

## Sage Advice »



# Camping With a Crew

## A young blended family shares their tips and tricks

It was early spring and Marika was leading the way, while I formed the caboose of our hiking train. Two and a half miles into our hike, our girls were up front and singing. The boys had fallen behind as they investigated every boulder, tree and trench. As we rounded the last corner, all the kids fell silent as a pristine lake appeared in a narrow valley between two mountain ridges. Over lunch on a rock outcropping, we looked out over a partially frozen Lower Lena Lake 100 feet below. On our first day hike together, as Marika and I watched our kids playing and enjoying nature, we decided that hiking would become a large part of our family activities.

That was four years ago, when Marika and I began dating. Marika has four children, two girls ages twelve and seven and two boys ages ten and nine. I have two children; my son is nine and my daughter is six. We are raising our kids together now, and Marika and I both believe in getting our children unplugged and out of the house whenever our schedule permits. We feel it is one of the ways to raise well-rounded children.

For many of our first outings as a blended family, we took day hikes on the Kitsap and Olympic Peninsulas,

like that trip to Lower Lena Lake four years ago. My children had been hiking since my daughter was one, while Marika and her children had no hiking experience. Inexpensive and fun, hiking got our two families out of the house together and led us to have many memorable shared experiences. Since then, hiking has become something the whole family anticipates. It's truly a focal point in our spring through fall activities.

Through our hiking experiences with our group of young children, we have learned many tips that we feel would be useful for other families with young children, or families making their first trips onto Washington's trails.

### Gearing up

Every year in early spring, we take a series of local day hikes to help the kids get used to wearing their packs and help us evaluate any new gear needs due to physical changes from the previous year. Keeping the kids comfortable with their gear has paid dividends for Marika and me. If they aren't miserable, neither are we.

Knowing that kids outgrow their gear from season to season, we have opted to purchase cheaper equipment for everyone when outfitting our kids

## Adam Scroggins

Since early childhood, Adam has explored all that the Northwest has to offer. In the last 9 years, he's focused on exposing his children to the beauty and gifts found in our corner of the world.

for the first time. As the older kids have grown, we purchase higher quality gear for them and pass their older stuff down to the younger kids.

With a little planning, we've been able to spread our gear costs out, making a few key purchases each year, without breaking the bank. The first year we hiked as a family, our four older kids wore external-frame backpacks. We chose external-frame backpacks due to what we felt was a more universal fit, which would allow us to hand them down as the kids got older. As each of our kids enters their teens, we're planning to give them an internal-frame backpack with a more specific fit that they will be able to use through high school.

Outfitting our kids five and younger with mountain biking hydration packs, which have small pockets for snacks and lunch, has worked really well. These packs are smaller and lighter than external-frame backpacks. Due to the limited weight young kids can carry, this approach worked better than finding hiking backpacks for them and saved us money as well.

When our kids were younger and unable to carry all of their own gear, Marika and I carried some seriously large packs. After returning home with painful hips and sore shoulders, I invested in a Gregory Palisades internal-frame pack—an investment that has more than paid for itself as I have not had a painful hike since. Last season, Marika upgraded to an Osprey Atmos backpack. Our top priorities were comfort and fit, and we chose the packs that worked best for us, without concern for name brand or popularity.

Do you have to purchase the latest and most expensive gear to enjoy hiking with your kids? Nope, and you don't have to purchase all your hiking gear from a big-name outdoor store, either.

Keep your eyes open when you're at Fred Meyer, Home Depot and Target, or even the grocery store, and you may see similar gear to what you'll find at an outdoor store at a lower price. This gear may weigh more, but unless you're taking your kids to the top of Mount Rainier, it should be more than adequate to get you on the trails for your initial hikes.

With a few hikes under your belt, assess what has worked for you and what hasn't. At this point, you will have a better understanding of what you want to pay top dollar for, and you can slowly upgrade your gear.

## Planning ahead

In winter, we dream about trips we want to take in the coming year and research the trails. We typically identify 15 to 20

intriguing hikes and group them into spring, summer and fall hikes.

As each new season begins, we find all the days that we can reserve for hiking. For each hiking date, we pencil in three or four hikes, each in a different part of Washington. As our hike date approaches, we check the weather forecast and choose the hike that best suits the conditions and the gear we have. This question is our motto: *"Why hike in a rainstorm in the Olympics when a warm and dry hike in the Cascades or Eastern Washington is on the list of hikes?"* All of the hikes we don't take that day are then moved onto hiking dates later in the year or put on a list for the following year.

In our early hiking days, we targeted day hikes of 3 to 6 miles round trip with a maximum elevation gain of 2,000 feet. As the kids have become stronger and can travel farther, we've ramped up our distance and elevation maximums and added overnight hikes into our criteria. This year, we are considering hikes that range from 6 to 9 miles with an elevation gain of up to 3,000 feet per day.

## Dinnertime

As it turns out, our kids do not eat large meals when hiking. They'd rather eat small snacks, like dried apricots and mangoes, all throughout the day. One of our kids in particular runs out of energy quickly, so we pack extra Clif Bars, trail mix and beef jerky and feed him every thirty minutes or so to keep his energy up. Watching how your kids eat on day hikes will give you some sense of how they'll react once on overnight trip.

