

GUIDELINES

A few thoughts for outdoor lovers and leaders from
WILD GUYde Adventures, LLC

Vol. 2, Special edition (Winter, 2008)

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"CLIMBING WITH CHILDREN" -- Expanded Version of an interview of Lester with Blue Ridge Outdoors Magazine, Winter, 2008 (reprinted by permission)

Tell us about your family. Do your kids like to climb? Your wife? Any kid that's more into it than the others?

I have two sons (21 and 17) and two daughters (19 and 11). My wife Robin and I have always enjoyed being outdoors, and have involved the children (now young adults) all along in hikes, canoeing, and some caving and climbing. So the big picture is that the outdoor experiences have provided some marvelous high quality times for us together as a family. My sons have embraced climbing more, to the point that now, my older son leads some trips and assists me in guiding larger groups or multiple events. My wife climbed in college as part of the outing club that I was a leader in, but hasn't really climbed much since. When I ask her why, she tells me that back then, she had ulterior motives. ☺ She has said that if our kids must climb, she is glad that they are learning from someone who knows what they are doing.

When you take children are they apprehensive? Or are they more fearless than most adults?

Healthy kids enjoy physical action and adventure, but like adults, some have a greater need for certainty than others. The very definition of "adventure" implies an uncertain outcome, so we need to know how our children respond to that. Most children have an internal range of comfort, and when you push them beyond it, they can get anxious and resistant to trying things. Some people say that kids are naturally daredevils, but I find this a bit simplistic. A wise parent will work to understand their child before ever setting foot in the backcountry, and then create experiences that provide the right mix of joy and challenge. If a kid is having a miserable time in the outdoors, the root cause is often a parent (or scout leader, etc.) who didn't do their homework or prepare adequately, or who has their own agenda.

What do most kids enjoy about climbing? Most kids are into team sports at a young age, is the solitude of climbing refreshing or something they have to overcome?

Kids will probably enjoy both soccer/basketball and the outdoor activities, but for different reasons. Soccer is all about continual action and friends and wearing a team shirt (social affiliation) and getting a trophy (extrinsic motivators). Climbing is about extended time with Mom or Dad, learning new things like knots and signals, seeing snakes and waterfalls, and getting ice cream or a Little Debbie on the way home (our particular tradition!). One of the unique things that the outdoor activities like hiking and climbing and caving offer to even the college students I teach is the chance to use and test their body and be an "athlete" in a non-traditional venue, with no coach, no screaming fans, no score, no humiliation, and no bench time. Some young people have really been turned off to the traditional sports scene, and find in climbing that they can still experience physical effort, striving, fitness, and exhilaration, without all the other garbage. So I would say that climbing probably sits higher on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs than team sports ☺

Any hard and fast rule about what age a kid should be before they start climbing?

Kids can be exposed to outdoor activity as soon as they can walk, so they begin to see this environment as an exciting and comfortable one, rather than one that is foreign and intimidating. And hiking naturally gives way to scrambling and exploring. In my Adventure Classroom, we spend a whole morning with 2nd and 3rd graders exploring on and under and through the huge boulders of a scree slide/boulder field on the side of the mountain, and they love it. I also rig a two-line rope bridge over a creek, so they can begin getting up off the ground and enjoying it. Children are physically capable of top-roping low angle and highly featured class 5 routes as 5 and 6 year-olds, but their emotional readiness is almost more important than their physical capabilities. Some kids are ready, but others suddenly get intimidated when you add gear. While I don't get a lot of personal satisfaction from indoor climbing, the controlled climate and the ability to easily create a kid-friendly route in a rock gym can give kids a easy first chance at getting off the ground.

Are there any common mistakes that parents make when trying to introduce their kids to climbing? Is it difficult to keep your personal expectations in check when climbing with children? For instance, a lot of climbers are goal oriented, pushing themselves further and further with each climb. Is it difficult to step back and take it easy when you have a child along for the ride?

