



Introduction To Family Camping

*Your Guide to Finding the Perfect Campsite, Keeping
the Kids Engaged, and Arriving with all the Right Gear*

Roy Scribner
www.CampingBlogger.net

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Forward

Kids Want to Explore

I think I was about 8 years old when my parents bought a used Dodge Van and we started exploring some of the great California parks in the early 1970's. I can remember disappointment; hiking to the top of the volcano at Lassen National Park – which ended-up not looking anything like what I thought a volcano should look like, and the ancient bristlecone pines of the Inyo National Forest, which to this child were just a bunch of old, twisty trees. I also remember the giant banana slugs in Jedediah Smith Redwood State Park, and black bears in Yosemite National Park that could open the “bear proof” garbage cans, at will. I remember being mesmerized by hang gliders going off El Capitan.



*No salamanders were harmed on this trip to
Alsea Falls, Oregon*

I see some of these same interests and disappointments in my children. While they might dismiss some great natural wonder as “ho-hum,” they will spend hours playing with a salamander in a mountain stream or trying to skip rocks across a pond. It is important for us, as parents, to remember that our children’s interests are not always aligned with our own. If we are to promote and develop our children’s interest in nature, it is important to let them explore nature on their terms – wherever that may lead. When we took our first camping trip, our kids were one, four and five years old. To say they were excited would be an understatement! The campfire, the s’mores, the sleeping bags, the stars – everything was a new adventure for these toddlers and the fact that mom and dad were experiencing it right there with them made it even more exciting.

Lasting Experiences

I think that as adults we tend to underestimate our children's ability to enjoy nature for nature's sake, without the electronic stimuli that has become such a big part of their lives, these days. The television will always be there, but how many times do you get to walk through the woods and see a doe and her fawn, or try to skip rocks across a stream? Those kinds of experiences cannot be reproduced at home, which is why they are such enduring memories for the kids. For mom and dad, too, a weekend of camping is one of the best ways to decompress from the workweek. Monday will always come, but for at least a day or two, there are no schedules, no agendas, and no appointments. It is important that camping with the family remains an event, and not a destination. There is certainly a place for "destination camping," such as a trip of one of the major national parks during summer vacation, but for every national park in the western United States, there are thousands of state, county and municipal parks that offer everything required for a weekend getaway. The key to weekend camping is keeping it close to home, because camping with the family is a lot more fun than driving with the family.

Enjoying Nature Together

Camping with the family is one of the few activities that the entire family can participate in together. Even sports, that other great American family pastime does not provide the same kind of family togetherness as camping. Contrast the simple act of building a campfire, in which the entire family can participate in gathering wood, make kindling, build and feed the fire, etc. with the typical sports activity in which the children participate while the parents watch from afar. Not that organized sports do not have a beneficial impact on our children's development, but it is no replacement for family time. Camping places everyone on an equal footing, with certain responsibilities that enhance everyone's camping experience. Kids might not initially understand the importance of keeping the campsite clean, but when everyone suffers through an ant-invasion or waking up to garbage strewn about the campsite by raccoons, it is a lesson the children will not soon forget! Fortunately, most lessons do not have such negative consequences and, the fact is, mom and dad will be learning right alongside the children which is the best way for our kids to learn how to problem-solve. Parents and children doing things together, this is what family camping is all about and it is why camping is such a great activity for families.

Where to Go Camping

There are thousands of campgrounds across the United States, and they generally breakdown into two major categories, public and private. Public campgrounds comprise the vast majority of available sites and include the big national parks and forests, individual state lands, and even your local city or county parks. Private campgrounds range from large national chains, like Kampgrounds of America (KOA), to individually owned sites. Some private campgrounds, like Thousand Trails, are open to members only and not the general public.



