

Safer Hiking With Children

It's hiking season again! The White Mountain area has some great scenery, lots of wildlife and a very well developed trail system thanks to the TRACKS organization (<http://www.tracks-pinetop-lakeside.org/>) and the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests (<http://www.fs.usda.gov/asnf>). Hiking and camping are healthy and inexpensive activities that just have to be the most popular outdoor sports enjoyed by multiple generations at the same time. In other words, what a great way to strengthen family bonds!

Family gatherings usually include young adventurers who aren't afraid of anything. This puts more responsibility on the adults to make sure everybody is prepared, kept track of and knows what to do if they get lost. It's a fine balance between being too restrictive or too loose on youngster supervision, especially in mixed groups of kids with much different levels of experience. Even when everybody is supposed to hike together, it never fails that, when you get separated a little bit, there is always a trail junction involved where hikers can easily go in different directions. So, it should be a rule to wait for your entire group when faced with trail choices and always keep your hiking buddies within sight. Make sure a responsible adult is clearly assigned as the "sweeper" to be the last person in the group who keeps everybody in front of them, even if it means stopping to rest for a while. Kids should be taught to always stay on a trail when in unfamiliar country.

Every hiker should have a backpack or fanny-pack that can carry water bottles, snacks, extra clothes and small survival kits. Kids should also be outfitted with a folded large trash bag that has a hole cut in the top front of the bag. When the bag is pulled over your body the hole lines up with your face making it easy to breathe in your emergency "rain poncho with a hood". Another inexpensive survival tool -- worth its weight in gold -- is a whistle. It is easy to carry and can be heard from much greater distances than someone shouting. Many young hikers enjoy making their own survival backpacks.

To be fully prepared, young hikers should also be taught what to do if for some reason they do become "Temporarily Misplaced." People can make it much easier to be found and rescued with a couple of simple steps that even the youngest hikers can understand and remember.

Most people start feeling a sense of panic if they think they are lost, especially kids. So the first thing to do when you feel a little anxious about your situation, is to take a deep breath and try to stay calm. People make bad decisions when stressed out and kids can panic and just start running aimlessly, burning valuable energy, often tripping and getting hurt and always making it more difficult for searchers to find them. Energy is needed to stay warm so the best thing for kids to do when lost is to find a tree that is easy to hug and find comfort under it. The National Association of Search and Rescue has developed a program called "Hug-a-Tree" that is credited with saving lost kids nationwide. They recommend telling kids to pick a tree that is not a "Grandpa or Big Daddy" tree or a "Little Baby" tree but rather a middle sized tree. This sized tree can provide shelter without being a high lightning risk. By staying put and even talking to the tree, kids will feel more comfortable and make the search area much smaller, leading to a faster rescue.

Kids should be taught not to be afraid of searchers, if they get lost. Most parents teach their children

that strangers are danger so that is why searchers like to wear uniforms and badges to resemble trusted law enforcement officers. Parents should also emphasize that getting lost is nothing to be ashamed of so they shouldn't try to hide from others if they feel lost. Tell them that all outdoor people need help from others every once in a while.

The smartest thing kids can do is to keep warm, dry and safe by staying near shelter like a medium sized tree on a trail where searchers can see them. They can make themselves more obvious with a big "X" or "SOS" made from stones or sticks. If they hear a search aircraft, kids should be taught to move away from the shelter and lie down in an open clearing with no trees, waving their arms and legs. If they hear people, they should use their whistles by blowing three times (or yelling "help" three times), waiting ten seconds and repeating until rescued. And make sure your kids don't try to hide to get away from dangerous animals, since most animals are afraid of people and the other ones will try to hide in the same small spaces!

The most important points for safer hiking with kids:

- Have children wear brightly colored clothes and hiking shoes, not flip-flops or sandals
- Make sure all kids have a backpack for water, snacks, sunscreen, extra clothes and a small survival kit.
- Teach children to always stay on a trail and never hike alone
- When hiking with a group of older children, make sure someone tells an adult where the group is going and when you'll be back
- If a child feels lost, teach them to find a medium-sized tree to hug and find shelter under it.
- Take photographs of your child's shoe sole patterns to help searchers distinguish it from other tracks
- Remind children that no one will be angry at them for getting lost so they should not be afraid of searchers looking for them.
- Teach children and others when lost to **S.T.O.P.** and memorize what the letters stand for:
 - S = Stop**, take a deep breath, sit down to relax and prevent panic, then
 - T = Think** about what you should do to stay warm and visible, and then
 - O = Observe** your surroundings to try and figure out where you are and make sure you can find a place to stay dry, and finally
 - P = Plan** a way to stay warm and visible to searchers like hugging a tree and stick with that plan.

In case someone is missing, don't wait to start looking for them. The longer you wait to call 911, the farther the lost person could travel and the longer the search will take. This could be critical if bad weather is heading your way. Rain and snow not only cause hypothermia but they can also erase tracks and scents needed by the search and rescue crews and dog tracking teams. The Sheriff's office would rather have you call right away since search personnel can be easily called off, which happens commonly.

Hiking and camping are great family activities that can create a lifetime of great memories. With just a few precautions and responsible supervision, even the youngest explorers can safely enjoy our beautiful White Mountains of Arizona. Happy Hiking!

For more ideas and information try these:

<https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/kids-hiking.html>

<http://www.makeandtakes.com/10-tips-for-hiking-with-kids>

<http://www.backpacking.net/featured4.html>