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Word Count 1,010
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"Hiking: A Hands on Experience"

Family Hiking Adventures

By Kimberly Blaker

What better way to spend quality time with your family and get in touch with nature than a fresh, invigorating walk in the woods? What's more, family hikes make for fun learning opportunities for kids and parents alike. So try some of these hiking activities with your youngsters.

A stone is a stone is a...mineral?

Go on an excursion to learn about rocks and minerals. Shorelines offer a variety of stones. Before you go, learn which rocks and minerals are abundant in the area, and have each family member choose several to scout for. Take along a small plastic container with dividers, a descriptive rock and mineral guide, and a magnifying glass for viewing the colors, layers, and details. As you identify stones and minerals, discuss their uses and other neat facts.

Sounds of nature

Wander through a forest and listen carefully for a variety of bird and animal sounds. Visit your library before you go for a video or audiocassette of birds and wild animal calls. Carry an audio cassette player on your hike, and record some of the sounds

you hear. Listen to the recording again at home and play a game of detective to determine the source of the sounds you can't make out. Search the Internet, encyclopedias, and books to discover the makers of the mystery calls.

Photo adventure

Capture nature's splendor. Hiking trails provide plenty of photo opportunities, and kids will love snapping the shots. Discuss in advance what each family member wants to catch on film such as a huge oak tree, a monarch butterfly, deer tracks, or a close-up of a nibbling squirrel. Assist your child in managing his or her shots so the fun won't be over in the first stretch of the trip. And carry extra film just in case. At home, create a nature scrapbook with the photos.

Tree tales

These giants of nature are not only intriguing because of their sometimes-massive size but also because of the variety and history behind them. Borrow some books on trees from your library that describe the unique features of trees and that offer history on them. Use clues such as the shape of the tree's leaves, the texture of its bark, and even its size to determine the kind of tree.

Which way do we go?

Roam the countryside and teach your children directional skills such as how to read a map and use a compass or the sun to determine direction. Before setting out choose a trail system that provides maps, or make up your own. Take a trail that branches off several times, allowing for plenty of skill building opportunities. For even more fun, turn the excursion into a treasure hunt. Hide a small prize just off the trail under a bush or pile of leaves, mark the location on your map, and let the journey begin.

Animals all around

Take a quiet hike in a wooded area with grassy clearings, and see how many animals you meet. Watch for snakes, turtles, and geese if there's a nearby lake or stream. Also, look for chipmunks and squirrels playing chase or gathering food; birds of prey circling overhead; or grazing rabbits and deer. Discuss the animal's unique features and how those qualities help or hinder the animal. Talk about what the animals eat, their shelters, and species they are related. Also, keep eyes peeled for animal tracks to identify and determine how recently they were made.

Creepy crawly things

Scouting for insects is an all-time favorite among kids, and the variety of creepy crawly creatures in the woods is remarkable. Carry an insect book, clear container, tweezers, and a magnifying glass for close examination of insects' fascinating features. Bring a journal and track the types of insects you find. Read about insects' defense behaviors and characteristics such as colors that indicate danger to predators.

Plant life--old and new

Discover with your kids the amazing diversity of plant life. Before you head out, review some books on plants to spark your children's interest. On each hiking trip, choose a different trail or area and see what plants grow in certain types of soil, climates, and in different seasons. As you inspect plants look for their seeds and discover the variations. Talk about how seeds travel by blowing in the wind or catching on the fur of animals. Carefully brush away ground covering and look for seeds that have sprouted their roots that will soon develop into a new plant or tree. Learn how certain plants have evolved natural defenses to protect against creatures that would otherwise devour them.

WHERE TO FIND TRAILS

You might be surprised to discover nearby trails that you never knew existed. Check with city, county, and state parks and for trails along rivers or near lakeshores and beaches. There are also national forests and parks across the United States with extensive trail systems. If you have access to a wooded area near you that isn't too dense, a trail may not be necessary. When hiking off trails, use safety precautions to protect against tripping, poison ivy, or other hazards.

BEFORE YOU GO

Plan your activities before you leave so you'll arrive prepared. For your comfort and convenience, carry a small daypack, extra clothing for cool air along trails, and don't forget hiking boots. For your protection, bring along hats, sunglasses, sun block, and insect repellent. Be prepared for emergencies by carrying a small flashlight and batteries, watch, map, bandages, and don't forget plenty of water and snacks. Finally, make the most of your nature quest by carrying binoculars, a magnifying glass, and small camera.

TREKKIN' TIPS FOR TYKES

When hiking with children, keep these suggestions in mind.

- Allow small legs plenty of time for breaks and making the journey and know your child's limitations.
- Be familiar with potential dangers in the area in which you'll explore and teach your children trail and animal safety.
- Before you set out prepare your children by informing them that there may be rules against bringing their nature finds home.

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PULL QUOTE: Hide a small prize just off the trail under a bush or pile of leaves, mark the location on your map, and let the journey begin.

SIDEBAR IDEAS OR WAYS TO LOCALIZE: List of hiking trails in your surrounding area. Insert specific trees, animals, or insects to look for that are common in your area.

Kimberly Blaker of Michigan is a mother of two. Her articles have appeared in more than 120 parenting and women's magazines throughout the United States and Canada.