Picnic tables and fire pits are typical in most public campgrounds

Public and Private Campgrounds

Private campgrounds tend to cater more to the traveler, than they do the weekend camper. When you are coming off six to eight hours on the road, it is certainly nice to be able to plug your RV into AC power and hook up to a sewer connection. If a private campground offers any kind of secluded area for tents, they will be sure to highlight this feature in their marketing material; otherwise, they tend to be parking lots for RV's. Private campgrounds offer widely varying degrees of family activities, such as swimming, fishing, or miniature golf, but these are all features that significantly highlighted in their marketing literature.



Barely room for a picnic table, the KOA in Crescent City, CA is typical of most private campgrounds

Catering more to the destination camper, public campgrounds rarely provide RV sewer connections at individual campsites, but many do have a dumping station located near

the entrance of the park. Electricity at the campsite is also rare, though many public campgrounds will have several restroom and shower facilities around the site that have electricity. Some public campgrounds, particularly the smaller ones do not offer shower facilities or electricity, so be sure to check the description well. Public campgrounds tend to be located where there is something to see, or do. It might be hiking trails, big trees, waterfalls, or the Yosemite Valley floor, but there is usually a reason that the government decided to build a campground there.



Bodega Dunes Campground, Bodega Bay, CA

Finding a Campground

There is no single, definitive online resource for locating all of the campgrounds available in a particular area. The best place to start, since camping is always preferable to driving, is with your local county website. If your county manages any campgrounds, you will be able to find information on them under the “Parks and Recreation” department. To locate public campgrounds at the state level, most states contract with Reserve America to provide their online reservation service. Some states maintain their own online state park reservation system, however. In a similar fashion, federally managed public campgrounds can be located on Recreation.Gov. Reserve America and



Fire lookout tower, Crater Lake, OR

Recreation.gov are both easy to use and provide a good deal of information about the campgrounds. Unfortunately, they only include campgrounds that accept reservations. There are a number of public campgrounds available on a first-come, first-served basis, but none of these campgrounds will show-up on the Reserve America or Recreation.gov sites.

The best single online resource for locating private campgrounds is Google™ Maps. Once you pull-up a map of the area, just type “campground” in the search field, and Google Maps will display a list of private campgrounds. Google Maps may also show some state campgrounds, but it is not nearly as comprehensive as Reserve America.

Locating campgrounds that do not accept reservations can be challenging, since they do not show-up on the two major reservation sites, or Google Maps. These first-come, first served campsites could be state parks, US Forest Service campgrounds, Bureau of Land Management campgrounds, or Army Corps of Engineers campgrounds. Google (regular search, not Google Maps) is the quickest way to locate the state campgrounds; just type your state’s name into the search field, followed by the words “campgrounds first come first served” (without quotes). Either you will receive a link to your state parks page that lists all first-come, first-served campgrounds available or, if your state does not support such a list, you will receive a number of links to various campgrounds located throughout the state. To locate first-come, first-served campgrounds on federal lands,

you will have to visit each of the three federal websites (USFS, BLM and COE) for a list of campgrounds in your region. See the online resources listed at the end of this chapter for more information.

Choosing the Best Campsite

Your particular camping situation will dictate what makes one campsite better than another one. If you are tent camping for longer than a weekend, you will probably want to be located in close proximity to a drinking water source. If you are camping in an RV, however, you probably have plenty of drinking water and even your own bathroom, so the location of these facilities is not nearly as important.



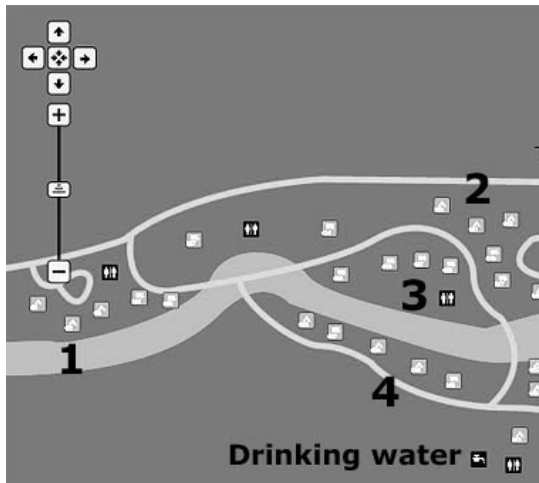
Another consideration, particularly for family camping, is a campsite's location on the road system within the campground. Popular campgrounds, particularly those that are located near major tourist areas like national parks, off-road recreational areas and beach communities, can have a great deal of traffic in and out of the campground. Fortunately, the major reservation sites provide basic maps of the campgrounds that show the locations of the various facilities, greatly increasing your odds of choosing a good

campsite. For non-reserveable campgrounds, the USFS and BLM sites usually offer similar information, but not nearly the level of detail that the commercial reservation sites.

