



Hiking with children

By Agnes Vojta

My husband and I are rounding the last switchback; a few more steps, and we are down at the creek. A glance at the watch: we have walked for fifteen minutes. We think of the many hikes with our young children. The trail to the creek that took us a quarter of an hour and is just a small portion of today's hike used to be a day trip, the creek the destination: a place to play by the water, build a dam, picnic, and then hike back up the hill to the car. We find ourselves reminiscing as we walk through a landscape dotted with memories. Later, we pass the shallow creek where, on Easter Sunday fourteen years ago, our three year old managed to get completely wet falling in (the picture at the right was taken just moments before). We remember countless stops for playing and snacking, climbing boulders, collecting sticks, throwing stones, balancing on fallen trees.



Hiking with our children was always our favorite family time. We had started taking our kids into the mountains when they were babies; first in a sling, later in a backpack carrier. As soon as they were able to walk, they got to hike on their own feet as long as they wanted. At three months old, they spent the first night in a tent; at three years, they had rock climbed with harness and rope. We loved that we got to do something together, share an experience, be outside in nature, and have uninterrupted time to listen and talk. Often, the kids would split us up, each walking next to one parent, talking incessantly about the things most important to them, for hours, savoring the undivided attention: no interruption by chores, work, or pressing adult business – just the forest around us, the trail under our feet.

The weekend hikes and longer summer trips were a vital parts of our homeschool. We explored the natural beauty of our state and the states we traveled to, visited nature centers and National Parks, learned together about geology, history, plants and wildlife. We observed, marveled, discussed, and learned more about nature than we could have from any curriculum.

As the years went on, our family hikes got longer and the summits higher.



The patience from the early years was richly rewarded as our kids became strong, sure footed hikers, able to backpack and navigate difficult terrain. Instead of a one mile hike to an Ozark creek, we now backpacked in Utah's desert canyons and climbed fourteeners in Colorado. These days, we mostly hike on our own, but it is always a wonderful treat to have our college student along with us on a hike when she is home on break.



As I think fondly back on the years hiking with my children, I have a few tips for families who are just starting out on that journey:

Keep it interesting. The mountain top or gorgeous viewpoint may draw an adult, but we found that kids are more interested in a cave, natural bridge, waterfall or spring as destinations - or a boulder field where they can scramble to their heart's content.

Take your time. Our main goal was always to make the hike fun and enjoyable, not to cover a certain number of miles. We stopped frequently so the kids could balance on logs, throw rocks into a river, or play fairies. Stop if they find something interesting and want to explore or collect. That is how a deep familiarity with the woods develops.



Be prepared. Always carry food, snacks, extra clothes. Many a meltdown could be averted by a timely administration of a small treat. When I asked my 16 y/o what advice he would like me to include, treats made the top of his list. And we could let our two year old rock hop on the shore of a Welsh mountain lake, because we had clothes to change him into after he had fallen in. (If you sense a theme here: yes, each of our kids had unplanned encounters with water.) Know where you are going and what to expect on the trail. “In ten minutes we will be at the big cave and take a break” is more motivating than “I have no idea how much further it is.”

Have the right gear. Make sure your kids have good hiking shoes, but there is no need for expensive brands, since they will outgrow the shoes before they show signs of wear.

Some kids love carrying their own little backpack with a snack, bottle, and stuffed animal—but be prepared that you may end up carrying it yourself. Rain gear is vital. With the right clothes, you can hike in almost any weather. If you plan to carry your toddler or preschooler, invest in a good backpack carrier; we found it the most important piece of equipment.

Be flexible and patient. You may not reach the planned destination – and that's OK. Being out on the trail and having fun is what counts. The goal is to make hiking enjoyable for kids, so they look forward to the next time. Do whatever it takes.



Know your kids. What distance can you realistically expect them to walk? What is a slight, but attainable, challenge, and what would be a ridiculous demand? How well can you trust them in difficult terrain? We were able to take our kids on mountain hikes and scrambles in steep terrain (like Angels Landing in Zion NP, picture at left) because we knew their abilities and could rely on them.



And the biggest lesson we learned: don't try to go on a hike the day after Christmas. We made this mistake once, and it was the only time in all the years we faced open mutiny – because the Playmobil pirate ship that had been a Christmas gift could not come along. We had to admit defeat and return back home.

Happy hiking!