchools rating	Median home value	Monthly owner costs	Median household income	Growth
1	Petersburg	—	9	\$187,800.00	\$1,486.00	\$70,417.00	
2	Cordova	—	8	\$187,100.00	\$1,642.00	\$79,750.00	
3	Palmer	Anchorage	9	\$180,700.00	\$1,456.00	\$59,484.00	
4	Valdez	—	9	\$162,400.00	\$1,444.00	\$73,068.00	
5	Unalaska	—	10	\$301,700.00	\$2,319.00	\$85,455.00	
6	Homer	—	9	\$257,300.00	\$1,637.00	\$55,603.00	
7	Kenai	Anchorage	8	\$175,800.00	\$1,351.00	\$57,544.00	

8	Nikiski	Anchorage	7	\$166,100.00	\$1,381.00	\$68,090.00	
9	North Pole	Fairbanks	7	\$191,400.00	\$1,774.00	\$66,339.00	
10	Seward	Anchorage	9	\$192,000.00	\$1,589.00	\$45,156.00	

Methodology

The overall score for each city was derived from the following measures:

1. GreatSchools city rating. GreatSchools city ratings are calculated by averaging the weighted overall rating for each school in the city (weighted by the number of students enrolled at the school)
2. Median home value from the U.S. Census (2011 ACS, data set DP04, half-weighted)
3. Monthly homeowner costs from the U.S. Census (2011 ACS, data set DP04, half-weighted)
4. Median household income from the U.S. Census (2011 ACS, data set DP03, half-weighted)
5. Income change between 1999 and 2011 from the U.S. Census (data sets P053 and DP03, half-weighted)

46 Alaska cities and towns designated as places by the U.S. Census were included in this analysis. Only places with a population greater than 2,000 were considered.

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