The maps provided by the two commercial reservation sites are rudimentary, but they do give you a feel for the layout of the campground, with roads and the location of the major services. If you are camping with children, look at the probable traffic patterns within the campground so that you can narrow your search to campsites that are off the major thoroughfares.

Once you establish where the major traffic patterns are likely to be, zoom-in on the map and try to weigh the pros and cons of the various campsite areas within the campground. In this example, you would likely throw-out area #2, as those sites back-up to the main entrance road. Area #3 could also be a problem, since two of the sites are close to the bathroom, and a bathroom symbol with no drinking water probably means

it is a pit toilet – even worse. The sites in area #3 further away from the bathroom sit across from other campsites, which is also not ideal.



Areas 1 and 4 look pretty attractive. If I were tent camping and thought that I'd be needing to replenish my water supply during our stay, I'd certainly be interested in reserving one of campsites in area #4 along the creek, due to their closer proximity to the drinking water. Packing 40 pounds of water back to area #1 could get old really fast! If you are in an RV, however, or if water is not a concern, area #1 would probably be a good choice. It is well away from the rest of the campsites, tucked into its

own small loop, and the campsites back-up to the creek.

Spending a little extra time choosing the best campsite can help make a great camping trip even better. Fortunately, today's online resources make finding the best campground an easier task now, than it was in the past.

Dispersed Camping: Skip the Campground

One of the great joys of camping is getting away from it all and spending some quality time with your family. That is hard to do, though, when the guy in the next campsite is running a generator all night, or having the equivalent of a frat party next door. When you really want to ensure a peaceful and serene camping experience, dispersed camping is the way to go. The US Forest Service and BLM generally allow camping anywhere on undeveloped public lands, with a few provisions:

- ▲ Camping at any one site is limited to 14 days per visit
- ▲ Pack out what you pack in
- ▲ Avoid camping within 200 feet of any water source
- ▲ Do not leave campfires unattended

The downside of dispersed camping, of course, is that there are no signs to tell you where to go to find that great camping spot. You are on your own, when it comes to discovering camping sites on undeveloped public lands. If you are unfamiliar with the

area, try camping in a designated campground first, so that you can scout the area for future dispersed camping sites. For a little bit of extra trouble, however, dispersed camping offers some huge advantages over camping in a campground. Noise pollution is nowhere to be found and you will likely have an entire area to yourselves.

There are few extra considerations if you plan to try dispersed camping. No designated campground means no campground facilities such as toilets, drinking water, picnic tables, and fire rings. Practice good leave no trace principles by camping on a durable surface, keeping your campfire small (or avoid a campfire altogether), use biodegradable soap, and pack out all trash and leftover food.

Online Resources

Kampgrounds of America, Inc. (KOA):	www.koa.com
Thousand Trails:	www.1000trails.com
Reserve America:	www.reserveamerica.com
Recreation.gov:	www.recreation.gov
US Forest Service:	www.fs.fed.us
Bureau of Land Management:	www.blm.gov
US Army Corps of Engineers:	corpslakes.usace.army.mil

What to do While Camping

With no television or video games, it is no wonder that parents become a bit concerned about the thought of keeping their kids entertained on a camping trip. The good news is that kids love the outdoors! There are carriers and rough terrain strollers for infants and toddlers that let you get out and explore the area together. Of course, older children are capable of keeping up on their own. My oldest daughter was seven when she started hiking about three to four miles with me. Her six-year-old sister and three-year-old brother were only good for about a mile, though. This meant that our family had to split-up when we went hiking, but it is important to tailor the activity to each child's ability. This keeps the younger ones from getting frustrated, while keeping the older ones challenged and interested.



