

Hiking with Kids

By Tom Rankin

You've probably noticed ads in the media aimed at getting kids to exercise. This is a great idea, and what could be better than taking your kids for a hike? They get to explore, play, enjoy fresh air and can start a love affair with nature that can last their whole lives.

I have friends who take their children hiking even as newborns. Some carry their babies in a sling, while others place them in a specially designed baby carrier, which can double as a backpack.

One important thing to keep in mind is that kids are much more about the journey than the goal. When climbing a mountain be prepared to not make it all the way to the top. Parents can usually tell when their children are tired, vs. just grumbling about moving along the trail, and you should never push a child beyond his/her limit. Frequent breaks and time to explore the sides of the trail will help keep children interested. Small rewards along the way e.g., "there is a treat waiting at the summit", might work with some kids, but let them dictate the pace. The last thing you want is for the hike to turn into a death march.

You can help avoid some problems by making sure children are adequately clothed in layers appropriate to the conditions in addition to having well-fitting boots. You can buy them daypacks, (or they could probably use their school packs), but don't expect them to carry all their gear, food and water at first. Explain to them that as they grow older and stronger, they can carry more of their own gear. A small, lightweight toy could be brought along in the pack.

My wife's grandson, age 6, is a typical, energetic boy who hikes with us a lot. He sometimes, however takes risks on the trail that we would rather not see. Let them have fun, and even take a few small risks, but make sure you keep an eye on them and do not let them to get into dangerous situations. Explain that the outdoors can be fun, but they could get hurt, or lost. Teach your children to understand trail markers and signs, and stay on the trail. Carrying a first aid kit is a must.

Children are welcome on our hikes, but please discuss your child's age and ability with the leader when you sign up. A parent/guardian must accompany all minors on club hikes.