

A Camping

WE WILL GO!



One Father's Take on How to
Successfully Go Camping with Kids

[Written by Steve Trenta]

Okay, SO, CAMPING WITH THE KIDS.

The scenes flash through a parent's mind, at one time or another, as if from some universal scrapbook: wholesome family moments out in the wild away from routines and everyday life, special timeless moments of bonding and conquering adversity together as a family. Really, would any childhood be complete without some authentic outdoor adventures? Don't we all want our kids to have memories of pitching a tent somewhere in the woods, sitting around a campfire telling scary stories and making s'mores? Well, assuming you can get past any phobias about bugs or germs, not to mention spending a night out where the wild things are, I have some tips that will help you pull off a memorable family camping trip.

When accomplished — even in a barely passable manner — camping can make the parents look like masters of fire, of the campground and even of nature itself. Remember, your kids will think camping has always been done the way you carry it off. Here is an instance where a little chutzpa can go a long way. Equipped with fire starter sticks, plenty of bug spray, a flashlight or two, and enough humility to let the kids witness your camping skills (for better or for worse), anything becomes possible. Sure, it requires an ounce of adventuresome spirit and an acceptance that things won't always go according to plan, but along with the satisfaction

of surviving a few nights in the woods comes a well-earned confidence and the realization that camping is all about the journey, not the destination.

To Camp or Not To Camp, That is the Question

For those brave enough to accept this challenge, the first key to camping with kids, and camping in general, is to recognize what you are getting yourself into. For the first few camping trips, you should forget any glamorized images of gourmet meals served at a neatly appointed table along with any chance of developing some deeper attachment with nature as your children discover their inner Henry David Thoreau. Instead, concentrate on head counts, sunscreen, hand sanitizer and copying what has worked well for others. As you prepare for an upcoming trip, ask other campers for advice. Most are more than eager to share great tips about what works, and many are humble enough to admit failures and things to avoid.

Getting adept at camping is not much more than learning from experience (often your own, and as much as possible, from others) and then applying that know-how at the right time. Maybe start by borrowing or buying a tent and pitching it in the back yard overnight. If that goes well, ramp up the camp experience by moving toward more challenging scenarios like spending the night in a state park, most of which have camper cabins or cozy cabins with beds, refrigerators and electricity. Perhaps the best rule of thumb for this first foray into



camping is to gather tips for future outings by walking around the campground and observing what seems to be working for others. Most campgrounds have electricity available and that is essential for the coffee maker, if nothing else. Proximity to bathrooms is another item of importance, especially for families new to the great outdoors.

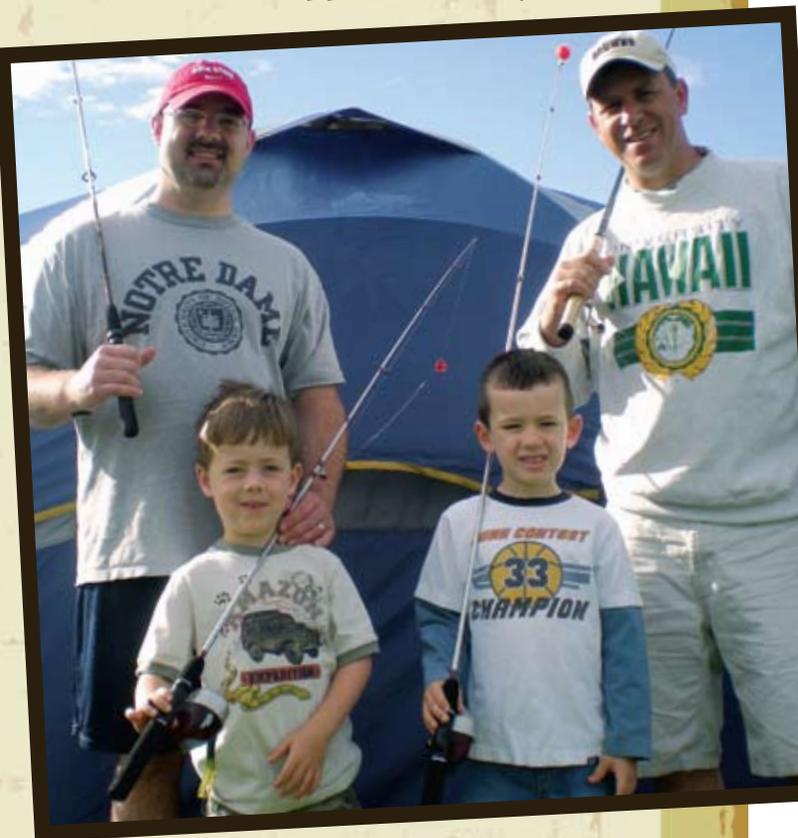
When it comes to camping, oftentimes the difference between a memorable trip and a miserable trip is a matter of inches, or a slight difference in perception or attitude. Be ready to adjust accordingly.