Inexpensive rubber horseshoe kit, Sunset State Beach, Watsonville, CA

Go on a Hike

Hiking is a great outdoor activity that parents and children can enjoy together. It is also a good way for kids to learn about nature and the environment, and maybe some wildlife too if you can coax the kids into an early start. Of course, you might have to do a bit of coaxing to get the kids to go hiking, at all! Our three children encompass the entire spectrum of motivation, when it comes to hiking. Our oldest daughter (8) actually bugs us to go hiking, while her younger sister (7) would never go hiking, if it were up to her. It is too soon to tell which side our son's (4) motivation will fall on.

Hiking with kids goes a lot smoother when there is some kind of destination, such as a waterfall or a lake, instead of just an out-and-back loop. At least for our younger ones, telling them that we are "going to the waterfall" gets them a lot more motivated than

telling them that we are just going for a hike. Remember to stay flexible, though. If a child stops enjoying the hike, then maybe it is time to turn around and head back from camp. Hiking is a great and healthy activity, though, that leads to many other fun outdoor activities like photography, fishing, scavenger hunting, geocaching and treasure hunting. You do not need a lot of money to get into hiking; a decent pair of tennis shoes and a water bottle will serve you just fine.

One thing that you, the parent, will have to keep in mind when hiking with your kids is to take

responsibility for keeping them hydrated and nourished. It is common for children skimp on water during strenuous activities, including hiking, so make sure you take frequent stops to recharge. I find it easiest to carry a small hydration pack, even on short hikes, which provides plenty of water for the whole family and has just enough room for trail snacks and emergency items.



Hiking in the Los Padres National Forest

Cover More Ground on Bikes

Bicycling is a great way to extend your sightseeing range over hiking, although you may have to stay on the road system or trails specific to bikes. Do not think that everyone has to have a fancy mountain bike, either. My daughter's first trail ride was on her little Barbie® bike and it worked just fine. Bike safety is just as important in the campground, or the woods, as it is at home. This means helmets, child seats or trailers, and watching out for other people on the trails.

Biking can be a great way for the family to extend their sightseeing radius, if the campground and surrounding area is bike friendly. Just like hiking, though, bring plenty of snacks for energy and remember to take frequent breaks for rest and hydration.

Play a Card Game

While we tend to focus on "camping things," like hiking, campfires and s'mores, it is important to realize that just because you are camping it does not mean you cannot do some of the things with your kids that you already do at home. Games, like a memory

matching game or a deck of Uno® cards, are fun for the entire family and are easy to pack. Games give you something to do at the campsite when resting from a hike, or taking a break during the heat of the afternoon.

The Original Memory Game is the simpler of the two, and probably our children's favorite. Hasbro offers several variations on the theme, but the game play is the same; mix-up 68 tiles and place them face down on any flat surface. Then each player turns over two tiles, in an attempt to match the hidden pictures underneath. The tiles are made of heavy cardstock, and although they are not waterproof, they hold up very well to the rigors of camping.



The Original Memory Game, by Hasbro

Uno is one of those classic card games that will undoubtedly be with us until the end of time. In fact, Uno has recently made the leap from analog to digital, and is now available on the Xbox. For camping, though, analog rules the day and the whole family will enjoy this game. The object of Uno is to get rid of your cards, which is a simple concept for children to understand. The deck is divided into colors; red, green, blue and yellow. Each color, in turn, has cards numbered from 0 to 9. Players get rid of cards by matching the previous player's discard, either by color or by number. There are also three "action" cards, such as "skip" (skip the next player), "draw two" (make the next player draw two additional cards) and "reverse" (change the direction of the game) for each color in the deck. In addition, there are eight "wildcards", which can be played on any color. Four of these wildcards are the notorious "draw four" cards, which are particularly painful for the next player!

