



# CAMPING ACTIVITY BOOK FOR FAMILIES



THE KID-TESTED GUIDE TO FUN IN THE OUTDOORS

SECOND EDITION

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## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

**T**his book is designed to be a handy guide to making your family camping experience extra fun. Read this at home before you leave, and bring it with you to use during your trip. Choose activities that appeal to you. Have family members choose something that appeals to them. You might ask older kids to take charge of certain activities (for example, leading a game to keep everyone occupied while you're making lunch, or even helping to make lunch for everyone). Put younger children in charge of picking one family activity for each day or collecting the rocks and sticks needed for an activity. Follow the easy-to-read instructions, or let the games and crafts spark your own creativity.

The first couple of chapters provide advice on planning your trip—preparing, packing, getting the kids excited, and setting everything up for a successful outing with the family. Chapter three focuses on the most popular family outdoor pastimes that will likely be your main activity each day, from hiking to birding to fishing. This isn't a how-to guide for each activity, but you'll find ideas for making sure each planned activity is as successful and family friendly as it can be. After that you'll find tons of ideas on how to keep everyone engaged



*There is something  
of the marvelous in  
all things of nature.*

—Aristotle,  
ancient Greek  
philosopher



during the natural ups and downs of the day, with chapters on ways to explore and be active in nature, games you can play outdoors, nature arts and crafts projects, and favorite camp songs to sing. You can find quiet activities, energy busters, solo activities, and recommended ages for fun and games of all kinds in the Activity Finder at the end of the book. Of course, each child and family is unique, so use this as a general guide. Listen to your children and to yourself.

Enhancing each chapter are sidebars with fascinating facts that will bring you even closer to nature ("Did You Know?"), special tips for kids ("Psst . . . Kids!"), topics for conversation ("Family Conversation Starters"), and jokes to share ("Laugh Time!").

Many activities include suggestions for recording the experience in a **NATURE JOURNAL**.

This is highly recommended but really depends on whether individual campers are into it or not. There are also options for being a **PHOTOJOURNALIST**. A camera is one of the few pieces of technology we recommend you bring along. (See chapter 1 for more information on Nature Journals and being a Photojournalist.)



# AT HOME BEFORE YOU GO

**E**veryone in the family can help in the research and preparation of your camping trip, and it gives them more ownership of the experience. Even the anticipation can be fun! If you have new or very young campers, introducing them to some of the equipment and aspects of the camping experience can inspire comfort and confidence. A little familiarity can go a long way.

## Picking a Campground

As long as you are well prepared and supplied, you can stay anywhere. However, for younger or inexperienced campers, it's a good idea to stay at a **developed campground**, one with flush toilets and hot showers and fully equipped sites with a picnic table, firepit, and bear box. If some family members just won't camp in a tent, look into renting a rustic or developed cabin or tent cabin. Many state and national parks and private campgrounds have limited numbers of these. If you've gone camping before and are interested in roughing it a little more, consider walk-in campsites, rustic camping such as that found on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land or national forest land, where you have to bring everything in.



Or consider backpacking. Occasionally you can find backpack destinations with pack animals, llamas, or donkeys, available for hire to carry your gear. This can be a worthwhile expense when camping with very small children, who often require additional gear.

**Think about the distance from home and how many days you have to camp.** Want to start simple and just do one overnight? You might be able to find someplace close to home that still feels like a world away. Less driving, more camping!

**Think about what amenities/camping activities are most important to the family, and narrow down your choices accordingly.** What do you want to do on your camping trip? Hike? Swim? Ride

bikes? Take in nature programs and community campfires with a ranger? Climb rocks? Have privacy? Also consider what activities might be available nearby. There's so much fun to be had in nature, but if the kids are less than enthusiastic about getting away from it all, consider an area where you can take a trip to an off-site attraction that will entertain them.

**Research the campground conditions and environment.** Is there poison oak? Is there a lake or river nearby? Have there been any bear sightings recently? Be prepared and go with your comfort level. If you're planning way ahead, don't forget to check weather conditions for the time you'll be there. Check out online reviews to understand the kind of crowd to expect, seasonal differences, and input on the best campsites.

**Know the amenities, and pack accordingly.** Does the camp host sell firewood? Are there flush or pit toilets? If pit,



*Photo by Kevin Meynell*

bring more toilet paper! Do you need to bring your own grill? Are the sites shaded, or should you bring a tarp or canopy?

**Plan to arrive during daylight hours.** It's much easier to set up. You can see what you're doing. It's especially important for inexperienced campers or for anyone a little nervous about nature. The best part is being able to look around, get your bearings, and start exploring and playing in nature right away, as well as have your first meal in the campground.



### **Did You Know?**

#### **Oaks and Ives**

Poison oak does not grow above 5,000 feet elevation. Western poison ivy, however, grows at 8,500 feet in New Mexico and Colorado.

