

Bedtime **in the** Backcountry

Tips on how to take your kids on overnight treks this summer. **BY JULIE LUE**

EASY DOES IT Before diving in to an overnight trip, start your kids off with day hikes of one to several hours, like this trek to Iceberg Lake in Glacier National Park. Photo by Dody Sheremeta.



children, I found that I just needed to take my own advice, with a few adjustments as my husband and I reconciled adult-sized ambitions with child-sized needs. Here's some of what I've learned:

Work up to it

The first step is to decide whether you and your kids are ready to begin actually backpacking or if you should start with shorter outings. It's far easier if you wait until your children can (and will) walk a few miles and carry some of their own things.

This is also a good time to start recruiting another adult to go with you, both to help carry the load and keep everyone safe. You can't count on cell service in the backcountry. If you're the only adult, who will go for help in an emergency?

Start with short hikes of an hour or two. Then expand your day trips until they involve everything but the overnight. Get children used to carrying daypacks that hold their rain jackets, fleece layers, water bottles, and snacks. Take a water filter or other purification system and teach kids how to collect more water along the way. When the weather is cool, bring a backpacking stove to make lunch along the trail (working the stove should be an adult's job). Throw in a plastic trowel in case someone needs to dig a cathole. "Using the bathroom" where there isn't one is an unglamorous but necessary backcountry skill.

On day hikes, teach your kids about trail etiquette, such as not shortcutting switchbacks, and show them what to do when horseback riders approach. You'll also want to talk about how to avoid getting struck by lightning, prevent hypothermia, negotiate any stream crossings, stay clear of steep drop-offs,



For your kids' first backcountry overnight, you may want to go somewhere familiar rather than strike out on a grand expedition.

When my husband first suggested that we take our kids backpacking, I balked. I hadn't carried serious weight since the boys' early years, when hauling 25 pounds of squirming, hat-flinging toddler left me exhausted before we lost sight of the trailhead.

And although our sons were now old enough—8 and 11—to enjoy our day hikes and fishing trips, I was afraid that giving them a heavier load would destroy their enthusiasm. Dragging a reluctant child up a trail feels as hopeless as trying to climb a talus slope in flip-flops.

Despite my strong reservations, the idea started to grow on me. I spent most of my twenties working in national parks, where backpacking was part of my life both on and off duty. Years later, I still remembered meeting a pine marten over a cup of camp cocoa, watching stars appear in a truly black subalpine sky, and following bear tracks along a flooded red-desert wash. I wanted to give my children a chance to experience remote places in the same way.

So with a couple of positive votes from the kids, I fell in with my husband's plans, and by summer's end we had taken our first three backpacking trips as a family. They weren't perfect. On the initial uphill stretch of our first overnighter, our youngest son curled up on a rock, pulled a bandanna over his face, and said, "I want to be teleported."

And we didn't always reach our goals. On one trip in July, plagued by heat and mosquitoes, we even hiked out early. Yet, despite these occasional setbacks, our family experienced some unforgettable days outdoors. We picked huckleberries near camp, studied tadpoles in an alpine lake, ran up a trail dodging an angry goshawk, and fell asleep to the calls of varied thrush. Then one day in August, when we were day hiking in the Beaverhead Mountains, the boy who had begged to be teleported looked around and asked, "Can we go backpacking up here next summer?"

In the parks, I had spent years helping people plan their backpacking trips. With my

and remain safe in bear and mountain lion country. Give each child a whistle to blow in case they get lost or into trouble, and teach them to read maps and signs carefully.

Even if you never progress beyond this stage, you'll still be giving your children a good foundation in outdoor skills. When they grow older, they can take the next step on their own.

Find your place

Once you're ready to take the plunge and try an overnight trip, you'll need to do a bit more planning. Fortunately, you don't have to figure everything out on your own. Talk to friends, search online, visit camping stores, and pick up a few books at the library or bookstore on backpacking with children.

For your kids' initial backcountry overnight, you may want to try somewhere familiar rather than strike out on a grand expedition. Use your day hikes to scout for existing campsites, and choose a destination that is no more than a few miles from the parking lot, doesn't require too many uphill and downhill, and has access to water. Avoid campsites near cliff edges or fast water, or areas known to be used by grizzlies (at least until your family becomes experienced at keeping a clean campsite). Plan to set up a base camp and stay for two nights. Day two is the best part, as you get a chance to hike and explore without a fully loaded pack.

Check with the agency in charge of the area you plan to visit to learn about any permit requirements or other regulations. For those first few overnight trips, avoid busy Glacier or Yellowstone National Parks, where backpackers must stick to an itinerary. Instead, head to a national forest, where you have more flexibility.

Because weather can make or break an overnight outing, be sure to monitor the forecast during the week before your scheduled hike. A chance of rain or even a skiff of snow doesn't mean you'll need to cancel the trip, but you'll want to bring appropriate clothing, sleepwear, and footwear so everyone is comfortable. If visiting the high country, call around beforehand to make sure winter snows have melted. When you're bringing children, you want conditions to be as favorable as possible.



BIGGER LOADS When kids are small, adults need to carry most of the weight for overnight trips. As children grow older, stronger, and more experienced, they can carry daypacks that hold water bottles, snacks, and rain jackets. From there, it's just a short step to full-scale backpacking.



