

# Family Hiking

There are not seven wonders of the world in the eyes of a child.  
There are seven million.

Walt Streightif

We had just a little way to go, Dad said. I struggled to follow his long, Levi-covered legs and old muddy boots as they lunged up the steep trail. The coniferous giants formed thick walls around us, and our labyrinthine path winded around moss, fallen limbs and large, climbable rocks.

In all my nine years, I had never hiked in the backcountry before that clear afternoon climb up Anthony's Nose, a gentle Adirondack mountain resembling a large, lumpy olfactory system. Although I was flanked by my five-year-old sister and father, the woods made me feel immersed in my own magical playground forest. The adventure stands in my memory as one of the biggest thrills of my youth.

Hiking with kids is often not regarded as worthwhile, much less practical. The time involved preparing for it and the minutes wasted on the trail often make hiking seem more of a chore than a fun bonding activity. It's slower, it's shorter, and it's a heck of a lot louder.

But family hiking is also just as rewarding—if not more so—than hiking with folks old enough to tie their own shoes.

Kids love the woods. The idea of getting dirty, exploring new trails, following paths of old, gnarled roots, and searching for wildlife appeals to the inner child in most of us. Granted, kids can take longer than their fitness-focused adult counterparts, but that is usually because they have different goals. Every bird must be seen, every noise identified. Every wildflower analyzed, every patch of kelly-green moss stroked. Kids seek adventures, as I once did, and their curiosity and imagination could probably teach adults a thing or two about trail appreciation.

When choosing a hike suitable for children, remember that despite their seemingly boundless energy, they can tire easily. Ranger Dwight Madison from Rock Creek Nature Center in Washington D.C. recommends beginning in a comfortable place, such as a backyard, then moving to an easy trail. "If children are not comfortable in a wooded setting, try a military or historic park," he said, which are more open.

Madison suggested taking it easy with children by choosing a trail that matches your child's abilities. As for age limits, Madison firmly believes no child is too young to hike. "Even before they speak, they can observe the world around them," he said.

How does one prepare children for their first hike? "The first rule that we tell children [on hikes]," Madison said, of Rock Creek Park's many children-focused trail programs, "is to be quiet. The main reason why many kids hike is to see wild animals... We tell them they are visiting someone's home, and they should practice the same types of manners while hiking... And that the quieter they are, the more they'll see."

If a child is old enough to understand, Madison suggested listing safety hazards. "Make them aware of certain things like poison ivy, and why they shouldn't put things in their mouths," he said.

Here are more tips for families wishing to take their children hiking:

- Go online to [www.AmericanHiking.org](http://www.AmericanHiking.org) to search the Trail Finder database for a trail near you or find a book in a hiking store describing trails in your area and their difficulty.

- Bring high-energy snacks, such as cereal, granola bars or fruit.
- Carry plenty of water; dehydration is an all-too-common problem on the trails, resulting in extra crankiness, fatigue or worse. The condition is complicated with thirsty children.
- Dress your children in extra layers and bring raingear to prepare them for all types of weather.
- For kids who might need motivation to hike, try playing “I Spy” or suggesting a scavenger hunt for some trail entertainment. Also, it helps to hike towards “something worth seeing,” Madison said. Reaching a waterfall, a historic cannon or a beautiful vista can all make exciting goals.
- If you have more than one child, or if your children tend to run ahead, dress them in bright colors, especially in spring and summer when vegetation makes it easy for them to blend in with their surroundings.
- Avoid dousing your children in sweet-smelling odors such as pungent perfumes or shampoos—this way bugs will be less likely to attack. There are Deet-free bug repellents available for children.

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Every muscle in my nine-year-old body urged me on out of sheer excitement. We could hear no noises except those created by nature’s rhythm: the chirping of birds, the gentle sighing of the wind through the large trees, and the thumping of my father’s boots in front of me as they tromped over rocks.

My sister Emma skipped along beside me, sun-streaked hair tangled, her oversized hand-me-down t-shirt flopping like a dress. We had lost sight of the lake, our starting point, and hiked far into the middle of the lush backcountry forest.

“Do you think we’re on the second bump of the nose yet, Dad?” Emma’s shrill voice shouted to reach her father, who stood on a boulder ahead of us, looking away at something.

He hoisted us to his height, and the forest dramatically cut away to reveal the 32-mile Lake George spread majestically below us. The lake reflected a clean blue hue from the flawless sky, and our boat appeared toy-like from where it sat anchored off the shore below.

I forgot about the famous Adirondack rattlesnakes, which I pictured hiding under every rock; I forgot the cramp in my stomach and the sweat running down my back. The mountain air at such a magnificent height smelled gloriously clean, and I was so proud I could barely speak. We had made it to the top of Anthony’s Nose—a real mountain.

# Fact Sheet