Many of us outdoor lovers are naturally eager to introduce our kids to what we enjoy so much. But I try to emphasize with parents that they should let their kids' level of enthusiasm set the pace. When I guide a family, especially with young children, I try to reframe in my mind and in the minds of the parents what the goal is for the day. Parents may come into the day thinking that "this guide is going to get my kids into

climbing," but I try to frame it: "my goal is to give these kids a great day in the outdoors!" That may mean letting them try scrambling, roping up for something simple, but then also looking for crayfish in the creek, watching a turkey vulture soaring off the ridge, and exploring around some big boulders and crevasses. A mom hired me last summer to take her with her 9 year old son and another little buddy out climbing for his birthday present. We top-roped a little in the morning, and then went up to the top of the rock platform to eat lunch in the sun. I pointed out the huckleberries to the boys, and guess what -- they spent the rest of the afternoon picking berries while mom and I talked and took photos. Now you might say that I was a fairly well paid berry-picker, but my point is that those boys were having a great day, and will be much more eager to go back out there in the future than if they had been pressured by an overzealous parent or guide to do something new and intimidating. Another lesson from the day might be that they simply have a shorter attention span on any one activity than grownups.

One other subtle issue is how we treat them when they either don't want to participate, or can't meet our performance expectations. Fundamentally, our children want our approval, and we have a lot of power in their little emotional lives with how we dispense or withhold it. So we must be very self-aware of our tendency to transmit messages of disapproval when a kid doesn't want to climb, or doesn't want to finish a route. We must just keep remembering that we are here for them, to enrich their lives, and they are not here for us (to gratify our egos, etc.), and our body language and tone must match our verbiage. So while I lament to say it, I definitely have seen the proverbial "Little League parent" in the outdoors, trying to impress me, the guide, with how precocious and talented their 8 year old is. (All of us have a little of Lake Wobegon in us: "*All my children are above average...*"). These parents then get frustrated when their child doesn't "perform." A parent like that is in it for the wrong reasons, and the truth is, their kids will probably pitch the whole climbing thing before too long too, because it never had real meaning for them. It goes without saying that adding competitiveness too early, or using outdoors achievements as a measure of manhood (at 8 years old) is way over the edge.

Younger children don't yet have a sense of their level of development within a sport, so the idea of "suffering in order to become a better climber" (through training, repeated practice, etc.) doesn't really take hold until junior high age or even older.

So the long and short is, as parents we try to introduce our kids to the world and activities that we love so much, but in respecting their individual personhood, we have to be ready for them to look at us and say sometimes, "Mom, I really don't think I want to go today - I'd rather stay home and play video games."

You mentioned you love taking families climbing. I think a lot of our readers would be surprised to think of climbing as a "family" sport. Is it a good family sport? How do you address the different skill levels and different expectations?

As a former physical education teacher, I would say that "healthy children grow up in families where they see their parents healthy and active." So role modeling is far more influential than haranguing or bullying about fitness and physical activity. When your kids see your enthusiasm, it will be contagious. That said, I do think that when we start to introduce our kids to these activities, it is time to put some of our own personal ambitions on the shelf. Occasionally, it might inspire your kids to see you pulling a 5.10, but they will have a far more pleasant day overall if you are cheering them on in their first 5.2. The payoff is that we experience a whole new level of personal joy and satisfaction when we start giving the sport to our children, and this can supplant and even exceed the pleasure we find in climbing our own hard route. The ultimate experience is when they start to surpass us in their skills. An insecure parent feels threatened here, but one at peace knows that this is the goal of parenting. Nothing is more rewarding than knowing that you had a hand in helping them reach higher than you could. Here are a few additional suggestions for positive family experience:

- Many areas here in the East allow you to set up several top ropes in the same site, with varying difficulties. This can accommodate different age and ability levels.
- Kids are not nearly as motivated by the "challenge" as they are simply by having fun, physical movement, action, and competence. So set up routes that provide almost guaranteed success at first (overly easy).
- I have often seen that kids only have the emotional energy to "go to the bank" once in a day. So if a kid struggles through a vexing overhang or sketches out on a high exposure route, ready yourself for the reality that they may be done for the day. It's not that they don't have the physical skill to climb more - they just don't want to go back to that place emotionally for a while. So we need to be flexible and willing to change the plan for the day (let go of our expectations).
- Take lots of photos to give them later, or show grandparents. Take one of the kid's friends along, so they are having a social experience as well as a physical and natural one. Take lots of Gatorade and snacks.
- As you plan your vacation week, I would encourage planning several different activities, so if a kid doesn't get jazzed by one, she isn't consigned to three days of misery. Instead of planning 3 days of climbing, try a day of climbing, a water day, and a cave trip (or even - gasp - a day at the Mall).

What are some considerations parents need to take into account when taking their young children on their first climbing experience?

