

TIPS for HIKING with KIDS

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BEFORE: Preparation for a Kid's hike

Ease children into hiking. Create a kid centered experience, especially when first introducing kids to hiking. Begin with very short hikes, and slowly work up to longer hikes. Focus on having fun and exploring, not on a destination or distance to cover.

What to bring:

1. Shoes and clothes-
 - Regular clothes and sneakers are fine for most hiking and even light backpacking for kids. No need to spend tons of money on specialized gear and boots.
 - Bright colors make it easy to keep track of kids in the woods.
 - Dress in layers, so kids can easily adjust layers based on their activity level, sun, wind, etc. Remember kids who are carried won't generate heat from exercising, so add an extra layer of clothes for them.
2. Fluids: When traveling with kids, make sure you have plenty of fluids along- water is best, of course but if your child won't drink water, bring what they will drink. On a hot day, freeze a bottle of water for cold water along the way as it melts. (or freeze a half filled bottle of water, and top it off with water- you don't want to end up with bottles frozen solid, and nothing to drink)
3. First aid kit (bandaids being the most used item)
4. Food- My kids love snacks on the trail, even if we just ate a meal.
 - Smaller quantities with lots of variety work well. This gives kids choices.
 - Novel food or treats can be powerful motivators. Personally, I stay away from empty calorie junk food- which can lead to low energy, grumpy kids when they get off the sugar high.
 - My kids favorite trail foods are: trail mix, fruit leathers- FruitaBu is one 100% fruit brand, Kid Cliff Z bars, cheese sticks, pretzels and goldfish crackers, In the summer, frozen mini applesauce or frozen squeeze yogurts are a great way to cool off.
5. Kid's pack:
 - When kids have their own pack, they can be independent so they don't have to ask you for every snack or sip of water. It also prepares them for backpacking.
 - For safety reasons, it's a good idea for kids to carry a small pack with a few snacks, water (a small bottle since water is heavy), a whistle, and a plastic garbage bag (for emergency shelter).
6. Change of clothes in the car: Half of having fun in the wild is getting dirty! Dress the kids accordingly and keep a change of clothes in the car, or just strip them down for the ride home.

What Not to bring:

- Toys- Kids entertain themselves with found objects like rocks and sticks, etc.
- Too much stuff - Even a day pack can get heavy- and it's hard to be patient with a two year olds pace when your back hurts.

Where to hike:

- My kids and I think flat trails are boring! *I often see troops of boy scouts out 'hiking' along flat, exposed trails. It always seems to me to be a perfect way to turn kids off of hiking.*
- Kids love water, rocks, boardwalks, bridges and variation in tread, scenery, elevation, etc.
- Focus on the hike- not the destination. A ½ mile hike can be lots of fun and worthwhile for a beginning kid hiker. Also figure in run around mileage during 'breaks' Adults may be relaxing while kids climb rocks, chase each other, etc...If it's an out and back trail, make sure to turn around long before the kids are exhausted.
- Just like children love to reread familiar books over and over, kids enjoy hiking favorite trails over and over. Familiar trails seem easier to kids with their known landmarks. It's fun to visit the same area in different seasons.

Who to bring:

- Bring other kids- Having other kids along seems to motivate kids to move forward, and adds interest and excitement to a hike
- Kids of all ages enjoy getting out in the woods.
 - ◆ Infants up to age 2 or so allow adults to hike a fairly typical adult hike, with occasional stops to change diapers or eat.

- ◆ When hiking with young walkers, it's helpful to drastically change your expectations of how far you will go and your pace. *When I first started leading hikes for kids, I was embarrassed to advertise hikes of 2-3 miles, it seemed so insignificant- but it's just what young hikers need.* Allowing young hikers to walk at their own pace, stopping or straying from the trail to explore, empowers them to build their hiking legs, and shows them the joys of hiking.
- ◆ Older kids enjoy challenges like stream crossings, boulder fields, and leading the way.