These games are simple enough for our youngest to play and yet our older kids find them interesting and fun, too. Even mom and dad get into the fun, and we have been known to continue a Uno game or two with friends long after all of the kids are in bed. In addition to their simplicity, these games never seem to get old. Our children have been playing them for several years now, and yet each new game seems just as much fun as the first.



Uno is easy for children and fun enough for adults

Other Family Activities

Horseshoes and ring toss games (along with the numerous variants) are great activities that everyone can enjoy around the campsite. They do not require a lot of setup like a badminton or volleyball net, and they are available at all of the popular superstores. When it is too hot for hiking, or other strenuous activities, these types of games are great for keeping busy, together. They are also great for keeping the kids occupied while you are preparing a meal.

Scrapbooking is a fun activity for parents and children to enjoy together, around the picnic table. For younger children, you can cut nature or animal pictures out of magazines to bring along. You can also print outline drawings from your computer that the kids can color. Older children can use their artistic skills to enhance the pages, and you might just entice them to write a few words about their experience. Young or old, leaf rubbings with chalk or crayons is always fun. Attempting to print pictures at the campsite may seem a bit extreme, but scrapbooking projects can always be enhanced with pictures after you get home, while the trip is still fresh in everyone's mind.



*Scrapbooking in a Junior Ranger Program
at Joseph H. Stewart State Park, OR*

Have an Ice Cream Party

I am sure that an ice cream social is probably the last thing on your mind, when you are brainstorming fun activities to keep the kids busy during a weekend of camping. You really can make it happen, though, with a great product called an ice cream ball. The concept behind the ice cream ball is similar to most other ice cream makers; pack ice and rock salt around a metal cylinder filled with the ice cream ingredients (cream, sugar and flavoring), and then agitate the mixture until it freezes solid. It is the agitating part where the ice cream ball makes a significant departure from traditional ice cream makers. What used to be mom and dad's job, tirelessly turning a crank to spin the cylinder, is now a fun game of sitting in a circle and rolling the "ball" to each other.



The ice cream ball in action

A quart of ice cream takes about 30-minutes and it is nearly impossible to mess this up, provided you start with whole cream and use enough sugar (just shy of a full cup, for 1 quart of cream). An ice cream ball is easy to transport and seems rugged enough to last a lifetime. Best of all, the kids will have almost as much fun making the ice cream, as they do eating it.

What to Take Camping

If you are planning to take the family camping, the first decision you will have to make is what to bring. Just Google™ 'camping list' and you will get 10.6 million different opinions on exactly what it is that you should be taking and, while most of this advice is probably just fine, a lot of it (even at some big-name outdoor companies) is written by people who don't know the first thing about camping.



Movie night along the Klamath River, CA

Types of Camping Gear

Any camping list is going to vary depending on whether you are car camping (carrying all of your gear in a car) or backpack camping (carrying all of your gear on your back). If you are carrying everything on your back then weight is a primary factor in your gear selection and you can justify the premium price that you will pay for lighter gear. For example, an REI® Halo down-fill bag weighs just under two pounds and is \$250. An equivalent synthetic bag, like the REI Zen, is only \$150 but weighs over three pounds.

Core Camping Gear

A sleeping bag is part of the core set of gear that you will spend the most money on:

- ▲ Tent
- ▲ Sleeping bag
- ▲ Sleeping pad
- ▲ Stove
- ▲ Ice chest

The ice chest is only for car camping, but the rest of this gear is available in lightweight versions that are more suitable for backpacking. Of course, you could go with backpacking gear even if you are car camping, but it will cost a lot more money and you will be giving up some comfort. There is a huge difference, in both cushion and warmth,

between a ¾-inch thick foam sleeping pad and a 1 to 2-inch thick combination foam and air mattress.