Some of this has been addressed already, but my one additional suggestion (and I say this at risk of being accused of doing shameless advertising) would be to hire a guide, even if the parent is a climber. The AMGA (American Mountain Guides Association) is the only professional mountain guides' association in the US with certification, so an AMGA guide is going to have training, a Wilderness First Responder certification, adequate insurance, and appropriate permits if using public land (national forest or national park). They are also going to know an area well enough to provide "appropriate adventure" for your family, and they will have ample equipment so you don't need to invest in a lot of gear if you are not sure that your family will embrace the sport. They will have a good inventory of climbing helmets, harnesses, and shoes, so all family members are safe and comfortable, and can have success on the rock (instead of spinning their wheels in their Converse High Top All-Stars). A good guide will become a member of your family for the day, and do a quick read on each person and their personality and motivation, and then adjust to what they see.

I watch pretty carefully when I see families out at the climbing areas that I visit; if Dad got his training in the military 20 years ago, or learned from a buddy, there can be the real possibility that he is using antiquated gear or unenlightened practices (for anchoring, belaying, rappelling, etc.). Several examples of dad-led-experiences-gone-terribly-wrong appear each year in the American Alpine Club's annual volume, ***Accidents in North American Mountaineering***. Most climbing schools and guide services offer skills workshops and practice seminars, so a parent can go and get grounded in current best practice before taking the family. A parent (or any climber) who is unwilling to take instruction is exhibiting other and more potentially fatal attitudes. I would encourage any outdoor lover, and especially a parent who plans to take kids into the backcountry, to complete a Wilderness First Aid course (see WFA.net in Virginia, or contact SOLO or Wilderness Medical Associates).

An additional challenge occurs when your growing children gain some competence, and you begin entertaining the notion of going climbing as a twosome. It should go without saying that you don't start taking just one child (even a precocious teen climber) until they are fully ready to assume care and take charge in an emergency. In the event that you are incapacitated in a lead fall, do you really want your 13-year old living the rest of their life with the trauma of watching you die because they were up one pitch at Seneca, saw your massive head injury, and didn't know what to do about it? This sounds brutal, but in September of last year on Dragontail Peak, we witnessed the death of a father-son team from Spokane. They were decent climbers, but the dad reckoned that nothing could happen to him that he couldn't handle; when he fell, apparently his 12-year old son had no other options but to curl up and die of hypothermia.

Any special safety considerations for children? Do you often have to ease a parent's mind about the perceived risk of climbing?

Often when I am with a family, I become quickly aware that one parent is the adventurer and the other is the worrier (and it doesn't always divide predictably along gender lines). So before you ever venture out of doors with your family, you should achieve a level of understanding with your spouse. Lacking this, there can develop real conflict out at the site, and the kids (or the guide) get caught in the middle.

Another reality is that no outdoor adventure is completely safe - not all hazards can be eliminated, and if they could, it wouldn't be adventure. So in the guiding industry, we say that our goal is not to **eliminate** risk but to **manage** risk, with proper equipment, procedures, etc. If you want the **liver-shiver** but no risk, go to a theme park. A few practical issues with kids and parents:

- Children need more constant supervision in dangerous areas (top edges, drop zones at the bottom), and need to be monitored for dangerous activities (tossing rocks off the top, etc.).
- A chest harness can keep a young child upright if they don't quite have the lower body ballast of an adult to keep them "nested" in their hip harness. Smaller size helmets (or ones with adjustable headbands) should be used, so heads are properly protected. Bike helmets, kayaking helmets, and construction hard hats are inappropriate for climbing, and even more so when ill-fitting.
- Some parents who are very safety conscious like to hear a lot about details, so I spend time explaining about procedures, technical specifications of gear, and even what-if-scenarios for bad situations. When parents see that I am as committed to their kids' safety as they are, they usually relax a little.
- Finally, I try to emphasize from the very start that safety is a partnership. I as the guide am not here to **keep you safe** - I am here to **model how each of us should be behaving** in order to minimize the chance of something bad happening. My pre-trip mini-lecture emphasizes three points: "*Keep it safe*" (everyone attentive to dangerous issues), "*Keep it natural*" (care for the outdoor environment), and "*Keep it positive*" (be an affirmer and a positive influence in the lives of others today). When I get buy-in all around the circle on these three, we are going to have a great day!

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