

Some Thoughts on Backpacking With Children

What could be more wonderful, a parent thinks, than combining two great loves of my life: my kids, and backpacking? And it's true, there is a natural affinity between kids and the outdoors. As outdoors people who also happen to be parents, we are in a unique position to enjoy and appreciate this combination – to make it happen for our children, and to build some of those fond memories we want our kids to carry with them into their own futures. Just like introducing your child to [Charlotte's Web](#) or Disney World can be more fun than experiencing it yourself the first time, taking a kid into the outdoors can involve levels of wonder, creativity and fun you never dreamed of before you became a parent.

This article will address some considerations involved with taking children backpacking. It is not intended as a comprehensive survey, nor as the “last word” on backpacking topics. This article is directed primarily at a parent or parents hiking with their own children and perhaps a friend or two; it is not intended to address adult leadership of groups such as church or Scout outings. Since I haven't backpacked with infants, or children with special needs, I am not going to address either of those topics here. Anyone who has spent more than five minutes on a backpacking internet discussion board is well aware that the most seemingly mundane topics can be highly controversial so, as with other advice, take what seems sensible to you and leave the rest. For further resources, books by the author Cindy Ross are highly recommended (especially [Kids in the Wild](#) and [Scraping Heaven](#)). Your local library may have some references, and internet book-selling sites list a multitude of “outdoors kids” guides and planners. For inspiration, check out [Last Child in the Woods](#) by Richard Louv.

The one cardinal rule of taking children backpacking is that *it is impossible to overplan*. Even if, before parenthood, you were sort of a footloose, devil-may-care hiker, those days are over now. Whether you ever need any of the contingency plans or escape hatches you put in place, the psychic comfort you will derive from having attempted to anticipate every possible pitfall or circumstance will be well worth the effort of having done so.

In planning a trip with children, you need to start out with a few basics. First, what are the ages of your children? Two robust teenagers will require a substantially different trip from a newborn and a two year old. What is your own, personal level of backpacking experience and expertise? If you're a neophyte yourself (and by the way that is no reason to delay taking your kids out), you'll want to plan an easier and more comfortable trip than if you'd thru-hiked the Triple Crown in the past year. Third are considerations regarding route, terrain, time of year, and anticipated weather conditions. The younger the child, the more you'll want to err on the side of caution in planning a trip. Small infants, or children being carried, are more susceptible to changes in temperature than children who are older or those who are moving about.

A key element to preparing to backpack with children starts before you buy your maps or start planning menus: before considering an overnight trip, go on several day hikes with them. This gives your kids the chance to experience being out in the woods, to burn up at least a little shoe leather on the trail and, most especially, to give you the sense of how they'll function as backpackers. The whiny, uncooperative child who shrieks at the sight of a bug is not going to be a good candidate for a backpacking trip, and it's significantly better to find this out before you've invested yourself in an extended trip.

The best way to plan a trip involving children is to start with the number of days you'd like to be away from home. The younger the child, and especially if the trip involves separation from the

“other”parent, the shorter you will want to make it. Starting out with a one-night adventure might be reasonable. Think very, very carefully about the time of year you want to go. It's true that kids greatly enjoy being outside, and often can seem immune to certain discomforts, but hiking for miles in the cold driving rain, or whilst being attacked by swarms of black flies, is not the way to initiate a lifelong love for hiking. We do not want to teach our children to be “weather weenies;” however, remember that children are not usually prone to suffer in silence and if you've gambled with the weather and lost, you're going to hear about it.

Mileage is usually a major concern for those hiking with children. As adults, many of us were accustomed, at least part of the time, to pushing ourselves and trying to make “big miles.” There is a wonderful psychic satisfaction that comes from successfully stretching one's body and spirit to the limit. In time, your children may even come to develop a sense of pride in their own ability to endure. It is, of course, impossible to predict when that point will come for any particular child; however, in general, kids under the age of 10-12 do not seem to have the physical or mental capability to push themselves much past the point of discomfort or, certainly, outright pain. You will want to take this factor into consideration when planning a trip – either to formulate a trip that will not demand a major effort from your children or to plan a trip that will permit you to stop short should you need to. Planning mileage is also where having done day hiking with your children will be of use: if your child will not do five miles on a day hike with a water bottle, it's not reasonable to anticipate higher mileage with a full pack. It is always helpful to have at least two hike plans: an ambitious one and a realistic one, perhaps. Know your bailout points, where and when you could leave the trail and get back to your vehicle or transportation if you had to. Perhaps save the 100 Mile Wilderness for future trips and stick to areas that have more “civilization” about.

To expand on the mileage question just a little bit, it's often been observed that backpacking can be more of a mental challenge than a physical one, and that's saying something. There have been times when every hiker has wanted to turn around, to bail out, to just stop hiking and do something else – whether it's because it's too cold, too wet, or too buggy, or just because hiking, while fun for an hour or so, got less fun after six or eight or ten hours of it. Kids in particular will take off like bullets out of a gun. They'll scramble up the trail and steam along and you'll think, gosh, we're going to reach our destination in time for mid-morning snack, not dinner. Then, suddenly, the air goes out of the tires. Carrying that heavy pack got really tiresome and rock scrambles and funny-looking trees got much less interesting. It occurs to the child that it would be much, much easier to be sitting home in front of a screen right now, nibbling on Apple Jacks. And the difference between a child and an adult is that the child will sit down in the middle of the trail and refuse to go on, or at the very least launch into Industrial Strength Whine Mode. The child will persist in the notion that the adult can somehow rectify the discomfort of the situation, to the adult's intense chagrin.