Two of our kids need constant water, so they carry larger, completely full water bladders in their packs, and we watch for spots to filter water to refill their hydration systems as needed. We encourage them to drink as much as they need. It is far easier to take another potty break than to treat a dehydrated child or, worse, one with heat stroke.

When we do eat large meals, we typically eat in shifts of two to three people to limit the amount of cooking gear that we need to pack in. By keeping the amount of community gear low, the adults and older kids can carry more personal gear for the smaller kids. Our children aren't big fans of MREs or the dehydrated food found at your typical outdoor store. Instead, we look for the foods that the kids will eat at home and use meals that are light and quick enough to bring on a backpacking trip. Bear Creek makes several dehydrated soups that the kids like. Their tortilla soup ends up being served regularly. Uncle Ben's makes several precooked rice packages which require minimal heating over a stove. Salmon, halibut and tuna patties that are precooked and vacuum-sealed heat up quickly. For breakfast, we bring instant oatmeal,

## Sharing the Load

To pack efficiently, we've developed a set of guidelines of what to pack in our kids' backpacks based on their ages.

**Ages 4 to 6:** Water and snacks

**Ages 6 to 10:** Ten essentials, water, snacks, meals, sleeping bag and pad

**Ages 10 to 13:** Ten essentials, water, snacks, meals, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, portions of the tent (poles or tent body), gear other kids could not carry, small community items like fuel canisters or the stove

**Ages 13 and up:** Everything needed to be self-sufficient, including the ten essentials and a first-aid kit

As the hiking season goes on, we evaluate each kid's comfort and make small adjustments.





vacuum-packed breakfast meats, like Spam, and instant hot chocolate.

Making meals that the kids will enjoy and that are also easy to pack and prepare takes practice at home. The last place you want to try and figure out how to prepare a dinner is under the light of a head lamp at the end of long hike. Spend a weekend car camping, or cook in your back yard using only your hiking gear and food, to see what works and does not work. Remember, when you're on the trail, you have to be self-sufficient. Is this a good time to figure out what you need or realize what you are missing? No way, especially not when you're hiking with children!

## Settling into camp

Making camp is a family affair, and, with our numbers, it tends to go rather quickly. Marika typically focuses on getting the camp kitchen set up and dinner going, while I set up the various tents. The kids are responsible for refilling all of the hydration packs and our camp shower (which doubles as a water bladder), and for finding firewood if that is allowed.

People have different ideas as to how to entertain the kids around camp. Our philosophy is, "You're in nature. Go enjoy it." What this means is explore the area around you, find a nice place to skip rocks, find natural forts, find a nice view and listen to nature. Sit around camp with a book or a deck of cards and enjoy each other's company. If it's allowed, fishing is a fun activity that provides an additional dinner option and this bonus: the kid who provides food for the whole family leaves with a real sense of achievement.

Personally, I tend to sit back and enjoy watching our children's imaginations run wild while I sip on instant hot chai tea, and tend to any gear or camp issues.

In the last four years, our hiking and camping trips have provided many wonderful family experiences. As parents, we have learned more about our kids and what they are capable of, both mentally and physically. And our kids have developed an appreciation for what nature and our state of Washington have to offer. They've also learned that by working together, they can reach goals that they could not achieve alone. We hope that sharing what we've learned through our experiences as a hiking family will inspire your family to find your way to the trails, or to make your future hiking experiences even more memorable.♦

This spring, the Scroggins-Forsell family will test out a number of new tents, backpacks, sleeping bags and sleeping pads. Read their review of family camping gear in the next issue of *Washington Trails*.



## 11 Lessons Learned (Some the Hard Way)

1. When backpacking, carry more snacks and fewer large meals.

**2. Always keep one adult at the front of the group and one at the back. Set up checkpoints every half mile where you can regroup.**

3. If you're getting an external-frame pack for a child, check to see if there is a support bar across the top of the pack. If so, make sure it does not interfere with the child's ability to move their head now and in the future as they grow.

**4. Look for sturdy compression straps. High-quality thick plastic or metal clips with high-quality stitching are a must.**

5. Many backpacks are not set up with a tie-down point for a hydration systems nozzle. Hardware stores sell 4-inch by 0.5-inch Velcro strips in a roll that you can use to add tie-down points to any pack.

**6. Each child hikes at a different pace, with a different energy requirement. Watch your kids and do not push them harder than needed. Remember, hiking is supposed to be fun.**

7. Plan on your hikes taking longer than listed in the guidebooks, especially the first time. Don't push your kids to try and meet the posted hiking times. Accept that you may not reach your end goal, as you may need to turn back based on how fast you are hiking and how your kids are doing on any given hike.

**8. Give each kid a whistle, and make sure they keep it on them at all times. Teach them to use it as soon as they feel they may be lost.**

9. Hydration systems, for the most part, do not contain interchangeable components. Research the systems first, then outfit everyone with the same brand to make cleaning, storage and upkeep much easier. After using four different systems, we've switched exclusively to CamelBak for their ease of use and mouthpiece functionality.

**10. Baby wipes can be used to clean dirty feet and hands, remove sticky sap, and serve as backup toilet paper.**

11. Kids love the taste boost that comes with adding a powdered flavored water packet into their water bladder or bottle. Just make sure to properly clean and dry your hydration system when you return home.