### **Technology in Nature**

**Decide on technology usage rules before you leave home.** If you do not want phones or other devices brought along, be clear about why. Make your reasons positive: "We're going to experience new things and places, the things you sometimes see on your iPad. This is

## WHY ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO BE THE FAMILY PHOTOJOURNALIST?

Photojournalism builds many skills. Along with keen observation, kids learn how to approach a live subject quietly to catch it in action. This builds patience and alertness. Kids become more aware of their surroundings, and this generally leads to increased curiosity and motivation to learn about what they see and experience. Photojournalists try to capture moments of truth, have compassion for their subjects, and take pictures that tell stories. Kids learn the basics of photography too: different types of shots, angles, and lighting.

From age two or three all through adolescence, children are developing their memory. The human mind tends to be very visual and remembers things that stand out. Competing with the colorful palette or photorealism of video games, it helps to make a record of your adventure in nature—whether a slideshow, book, or album—so it can be remembered with affection. Your children will be more likely to want to repeat such experiences.

going to be an adventure and focusing on it makes it all the better."

If you decide to allow devices but only for limited usage, explain the rules clearly.

Give everyone a couple days to transition to no (or less) screens. They may complain at first, but then kids (and adults) tend to adapt to the slower pace and focus on outdoor activities and experiences.

Though a hiatus from video games and habitual texting—for both kids and adults—while camping and limited use

of technology in general is best, some technology can be put to great use in the outdoors.



*Photo by Kevin Meynell*

It is empowering for kids (and shutter-bug parents) to take pictures to memorialize their camping trip and to fine-tune powers of observation. There are suggestions throughout this book for your young **PHOTOJOURNALIST**. After the trip, your kids and you can turn the pictures into a slideshow or photo book, which continues the fun and benefits the entire family, solidifying memories and encouraging campers to reflect on their experiences.

Kids love to share things they see and to connect with their friends, so you could have one time a day when they send pictures via social media or text message to relatives and friends. Or wait until you're in the car heading home for outside communication.

A great use of your smartphone while camping is for apps that help with geocaching, star and planet finders, and those that identify flora and fauna if you don't have field guides. Smartphones can be useful as walking encyclopedias. You can also listen to a camp song on YouTube to teach the family or play music for a spontaneous dance party or to make chores in camp more fun.

The rules of technology use are up to you, but you have to follow them too. You can adjust them if what you initially decided doesn't work, but once you set them, don't break them!

### **Think Like a Child**

**Once the adventure begins, don't push the pace. Be aware of your own agenda.**

If you camped PK (pre-kid), plan on doing different stuff, doing less, going slower, and covering less distance now. Bring patience to camp and pay attention to how children and any new campers respond to activities, suggestions, and the new environment. Listen. Let kids find their own pace and choose some of the activities. Give them choices and ask what they want to do. They might need encouragement to try new things; but to make camping a positive experience, it's important not to push kids into situations they find scary, especially without guidance. And it might surprise you what they find scary.

**Provide chill time.** Longer vacations have waves of emotions. After the first exciting day or two, there is almost always a day or a few hours when energy dips and moods swing. Young children can suddenly get very upset by little things. Older kids can get sullen or homesick. Adults can get cranky and short-tempered. Make

*Psst . . . Kids! Everyone needs to **RECHARGE** at times. If you are feeling annoyed by a family member, tired of the sun, and ready to go home, take some time and be nice to yourself. Rest, nap, relax, read, doodle, or just get out of the sun or wind. Ask yourself what would recharge you? Play a game of cards, lie on your sleeping bag and breathe for a while, or sit and watch the trees blowing in the breeze. Daydream and let your mind wander. Some people even like to have a good cry. After a recharge, you can usually once again enjoy your family and the great outdoors.*



sure your children know that if they feel this way, they should tell you. Validate their feelings. Make sure they know it's totally normal. Give them (and yourself) a chance to RECHARGE. You don't have to do or see everything on the agenda.

Read aloud to your children or do a quiet one-on-one activity or play a paper-and-pencil game (see page 160). If the family is in the middle of an excursion and can't be back in camp when a down period is needed, find other ways to take a break.

It could be something simple, like having a cool sip of water or splashing water on their faces. Have them throw a towel over their heads or put on sunglasses to block out some of the stimuli.

**Don't overschedule.** Not every activity needs to be carefully planned. If kids get into imaginary play, for example, maybe the swim or hike you had in mind can wait ten minutes. The kids might find a decomposing stump to take apart, or they might take more time with an activity than you expected. Give them time and space to play and explore, supervising as appropriate for their ages.



*Photo by Kevin Meynell*

## **Outdoor & Camping Ethics**

**Model the behavior you expect of your children, and be clear about your expectations.**

Bring extra trash bags and keep a clean camp, be considerate of other campers, stay on trails, tread lightly around wildlife. Give your children opportunities to be responsible too. It will build their confidence and give you all a unified purpose. Your children are the next stewards of our Earth.

