



By Karen Stephens

# Camping Brings Children Closer to Nature and Family

I have my mother to thank for opening my eyes to the beauty, miracles, and wisdom of nature. I'll be forever grateful. Even if all else is going lousy, the rhythm of the seasons reassures me that life goes on, and in fact, usually gets better. Nature has also provided me with tons of fun and knowledge worth learning. It can do the same for your child.

Camping with children is one way to acquaint children with nature. If you make the experience positive, they too can reap the rewards of a close relationship with Mother Earth. Even more important, camping will provide your family with time away from the distractions of modern noise and technology. It will give you a setting to reaffirm emotional bonds and create family memories that sustain young and old alike.

Here are some activities to make the most of camping out with the kids:

## Camping Pastimes

TOGETHER, set up camp, from tent to collection of firewood. Cook meals and delegate clean-up chores. Hike paths. Spy patterns in nature, such as rings in logs, spots on ladybug wings, spirals in unfolding ferns. Walk across a log that bridges a shallow creek. Seek out abandoned clam shells. Wade and mess in the slick algae. Pick up logs and rocks to investigate bugs that live under them. Climb a tree. Count how many different creatures live in it.

Collect grasses, leaves, and flowers to make head wreaths or sashes. Walk along a stream and follow animal tracks. Find animal homes in a tree, in the water, or in the ground. Skip rocks. Investigate the habitat — where could animals find water, food, or shelter from a storm? Make a list of all the wildlife you can identify, from butterflies to fish to mammals. Sit down and close your eyes, identify all the sounds you hear — from airplanes to birds to frogs croaking in a pond. What smells can you name?

Sing songs or tell folklore stories around the campfire. Make handmade instruments from natural items (such as sticks, shells, or hollow logs) for sing alongs. Use a flashlight inside a tent to make shadow figures on the tent wall; make up plays. Play flashlight tag. Collect nature finds — such as a lucky buck-eye seed — to begin a nature collection. Tape record nighttime songs of crickets and tree frogs to listen to at home. Walk along fallen logs.

Star and planet gaze. Teach kids to use a disposable camera or a camcorder to record nature scenes and family fun. Lie down and watch — really watch — ants busy at their hill or a spider spinning a web. Play *I spy*. Sit under a tree and teach your school-ager how to whittle wood or soft soap or learn together. Watch clouds and name shapes. Go swimming, canoeing or row boating (wearing life jackets!). Learn rope knots or rope tricks. Dig and poke around in the mud — what turns up?

Find a fallen log; what is using the log as it decomposes? Search for insect shells (such as cicada) or empty bird nests. Teach the kids to fish. Use paper and the side of a crayon to make bark rubbings of various trees. Catch fireflies and put them in a jar (with air holes in the lid) to create a nighttime walking lantern.

Read books, make up poems, and tell jokes. Find a tree that's been damaged in some way and make up a story of how it might have happened. Find fallen branches to make a fort.

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Have kids collect grass and stick items for fashioning a bird's nest. Weave grasses into placemats. Collect fallen tree leaves or flower petals for pressing. Roast marshmallows!

### Camping and Nature Activity Books

*Sleeping in a Sack: Camping Activities for Kids* by Linda White. Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1998.

*Cooking on a Stick: Campfire Recipes for Kids* by Linda White. Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1996.

*Kid's Camp!: Activities for the Backyard or Wilderness* by Laurie Carlson. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 1995.

*Toasting Marshmallows: Camping Poems* by Kristine O'Connell George. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

### Packing List for a Camp Out

Planning for everyone's basic needs will help ensure that you and the kids have a rewarding outdoor adventure. Overlooking basics like food, sanitation, sunscreen, or insect protection can end your camping trip with a trip to the hospital.

Each family's camping list will be vary, depending on age ranges, weather, camp site terrain, and how long you plan to camp. Some campgrounds have convenient *home away from home* facilities like electrical hook-ups and showers. Other camp sites are far more rustic, but you'll have peace and quiet without other campers' televisions competing with the hoot owls' conversations. You decide which experience your family wants.

Whichever experience you choose, prepare for possible hazards. If you live in bear country, learn to pack food so it doesn't invite them into camp. Wear clothing to protect you from woodland insects that could carry disease, like ticks or mosquitoes.

With all that in mind, here is a basic packing list to get you off to a good start:

- **Shelter:** Bring an adequate sized tent with screens to keep bugs out, ground cloth for dryness, rain fly, and sleeping bag (a sleeping pad or cot is optional, but nice).
- **Basic Tools:** Have a map, water bottle for each person, watch, matches in a waterproof container, pocket knife (one with multiple attachments is handy), adequate nylon rope, hatchet for cutting firewood, flashlight with extra batteries, candles if batteries are lost, compass, binoculars, camera for photography, field guide for identifying nature finds, sewing supplies (needle, thread, and safety pins for material repairs).
- **Emergency Supplies:** First aid kit, emergency whistle for each person in case one becomes lost hiking, cell phone for calling emergency assistance.
- **Food/Cooking:** Containers of fresh water, long-handled cooking tools, cooking pans and/or pots, aluminum foil, plastic bags or containers, can opener, cooler filled with ice and food that keeps well, plates and utensils, plastic garbage bags, dishpans and dish soap, wash cloth/towel, paper towels.
- **Clothing:** Hats; short and long-sleeved t-shirts, sweatshirts for layering to accommodate cool mornings and evenings, but hot afternoons; long pants, shorts; sturdy hiking shoes and plenty of socks; water shoes; swimsuit; rain coat/poncho; gloves. Light clothing will help avoid attracting mosquitoes.
- **Health and Hygiene:** Sunscreen, insect repellent, toilet paper, soap, shampoo, comb, medications, towel and wash cloth for each person, toothbrush and paste.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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