When to hike:

- Estimate how long you think the hike will take, and double it. Don't plan other activities right after a hike. Keep your day open to really enjoy the outdoors without a schedule.
- Plan hikes for the best time of day for your child. If they are fresh and ready to go in the morning, go then, if they take naps, plan around it. Make sure kids are well rested, and well fed and hydrated before setting out.

Things to talk to kids about before setting out:

- What to do if they get separated from the group (Stay put, hug a tree)
- What to do if they encounter wildlife (look from afar- don't touch)
- Group rules vs. parent rules- everyone has to follow group rules- families may have their own additional rules- especially about climbing rocks, getting close to cliffs, eating wild berries, getting in water, etc.

If kids are leading the pack:

- If you can't see an adult, turn around and wait or head back towards the group
- Stop at any trail intersections. (See next section on teaching kids how to follow a trail. It's surprisingly easy for kids to just wander off the trail.)

DURING THE HIKE:

- Point out all the wonders of nature; different size and shapes of leaves, interesting rocks, evidence of animals, etc.
- Teach kids about trail maintenance and how to be a good trail steward- staying on the trail, picking up trash, removing fallen limbs from the path, etc.
- Teach kids how to follow a trail: Kids will enjoy becoming an expert, and this knowledge will help them stay on the trail. Show kids how to spot...
 - Blazes, and what different types of blazes mean; double, staggered
 - rock cairns,
 - signs and posted maps
 - clues on the ground- worn down path, logs along the side, brush pile blocking reroute

Wildlife: Encountering wildlife can be the highlight of a hike for a child. In a group setting, you may want to set some ground rules in terms of interacting with wildlife:

- We are visiting their home- we don't want to disturb them. Think about how big we are to them. A great book to drive this point home is "[Hey, Little Ant](#)" by Phillip M. Hoose
- Look with your eyes, don't touch any animals

Challenges: Backcountry experiences are often powerful self esteem boosters. Crossing logs, making it to the top of a mountain, rock hopping across a stream, climbing rocks, etc. can be very exciting for kids. I try to provide a scaffold of support where they need it, (with a suggestion, a hand, or encouragement) while giving them space to do what they can on their own.

Weather: If dressed appropriately, hiking in all kinds of weather can be fun. Always carry a hat if there's any possibility of it being cold- it's light, and a great way to stay warm. Layers of clothes are especially helpful for children, who often are more sensitive to shifts in temperature. On a hot hike, take along a spray bottle of cool water and/or plan your hike around a water feature. You can dress kids in their bathing suits for the hike.

When kids aren't happy, first check to see if all of their physical needs are met.

- hungry?
- hot or cold?
- need to go to the bathroom?
- hiking pace too fast for comfort?
- clothes/ shoes fit okay?

If physical needs are met, here are some **tips to keep kids moving-** Distract them:

- tell a story
- sing a song

- Get kids to move forward in different ways- take giant steps, baby steps, sideways steps, red-light, green light, etc.
- Rock hop- pretend the ground is lava
- Play games such as I spy or 20 questions, What am I?, or Alphabet search- look for things beginning with each letter of the alphabet or look for the shape of letters.
- Use natural motivators: Keep kids moving by finding some leaves, walking sticks, or getting them to search for the next blaze.
- Give kids a fun snack to eat, or promise a snack after you pass 6 blazes.

AFTER The hike:

- Give kids plenty to drink to replace fluids lost.
- Recount memories through stories and/or photos
- Show kids the ground they covered on a map, recount favorite experiences on the trail, “Here’s where we skipped stones in the river”, “here’s where we saw the bird’s nest”, etc.
- Plan your next adventure
- Talk about the high point and low point of the hike, you might be surprised by their answers..

Some ideas of how to manage a successful family hiking program:

- Consistency- having your hikes at the same time of day, same day of the week- doesn’t have to be every week, but say the second Tuesday of every month.
- Create an email group to send upcoming hikes announcements, specifics and directions to upcoming hikes.
- Try to have a variety of hikes to meet the needs of different families- some jogging stroller passable, some very short, some more challenging, also vary the geographic area if possible.
- At the hike, have everyone introduce themselves and their children. Enlist someone to be the sweep
- Try to connect with each family over the course of the hike.