This is where adult ingenuity needs to come to the fore. Early-stage curative methods will involve having a snack, preferably chocolate, making sure the child has had enough to drink, and a break, sometimes a long one. Have your break at a brook or stream, and let the child catch frogs or fool around trying to dam up the flow. You could stress that a special milestone, like a mountaintop or waterfall, is coming up, or plan for a treat (such as getting off the trail for ice cream) up ahead. If the child has been given a role to play for the trip, such as photographer or official map-reader, this can be a good time to emphasize that role. In the end, the parent's tools amount to the traditional carrots and sticks. It's important to know that in any endeavor like this with children, you will become exasperated from time to time. Your supplies of patience and understanding will be drawn upon as never before. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this entire process is the fact that, once you get to camp and the child re-charges for a bit, he or she will once again be bouncing around like Tigger, while the parent is

groaning, exhausted, in the tent. And so it will go. Understand that this is not an easy thing you are attempting, and be good to yourself. Finally, know that, if you keep at it, your children will eventually mature intellectually and emotionally to the point that these things will fade away as issues.

To return to a more mundane aspect of planning, gearing up children is often a major worry for parents. We want to offer our children the same quality gear we have for ourselves, especially because we know how much easier it makes any trip, yet considerations of expense, and worries that this will be a fleeting interest, make us hesitate. There really is no good answer to this. Clearly, the best alternative is if you have friends or acquaintances who also backpack with children; gear-sharing on this level would make excellent sense. If you have, or plan to have, a family with many future hand-me-down candidates, then investing in quality kids' gear might be the way to go. Internet swap boards or lists can be a terrific source for second-hand gear. If your child is on the cusp of teenagerhood, then perhaps buying small adult-sized gear will do. If all else fails, mass-market stores such as Wal*Mart, Target, and Sports Authority do sell a range of outdoor gear that can be pressed into service without the need for a home equity loan. I will admit to a bit of a prejudice here: it seems to me that a backpacker can become mired in an endless search for “the best” pack, “the best” tarp tent, “the best” water filter, and to feel that a trip is doomed unless the ultimate proper gear can be located and used. Once children are involved, the gear choice possibilities seem to multiply geometrically: yet, in the end, the most important part of the trip will be the going and the enjoying, not what is carried along the way.

The rule of thumb on backpack weight for individuals, including children, is that pack weight should not exceed twenty percent of body weight. The easiest way to get this right is to have your child stand on the scale with and without the pack (including water) and calculate the difference. Children often want to overpack and some of this involves their fear of leaving the safety of home. It is a scary feeling for a child to leave her pillow behind! However, unless you are interested in carrying 100 pounds yourself, sometimes the kindest thing can be to permit your child to pack his or her own pack, and then go through it later and take out the bed pillows, hardback library books, and fourth pair of jeans. Hopefully once you're actually on the trail, the absence of most of these items will not be noted. You will not necessarily plan to go completely ultralight with children: if you have downtime in camp, you'll appreciate that deck of cards, light frisbee, or even (for the older child) iPod or paperback book to read aloud.

Because backpacking burns lots of calories, and kids will often burn even more, playing, climbing trees, and otherwise exerting themselves, it might be a good idea to pack food for a child in the same amount and proportions as you would for an adult. Picky eaters at home become a bit less so on the trail. Lighting the stove or enjoying a campfire and helping with meal preparation are two things almost all children greatly enjoy on a backpacking trip, particularly since I've yet to meet the child who wasn't a born pyromaniac. Meal preparation is also a great time to emphasize LNT training. Most kids will not think twice about dumping uneaten food on the ground or pitching it into the bushes, so this can easily become a “teachable moment.”

While you were doing your day hikes, you took the time to teach your child about basic trail safety. Every parent has a different comfort level with this, depending on the age and maturity level of the child. Permitting a crabby child to hike out “alone” (perhaps 50 yards ahead of the group) can be a terrific safety valve for everyone. Even such basics as understanding what blazes mean, that you need to follow the colored ones for your particular trail, and that you should not go off the trail, are not necessarily intuitive for a child. Generally, they want to keep moving ahead, and leave the route-finding to the adults. Most children should at least wait at trail junctions or road crossings for the

adults; I've also come to feel that, unless they're in a group of several children, kids should probably not sit right at the road waiting for the adults for an extended period of time. Our personal experience with trail whistles was that, when we really needed them, the sound did not carry far enough; however, many parents do have their children carry these and teach them the international distress code of three short blasts. Other hikers carry radios; a parent can field test these on a day hike and decide whether they will work as required and if the weight trade-off makes sense for them. Right from the start, make sure you teach your child what to do if she feels she may have become lost. The "hug a tree" mantra is easy to remember and could be life-saving.

Parents do worry about encounters with other humans on the trail. By and large, other hikers' attitudes will range from "this is what I go hiking to get away from" (rare) to "how neat to see kids in the woods!" Many backpackers do not meet lots of kid backpackers on the trail, and can often be fun and kind, especially if the child shows an interest. The kids also get the chance to interact with other adults and learn a bit more about the wider world. Kids' high spirits and crazy energy and adults' need for rest and quiet time can conflict; this is when camping away from the shelter, in a tent, would be easier for all concerned. The likelihood that you will encounter an adult with seriously bad intentions towards children is surpassingly low; however it is not non-existent and everyone involved needs to use common sense.

There will be times when all of the planning and preparation and worrying and interpersonal hassles involved in backpacking with kids will make a parent wonder whether it is worth it. I have never had a trip with my children where I didn't, at some point or other, wonder what I was doing out there, and more importantly, why. Yet, to my last day, I will also treasure these times on the trail with my children. We shared camaraderie and adventures, learned self-reliance, independence and skills, met fascinating and colorful people, and learned to love – and respect – our Mother Earth. We haven't finished walking our trails together yet, and I hope we never do.