

Backpacking With Children - Four Tips

Contributed by Steve Gillman
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1. Generate Interest

Forcing uninterested children to go backpacking is probably a bad idea. They are likely to resist, cause problems, and ruin the trip for all. So try to generate some interest first. A couple good outdoor movies can help. Try to find movies with characters who are the same age or a little older than your children. After watching them, suggest the idea of backpacking and gauge the response.

If you aren't sure that your children are old enough for backpacking, try a camp-out in the back yard first. Let them help set up the tent. See how well they make it through the night, and try your best to make the experience fun for them.

2. Have The Children Plan With You

The more the kids are involved in the whole process, the better. Let them help in choosing the trails you will hike, but narrow the options ahead of time to those most appropriate. Allow them to suggest what foods to bring, again narrowing their options to meals that make sense for a backpacking trip. Show them how to use a map, and how to judge daily hiking distances. Then let them help in the packing.

3. Give Them Responsibilities

If they are old enough, have the children set up the tent or make the fire. If they are younger, you might have them collect sticks to burn, or prepare their sleeping pad and bag for the night. Give them things that they can handle, and let them know they are doing a good job (if they are).

When backpacking with children, it's okay to let them get a little ahead of you if there are no dangerous animals in the area. Let them be out of sight just a bit, as long as you can hear them or quickly catch up. And tell the older children that they are responsible for keeping an eye on the younger ones.

4. Bring Fun Items

Most adults love the opportunity to get away from all the things of home, and can sit talking for hours while watching the sun set. Backpacking with children, though, might require some more entertainment. Bringing a movie player is probably a bad idea, since the idea is to have a new and different experience. On the other hand, there are things that are fun and perfectly appropriate to backpacking.

For example, a pair of binoculars can keep young ones entertained for long stretches. One pair is enough, so they can learn to share. If they are old enough, a pocket knife and a quick lesson on how to make a walking stick might be a good idea. For evenings in camp a deck of cards is small enough to bring, and you can teach them a new game each night.

Finally, make sure that when backpacking with children you teach them the rules of the woods. Show them where and how to go to the bathroom, what is allowed and what isn't. Teach them to respect the wilderness, and treat it right.

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