The Evolution of the Camping Checklist

As any Boy Scout can tell you, preparation is key to a successful camping trip. While the premise is definitely to relax in Mother Nature's playground, there's a fair amount of hustle and bustle involved just to leave the house. This means, of course, that the camping world is dominated by list makers. A quick Internet search for "camping checklists" shows how obsessive some folks can get. Packing and making everything fit in the car can often be more harrowing than the trip itself. One useful tip here: Put the tent and things you'll need first in the car last. Back in more primitive times, lists were probably required because out in the wilderness, the things you needed wouldn't be available. With the advent of the ubiquitous camp store, much of that pressure has been lifted, and lists are simply a way to avoid paying the inflated prices at the camp store. Most campsite necessities are available nearby, but even for a price, there are some things that might not be obtainable. Jumbo packages of baby wipes and enough boxed wine to make sleeping on the air mattress bearable are two that quickly come to mind. A personal packing list is invaluable, but can only be acquired through time.

As you get more experience camping, your list will evolve. It is useful to note which items would make the trip better, or camping chores easier. For us, duct tape, extra batteries, aluminum foil and diaper rash cream all made the list, and the experiences behind each of those items are part of our family lore. Almost certainly, every time you leave for a camping trip, you'll feel like you've "over packed," and yet, there will inevitably be

Almost certainly, every time you leave for a camping trip, you'll feel like you've "over packed," and yet, there will inevitably be the one thing you forgot that would make the trip so much better. It happens to everyone.



Steve Trenta and his son Will (on right) head out for a father/son fishing adventure with good friends and fellow campers Matt Hallett and his son Max.

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Most campgrounds are like little neighborhoods, and it is good to bring bikes, or a wagon or stroller for the kids, as well as some outdoor or beach toys to let them play with. It is amazing how our children's powers of imagination come alive when we are camping. On good days, sticks become rifles, trees become space ships, and the woods around us serve as a backdrop for every creative impulse. Of course, on bad days, the chorus of "there's nothing to do" has led, at times, to them sitting in the back of the minivan watching DVDs.

It is important to know that all campers are at various points on the continuum from sleeping passed out under the stars to “camping” in a tour bus lavish enough for the Dave Matthews Band. Our portable home-away-from-home, going on four years now, has been a tent purchased at Costco for \$129, and believe it or not, our whole family of four sleeps in that one tent. Until this year when my daughter graduates to her own air mattress and sleeping bag, our sleeping arrangements included a queen-size air mattress, a twin air mattress and, yes, a Pack ‘N Play. Improving the camping experience for you and your family year after year comes down to identifying items designed to do just that; the result is a gradual accumulation of camping gear.

Survive and Have Fun

When Ralph Waldo Emerson said it “educates the senses, calls into action the will, perfects the physical constitution, and brings men into such swift and close collision in critical moments that man measures man,” he was talking about war, but what he said could apply to camping as well. The purpose of camping, once you are committed to it, is to survive and have fun — pretty much in that order. Think gobs of hand sanitizer and liberal application of the “three seconds rule” when anything touches anything not sterilized. It is a game of survival of the most prepared, and this extends to the schedule as well.