Get your stuff together

Even if you have been car camping for years and have a closet full of backpacking relics, you'll probably need additional gear to outfit your family. Look at suggested packing lists online to determine what you need to buy, and, for expensive items, what you need to borrow or rent. My husband and I took advantage of fall clearance sales to buy warm mummy bags for the boys and a four-person backpacking tent (some families use two smaller tents).

It's hard to find kid-sized overnight packs to borrow or rent, so you'll probably have to buy new ones or have your children carry lightly loaded daypacks, preferably those with a decent hip belt. For a few years we used daypacks for our boys before buying real backpacks that let them carry weight more comfortably. Although the standard rule is to load overnight packs to a maximum of 25 percent of body weight, I think 10 or 15 percent is more reasonable for children.

As you buy clothing for your kids throughout the year, try to find quick-dry items that can be worn in layers during overnight trips. Pack extra clothes, as kids are likely to get their wet, muddy, or food-stained. They need to sleep in something that's dry and doesn't smell like dinner—you don't want to attract bears.

Don't forget to update your first-aid kit with children in mind. Add a few pediatric medications, some electrolyte-replacement packets, and a pack or two of adhesive gel blister bandages.

Plan your meals

Some people prepare gourmet meals in the backcountry, and more power to them. But when kids are part of the expedition, it's easier if you keep your culinary standards low. Fortunately, children seem to be open to eating almost anything if they're up a trail and out of options. When testing backpacking meals at home, my sons said the food tasted "artificially flavored" and "weird." Yet on that first night at camp, our pickiest eater attacked a pile of rehydrated freeze-dried spaghetti and said, "This is good. What I like is that it's really hot."

In addition to expensive freeze-dried meals, you can find lightweight, shelf-stable, quick-cooking foods in both the processed food and health food aisles of grocery stores. Many are tasty variations of pasta that are easily hydrated with boiling water. Before your trip, let your kids take part in meal preparation by helping you make homemade fruit leathers or granola, or by putting packaged foods in clear plastic storage bags to reduce the amount of cardboard trash you need to carry out.

For a short trip, perfect nutrition doesn't matter as much as total calories. Plan for meals and snacks and then pack a little



SELF SUSTAINED Most young teens do fine with fully loaded backpacks weighing up to 25 percent of their body weight. For younger kids, however, 10 to 15 percent of body weight should be the limit of pack weight to keep the outings fun and not too grueling.

extra, particularly foods that require no preparation. Don't forget a few special treats to help you cope with "attitude emergencies" (both your own and those of your kids). And remember: No food goes in the tent, ever (again, because of bears).

Up the trail

Carrying a pack is hard work for kids, and you may exhaust your entire repertoire of

distractions as you try to entertain them on the way to the campsite. But even more important than keeping kids happy is keeping them safe. Make sure you know which adult is responsible for each child, and never let children run unattended between two groups on the trail—a mountain lion may be watching. You need to stay close enough not just to see them, but to intervene if they're in trouble. Sometimes, like when you're hiking a trail with a dangerous drop-off, that means keeping them no more than an arm's length away. Make sure that everyone drinks plenty of water and stays cool on hot days, and warm and dry on cool days. Don't let kids get their only pair of shoes soaking wet or they will suffer the entire trip.

Never bored

For kids, being at camp is the payoff for hauling all that gear from the trailhead. Even

chore-shirkers enjoy helping set up tents, arrange bedding, and hang the food bag. They can learn how to keep a clean, responsible camp by following your example (see Leave No Trace guidelines at www.lnt.org). But the best thing about camp is not what children learn from you; it's what they teach themselves.

Under your watchful eye, they can explore and observe all the small things that would go unnoticed if you were day hiking and had to rush back to the trailhead—like a sculpin flattened against the lake bed, a bat snatching bugs above the stream, or the claw marks a black bear scratched into an aspen trunk. When deprived of their traditional sources of entertainment, kids will make their own. On our trips, no one ever said, "I'm bored." The boys went fly-fishing, played "mummy attack" in the tent, raced stick boats in the creek, and awarded

"sneaky-route" points to the dog as she helped us navigate an unimproved trail.

At night, your kids probably will sleep better than you do, even if you have brought along a deluxe sleeping pad and backpacking pillow for yourself. But as you lie awake waiting for sleep to come, you can feel good about giving them a sense of comfort in the outdoors and the skills they need to explore it long after you're able to take them.

So far, my husband and I have not reached those distant lakes that first inspired us to try backcountry overnights with our boys. We hope to get there someday. But it won't matter if we don't. We learned that backpacking with kids is not about distance; it's about time—time spent together as a family, free of distractions, and time spent immersed in wild places. It isn't easy, but like so many other types of outdoor recreation, it's worth the effort. 🐾



Update your first-aid kit with children in mind. Add a few pediatric medications, electrolyte-replacement packets, and a pack of adhesive gel blister bandages.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHUTTERSTOCK; CHRIS MCCOWAN; PAT MUNDAY



"I DID IT!" Kids gain a great sense of accomplishment and confidence by backpacking to remote areas. The hiking can be tough, but the payoff is spending time at camp, where they can play, explore, and take part in creating the family's new outdoor "home."