Cooking Gear

In addition to the core set of gear you will also need a set of cooking gear for preparing meals and cleaning up:

- ▲ Garbage bags
- ▲ Aluminum foil
- ▲ Hot pads or oven mitts
- ▲ Coffee pot or tea kettle
- ▲ Sauce pan or dutch oven
- ▲ Frying pan or griddle
- ▲ Plates, bowls and cups
- ▲ Knives, forks and spoons
- ▲ Spatula, ladle, paring knife
- ▲ Fresh water container
- ▲ Wash tub



All packed up and ready to go

If you are camping in a campground, there will be garbage cans distributed around the area. It is still a good idea to bring your own garbage bags, however, so that you do not have to make constant trips to the garbage cans. If you are backpack camping, there will not be any garbage cans and you will have to pack out all of your trash. Whichever type of camping you will be doing, it really pays to limit the amount of trash that you take to the campsite. Strip all food-packaging materials at home, and pack foods into reusable containers or sealable bags, in order to reduce the volume of garbage remaining after use.

Aluminum foil is useful for campfire cooking and, in fact, you can cook entire meals in it by doubling it up and forming it into an envelope to hold the food (usually meat and vegetables). Roll up the edges to seal the foil “envelope” and place it on the campfire grate or directly on hot coals for a super tender, deliciously steamed meal. Even when you are cooking on a camp stove, add something extra to the meal by wrapping individual potatoes or apples



Baked potatoes on the campfire

in aluminum foil and placing them on hot coals to bake.

One of your biggest decisions about camp cooking might just be “paper or plastic?” Paper plates mean fewer dishes to wash and can be burned in a campfire. The campfire is no place for plastic utensils, though. Washing dishes is not that difficult, though, and real plates and utensils make for a much better dining experience. Your camping situation, too, will help dictate your preference in plates and utensils. The last thing you want to carry, if you are backpacking, is a several pounds of paper plates.

Safety and Comfort Gear

The final list of gear that you will need for camping is for safety and comfort items:

- ▲ First aid kit
- ▲ Insect repellent
- ▲ Sunscreen
- ▲ Several flashlights
- ▲ Toilet paper
- ▲ Towels and shower shoes
- ▲ Small broom or whiskbroom
- ▲ Pillows
- ▲ Matches and lighter
- ▲ Fire starters
- ▲ Small ax or hatchet
- ▲ Camp chairs



3M makes a great bandage assortment that is inexpensive

One thing that we need to think about when venturing into the backcountry is the need to be a lot more self-reliant than we sometimes are back at home. When the nearest emergency care can be hours away, it just makes good sense to carry a first aid kit. A good first aid kit will include items to treat the most common outdoor-related maladies including cuts, burns, poison oak and ivy, and sprains. Remember to pack for both kids and adults, so make sure to include items like children’s aspirin.

Insect repellent, sunscreen and toilet paper is self-explanatory, but if you plan to use the campground’s shower facilities make sure to bring some shower shoes to wear in the shower. Even if you have no plans to partake in the campground facilities, a pair of sandals or shower shoes can be a lot more comfortable and easy to put on and take off, around the campsite, than hiking boots or tennis shoes. One thing you will notice

quickly is how much dirt gets tracked into the tent. A small broom, or whiskbroom, is essential for tidying up the inside of the tent, each day. Besides the sanitary benefits, keeping dirt out of your tent is also beneficial to keeping warm at night. When dirt becomes trapped your sleeping bag's insulation, it displaces air and tends to compress the insulation (down or synthetic), both of which rob the bag's ability to keep you warm.

We finish our list of safety and comfort items with campfire gear and camp chairs to enjoy the campfire. I cannot remember the last time that I used matches to start a fire, but it is a good idea to have a backup plan for those times when the lighter just will not light, or it is not in the place where you always keep it. Fire starters come in all different types, including solid pellets and semi-liquid jells.

You can usually find these in the outdoor barbeque section of your grocery store, along with the charcoal and lighter fluid. You can also make your own fire starters, with cotton balls or lint from the dryer. We collect lint in empty egg cartons and it works great for starting campfires. Most campgrounds sell firewood, but it is a good idea to bring a small ax or hatchet to make kindling.



Firewood is usually available at the campground, but you may still need to chop kindling to start a fire