**Decide on your family's ethics concerning the natural environment.** The general rule of camping is to "Leave No Trace." None of the games in this book leave trash in the wild. In fact, you will find ways to make games out of cleaning up the forest! None of the games disturb living things (with the exception of bug, lizard, and crawdad hunting, which involves the temporary displacement of these animals).

A number of the games use rocks, sticks and other natural debris. Practice the principles of Leave No Trace by replacing them as you found them when the games are done. Leave No Trace is all about showing respect for the natural world and our fellow wildland visitors.

**Always practice safety first.** When doing activities involving being on the ground or picking up leaves and sticks, for example, know how to identify poison oak and poison ivy. When picking up bugs and critters, don't pick up anything with your bare hands that you don't know to be safe. Supervise your children in the camping kitchen, around the fire, and when using tools, especially if they are inexperienced. Decide how far away and where kids can go on their own based on their age and your own comfort level. Boundaries make kids feel safe (parents too) and are even more important in new surroundings. In any activity, make sure you have the right, age-appropriate safety equipment for everyone.

### Family Camping Checklist

Here's a basic checklist to help make packing easier and to get everyone accustomed to camping supplies. Personalize this for your family, adding your own essentials. What may be an "extra item" for one family might be a necessity for another. The items on this list are for car or walk-in camping. Backpackers would probably want to trim this list down even more. Make sure your car is in good working order before departing.



#### Information/Personal Stuff

- ID, reservation info, address and directions, money (wallet)
- Cell phone and charger
- Camera and batteries

#### Sleeping/Bedtime

- Tent and tent footprint or tarp
- Sleeping pads
- Sleeping bags and/or sheets and blankets
- Pillows
- Books
- Comfort items like stuffed animals or blankets (optional)
- Extra blanket(s) (optional)

#### Light & Fire

- Lantern
- Headlamps and flashlights with extra batteries (1 light per person and at least a couple extra)

- Matches, a disposable lighter, or a butane stove lighter
- Fire starters or newspaper

### First-Aid Supplies

- Bug repellent
- Sunscreen
- Acetaminophen or ibuprofen (or aspirin) for kids and adults
- Calamine lotion
- Tecnu or bentonite clay or other poison oak and ivy rash preventer
- First-aid kit with adhesive bandages of different sizes, tweezers, antibiotic cream
- Any prescription meds

### Toiletries

- Toothbrushes, toothpaste, floss
- Soap
- Deodorant
- Hairbrush and hair bands
- Lip balm
- Feminine hygiene products—tampons and pads
- Toilet paper
- Towels (one large and one hand towel for each camper)
- Moisturizing lotion or aloe vera

### Clothing

- An outfit to play in for each day plus one or even two extra (think rain and mud.)

- Long pants or tights and long-sleeve shirts, sweaters, or sweatshirts for morning and evening (possibly long johns)
- Jackets (consider bringing one light and one winter/year-round jacket)
- Warm hat
- Hat with sun visor, such as a baseball cap
- Extra socks (long socks protect against ticks and poison oak/ivy)
- Sunglasses
- Bathing suits (and goggles)
- Rain jackets, ponchos, or garbage bags
- Pajamas
- Flip-flops, sandals, or water shoes (for water play, showers, and middle-of-the-night bathroom runs)

### Kitchen/Campsite

- An extra tarp (to hang for rain cover or general use)
- Two or more ropes (for hanging tarp, for hanging clothes to dry, and more)
- Camp chairs
- Medium pot with lid, skillet, and mixing/salad bowl
- Knife & cutting board
- Cooking utensils (spatula, wooden spoon, tongs)
- Kitchen tools (pocketknife, extra knife, can opener, bottle opener, corkscrew)
- Plates, bowls, silverware, mugs, cups



- Plastic tub for washing dishes, sponge, dish soap
- Paper towels and wet wipes
- Garbage bags
- Zipper-lock plastic bags (large and sandwich size) for leftovers and easy away-from-camp lunch and snack packing
- Water—water bottles for each camper/hiker and two jugs or one five-gallon and one smaller to refill at campground (most have potable water; do your research and bring more than you think you'll need for rustic camping)
- Duct tape (for activities and crafts as well as repairs)
- String or twine (also used for crafts and activities as well as necessities)



- A folding backpacking shovel (for when nature calls away from camp and for activities)
- For walk-in camping, a kids' wagon to tote supplies to the campsite (you won't regret it!)

### Entertainment Necessities

- Deck(s) of cards
- Five or six dice (six for Farkle; five for Yahtzee, Skunk, and other games)
- Board game(s) (optional)
- A couple permanent markers
- Paper, pen, and pencils (with sharpener)
- Nature journal (See page 14 for preparing a **NATURE JOURNAL**)
- Camera (See page 3 about being a Family **PHOTOJOURNALIST**.)
- Additional items as required (as may be required for specific games and activities listed in this book, though most make use of found objects or camp supplies you'd readily have at hand)



Photo by Kevin Meynell