



Youth & Families » Introducing Ella

Jodie completes a backcountry diaper change while Ella's dad, James Davern, does the documentary work.

When my husband, James, and I moved to Seattle from Australia in early 2007 for his job in the aerospace industry, we looked forward to spending many weekends hiking in the beautiful Cascade mountains and beyond. As we settled into our new life in the Pacific Northwest, we took every opportunity to hike.

Then our daughter, Ella Rose Davern, was born in September 2008, and everything changed for the better. Sure, there was sleep deprivation and the overwhelming task of parenting to slow us down, but neither my husband nor I could stay away from the mountains for too long. We thought, why not start Ella hiking early? At a mere seven weeks of age Ella enjoyed the brisk mountain air at Panorama Point (6,900 feet) on the side of Mount Rainier. From there, she has enjoyed many snowshoeing and hiking trips in the Leavenworth area, Issaquah Alps, Snoqualmie Pass area and off the Mountain Loop Highway. Ella has even explored the desert of New Mexico and the subtropical rainforest of Queensland, Australia. While we show her the beauty of the mountains in Washington state, we're also setting

her up with the skills she needs for a lifetime of exploration and conservation of the world's wild places.

Here are the main questions and challenges we have faced in taking an infant and now a toddler into the wild.

First, what to carry her in? We used a Baby-Bjorn or Ergo baby carrier until she was able to sit up at six months of age and then we switched to a Deuter Kid Comfort Carrier III. REI stocks plenty of good quality backpack carriers, but keep in mind that during a sale, shopping for kids' gear becomes a contact sport.

Second, there is clothing to consider. If the weather is cold, then baby will need a good quality snowsuit and layers underneath to stay warm. Over Christmas vacation we snow-shoed around Leavenworth in 14 degrees F. To keep Ella warm, we dressed her in her usual layers and snowsuit then we also wrapped an old down jacket around her carrier. She stayed warmer than we did. Don't forget sunscreen and eye protection for baby on the snow, too. A similar trick works in wet weather, as you can wrap an old raincoat around the carrier to keep the baby dry. Ella now has her own miniature rain gear. If the weather is hot, baby should wear light natural fibres, a hat, sunglasses and

Jodie Murdoch

Jodie is a former WTA intern and first-time parent from Seattle.

Youth & Families »

Out in the "Ella-ments"



sunscreen. We find a light cotton sheet (soaked in water if it is particularly hot) draped around the carrier provides shade and keeps baby cool. If it is just too hot, consider playing in a river or lake reached within a very short walk. Good quality rain gear, snowsuits and natural fibre clothing can all be found at REI or if you have more time lightly-used clothing and gear, such as carriers, can be easily found in consignment shops or on craigslist.

Of course, we can't leave her all dressed up with no place to go! Finding hikes for Ella has been easy with the guidance of the WTA website as well as the book *Best Hikes with Kids - Western Washington and the Cascades*. Luckily, Ella is easy to please at this age as her criteria for a fun time are pinecones to play with and mud to squish.

Now that Ella is walking and setting the pace, we pick hikes that are short so that we have plenty of time to "smell the pinecones" along the way. We maintain that even if we walk only a fraction of the trail and Ella has fun, then she is storing away positive memories of the wilds and will be more likely to be a willing participant of further explorations and conservation efforts. The cliché really is true: we find hiking with a child is a much richer experience.

Our family doesn't believe that any place is "too far into the wild" so long as we are prepared with the ten essentials, stay aware of the weather conditions, and keep a sense of humour and some flexibility. If the outing is going poorly, we usually have the sense to seek out a swing set and an ice cream shop instead. Some hikes have required endless patience and the ability to keep the experience fun in frustrating circumstances. On one hike when Ella really wanted to hike on her own, we had to force her to stay in the carrier for a half-hour so we could get her back to the air-conditioned car quickly. The day had stacked up to be much hotter and our pace much slower than planned, and while Ella wasn't afraid of becoming dehydrated or having a heat stroke, we sure were worried for her. We have since dubbed the experience "the death march" and remind ourselves of it if we try to push too much for a toddler into a day.

For the parents, the more important consideration may just be how well your child will sit in the car seat. For our wriggly little bundle of energy, a car ride of an hour or less is prudent for a successful outing. On our way to one not-so-memorable hike, Ella refused to stay in the car seat, so we enjoyed the "pleasant" sur-

rounds of a suburban gas station car wash for over an hour. When we finally got on the trail hours later she had the time of her life squishing mud and—surprise!—playing with pinecones for the short time we could then spend in the wilds. These days, we do more weekend trips that involve hikes than day trips.

When we are on the trail, feeding the baby is a key concern. We breastfed so, in theory, this would be simple. In practice, Ella is too distracted most of the time by pinecones, sticks, birds, et cetera. Another unforeseen problem with breastfeeding in the wild was off-leash dogs. Now I personally think we can all share the trail (provided the dogs and owners follow the trail regulations, of course), but over the past few months Ella has experienced far too many close encounters of the canine variety. I've seen snapping teeth where Ella's head was just split seconds before. So far, I've been lucky to move her in time, but I dread the day when I'm not so quick. Not only does it scare her (and her parents), it also makes it difficult to get her to relax and feed peacefully again. We usually have a very hungry, cranky baby at the end of a day hiking in areas that allow dogs. [Fellow hikers, if you are taking the family dog hiking, please follow the regulations and, out of courtesy to other families, be extra careful around babies and small children.] These days, Ella is able to feed herself and we take her favourite snacks such as fruit, steamed vegetables, bread, cereal and cheese.

Finally, of course, we come to the usual baby care items such as diapers and naps. In winter, when it is too cold out to bare a baby's bottom, we have limited our trips to the length of time a diaper lasted. In warmer weather, diaper changes become easier, although finding a flat, dog-free spot to change can still be a challenge. Be sure to pack out what you pack in, especially diapers! As for the all-important naps, our Ella was comfortable enough to sleep while being carried in her backpack. Now that she is older, we aim to give her a bit of time to walk and explore at the start of the hike before settling her into the carrier for her usual nap time. Sure, things get a little out of whack, but the benefits far outweigh a bit of overtired crankiness at the end of the day.

We sure hope that Ella continues to enjoy the beautiful natural areas of the Pacific Northwest and then Australia as she grows into a girl. As she moves into adulthood and creates her own life, we hope she can make room for nature and efforts to conserve it.

Editor's note: This August, Ella decided to participate in WTA's Hike-a-Thon. James and Jodie guessed that Ella would be able to walk a total of ten miles on her own over the month, and for each of those miles—but not the ones they carried her—she earned pledges to help protect trails for future enjoyment.