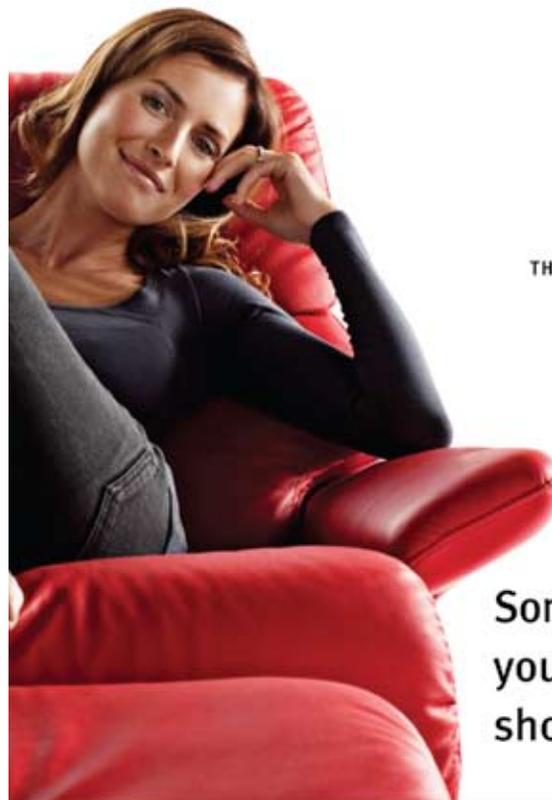
When planning camping trips, we make a point to identify local attractions or activities that will get us away from the campsite. These have included canoe trips, swimming, horseback riding or hiking excursions. And we’re not above taking comfort in more civilized settings, if necessary. Once, when camping in unbearable mid-July heat, we snuck into the swimming pool at the state park’s lodge. Another time, we waited out a thunderstorm in a

restaurant and video arcade. While being open-minded about activities allows for an expanded menu of options and a more enjoyable outing for the kids, we also try to recreate some classic experiences such as fishing and spending time with friends, either those that have joined us on the trip or new “neighbors” camping nearby. There

is just something indescribable about a good conversation around a campfire as the evening dew settles. It is also amusing how often those conversations quickly turn to camping, and the travails you endured the year before are now grist for a humorous retelling.

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Got it. Activities to keep the kids busy? Check. Food to keep everyone happy? Oh yeah. During the day, meals and snacks seem to take on a heightened role. A good breakfast, with eggs, bacon, pancakes and plenty of strong coffee takes a lot of work, but helps set the tone of the day. Lunch and dinner are devoured with a

fierceness that makes one believe there really is something to this "getting fresh air" thing. Dinner, though, is our favorite meal, and every effort is made to do it right. Burgers, ribs or steaks on the grill are favorites, along with corn on the cob. Of course, no camping trip is complete without everyone's campground staple: s'mores with melted marshmallows, compliments of a crackling fire.

Even when done right, camping with kids is hard work for everyone. The intensity of the experience leaves them wiped out by bedtime, and after an action-packed day with the kids, evenings typically afford us time to sit by the fire, mesmerized by the dancing flames, and drink an adult beverage or two before sleep beckons.

A camping trip is considered successful if by the end of the weekend, you are absolutely exhausted, your kids fall asleep in the car on the way back and you walk into your home with a restored appreciation for its comforts. In a sense, camping with kids is a microcosm of parenting itself. It is an exhausting, grueling experience that challenges your limits of endurance, yet is made worthwhile by a sense of incredible satisfaction. There is no better feeling than getting home, unloading the camping gear and knowing that in your own little way, you conquered nature. The bone deep fatigue that is justly earned gives way to a certain contentment that somehow, memories were made and experiences and timeless lessons, once universally known, have been imparted to your children through your hard work. **PN**

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