

Babes in the Woods



We went camping with Mum and Dad. We went to Arapiles. We put up our tents. One was for Mummy and Daddy and one was for me and Ali. We slept in some sleeping bags and read some stories. It was so dark in the tent. Dad tied up a light from his head but it was still dark down at the end. In the morning we had breakfast with our friends. Mummy and Daddy made us collect firewood. They said we had to stay away from the fire so we didn't burn ourselves. Daddy shouted at us.

We went to see the big mountains and Daddy came too because he's never seen the mountains before. It was a very big mountain cos it goes to the top of the sky. Because there's a mountain you can climb up. Kids climb on the small rocks. We had ropes and harnesses. At the top there were some rock pools and we played with the water sometimes.

Back at the camp they had a little forest and it was nice and dark. We played with our friends. We played jumping rock to rock, hide and seek and on pretend horsies. Actually it was only a tree branch. The clouds were nice. We got to play in the rain. I might go climbing again.

Melanie Chester (Age four and three quarters)

That about sums up our first extended family camping trip—an experience I had looked forward to with equal measures of enthusiasm and dread. To introduce one's pre-school daughters to a site so steeped in parental history was a stirring prospect. But how would we all cope? Would the kids be spooked by the strangeness of the bush and haunting presence of the crags? Or would they find the place too boring for words and badger us to be reunited with their beloved videos?

As it turned out my fears were mostly unrealised. The kids made themselves at home under the stars. Parental stress levels were, if anything, a notch or two lower than usual. Okay, I might have raised my voice at the kids waving smoking sticks around the campfire. And, yes, my nerves were possibly a little tousled while supervising a group of the tykes splashing in puddles on the clifftop. But, all things considered, this extended weekend went pretty well.

It was, needless to say, an altogether different kind of excursion to those of 15 years ago when the struggle to climb harder than you thought you could was all that mattered. This time around required us to see the experience through the eyes of our children. They were indeed interested in going for some short roped-up scrambles and abseils. And they did seem to relish lying on their backs in the grass watching the peregrines twirling aloft in the midday sky. They even enjoyed interrogating scavenging possums under the glare of Dad's head-torch. But, if the truth be known, they were just as happy with familiar games, albeit enhanced by having tree branches and boulders the size of castles to play with.

The main lesson from this expedition was that if you want to take kids to the bush be prepared to set aside adult ambitions. Success is best measured, not in terms of distance travelled but discoveries made. Pre-schoolers tend to see the world close up and all at once. This usually prompts a barrage of questions about beetle wings, gumnuts, mossy logs and other minutiae. In other words you might as well forget about the peak on the horizon you find so alluring and instead get down on your knees and enjoy sharing the learning curve with the little ones. Once you relax, it can be quite refreshing to have your sense of the natural world directed by beady-eyed three-year-olds.

Achieving this joyous collaboration does, however, require some groundwork. It is worth easing children into the wilds gradually, lest they find the experience alien and even threatening. Inner-city and suburban kids will not necessarily feel comfortable in an environment where there is spiky undergrowth, creepy sounds, and not a Sesame Street character anywhere to be seen.

Starting out at an early age is a real advantage. Even newly borns can be given bush baptisms, carried in the security of front pouches and slings. After a few months most babies are ready to ride in a papoose-style backpack. In many ways this is the best age for grown ups to enjoy extended day and overnight walks. Your pride and joy is still small enough for comfortable carrying and is usually happy to alternate snoozing and watching the world go by. Apart from ensuring that baby is shielded from sunlight, insects and low branches the biggest headache for parents is deciding who gets to carry the used nappies.

Life on the trail becomes much more problematic when you're dealing with two and three year olds. They are usually too heavy and restless to be borne along on adult shoulders. At the same time they are not up to trekking great distances. One solution is to establish a base camp from which you can make short forays to natural attractions. By age six or seven most children are ready to carry small backpacks and with gentle encouragement or bald-faced bribery they can tackle longer hikes.



Camping out in the wild offers unlimited scope for expanding the horizons of young innocents. Yet there is no guarantee that a child's natural sense of fun and curiosity will be automatically engaged. Regular outings from an early age will help children to regard life in the back country as another dimension of the family routine. Pre-schoolers being transplanted from home for the first time will benefit from a little conditioning. A popular ploy is to set up camp in the backyard and get everyone used to apparatus like tents, sleeping bags, stoves and the like.

If your camping plans encompass walking journeys into rough country or fickle weather then some specialised kids clothing is essential. Good waterproofs are worth hunting down. Infants are best protected by one-piece suits, while older kids prefer a jacket/pant combination. Functional shell garments are not cheap but they are indispensable if you are caught out in a squall and they can be pressed into service for around town wear as well.

Pint-sized fleece clothing is, thankfully, becoming much easier to find. Jackets, pants and accessories like hats and mitts made from Polarplus (or some equivalent) are perfect for kids of all ages. Lightweight, warm and simple to clean, these garments are ideally suited to the rigours of the wilds. Practical clothing can go a long way to keeping junior comfortable and quiet when the elements close in. And bright colours are recommended for making errant nippers easier to spot.

When the time comes to make your temporary home in the bush it's important to choose a safe, sheltered campsite. Steer clear of locations with perilous drop-offs and those that might become boggy after rain. Parents need to spell out to their charges any hazards around camp and the boundaries they should stay within. Just in case they should wander, it's a good idea to equip each child with a whistle so they can sound the alarm if necessary. As well as instilling a few safety lessons parents need to foster a non-destructive attitude to the environment. While small toddlers are content to amuse themselves collecting flowers and fossicking for lizards, older kids have the potential to cause havoc on a grand scale if left unsupervised.

Keeping a five-year-old on track and in sympathy with the spirit of the bush is a challenge, especially if you're competing with a media-fed fascination for Barbie Dolls or Terminator style weaponry. Be prepared to organise a range of diversions beyond camp. Most kids enjoy mucking about in streams and waterholes. They also like exploring exotic places like rock overhangs, dark rainforests and gorges—sites where they can have fanciful adventures.

At some point, however, school-age children will become jaded with the company of their parents and the idea of mere camping or walking. You might thrill to the serenity of a sunset but your offspring, as they grow in strength and confidence, will probably crave a more varied diet of outdoor action. Pastimes like cross-country skiing, cycle touring, canoeing and rock climbing are all worth considering, particularly if you or your friends have the experience to make these activities safe for children.

Finding like-minded families to share your trips is one solution to keeping everyone satisfied. Having other kids along helps relieve the pressure on parents to provide non-stop entertainment. A peer group can also spur recalcitrant young ones into having a go at new activities. Meanwhile, the adults can share the responsibilities of child supervision as well as, hopefully, finding the odd hour or so to reclaim long lost skills with paddles and skis, or trembling at the sharp end of a climbing rope.

Even then you may still have difficulty convincing your nearly-five-year-old daughter that you have seen the mountains many times before. After all, she is seeing the big mountains with her own eyes, for the first time and it is a kind of revelation for her—and me.

by Quentin Chester

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