

GUIDELINES

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

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Teaching Children about Being Lost in the Woods

As outdoor parents, there are two story lines that we are aware of. The first story terrifies us – it is of the child lost in Shenandoah National Park, and the search that seems to go on for 2 or 3 days. The child may be found, cold, wet, and dehydrated, or maybe not so fortunate. The second story is of that child who, when faced with some outdoor challenge, makes decisions remarkably mature for their young years. Maybe they are found with a snug shelter, or with a fire burning, waiting the eventual rescue. Maybe they tell rescuers of fashioning warmth by stuffing leaves into their jeans and jacket sleeves, signaling passing trucks with their flashlight, or eating berries that they had learned to identify positively. “*That’s my kid,*” we want to think. But how many of us take the time to teach our children the things that they can do to extend their survival chances? Here are a few simple concepts to begin conveying to your children as soon as they are able to join you on your outdoor jaunts.

1. Prepare: always take a whistle, a jacket, and a water bottle. Even daytrips can turn into unintended overnights, if weather delays travel or a navigation error eats up daylight.
2. If lost or separated from parents or the group but with a friend or pet, *stay together*. Do not separate.
3. Stay in one place – do not wander. Survival experts emphasize that the focus is not on getting oneself unlost, but staying alive long enough to be found.
4. Keep warm, and as dry as possible. Do not lie on bare ground (use branches or leaves under you for warmth). Hypothermia (losing body heat faster than the body can regenerate it by metabolism) is a faster killer than starvation or dehydration. When we lay on a cold surface, the massive thermal battle begins; our body tries in vain to warm Mother Earth, but the opposite actually happens. That cold ground sucks body heat away, so don’t just put a blanket or jacket over top; insulate yourself from the ground beneath.

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5. Find a cozy WAITING place – not a hiding place. Which of these three would you say is most important: food, water, or shelter? SHELTER! SHELTER! SHELETER! You can stay alive for weeks without food, you can stay alive for days without water, but cold and wet, you may not last a night of hypothermia.
6. Put out something bright to signal rescuers – a flag, bandana, strip of cloth. Rescuers have walked right past sleeping children, and children have hidden from the scary noises of barking dogs and yelling adults.
7. Look BIG for rescuers. Wave arms, make noise, shine a flashlight, blow a whistle.
8. Do not eat anything you are not sure of. Finding a good natural food source is a chancy proposition; it depends upon location, time of year, and proper identification. So there may be a few outdoor edibles that you can teach your kids to be bullet-sure of (huckleberries, wine berries), but mostly, we want to stress staying hydrated, and not ingesting something that will cause a secondary problem. *Hunger is better than poisoning!*
9. Stay away from large rivers and lakes. Again, teaching children early on never to swim alone, this will be a natural progression.
10. Keep your distance from animals and wild creatures. Wild animals may *look* cute, but they don't *act* cute, particularly when threatened.

In addition to these “at the moment” survival concepts, there are some things that we can do as parents before the fact to better prepare our children for outdoor situations, and to help them toward rewarding backcountry adventures.

1. Begin teaching your children around home about simple first aid concepts, maybe while treating their neighborhood “boo-boos.” Talk about the necessity to clean wounds, protect from sunburn, and stay hydrated when physically active. *“Be a grape – not a raisin; the difference between the grape and the raisin is that the raisin forgot to drink.”*
2. Assemble the Ten Essentials, and teach your kids that every trip requires these items, even if they do not intend to be out overnight: Those ten, in case we haven't reviewed them lately, are: *flashlight or headlamp, matches, pocketknife, extra food, water, first aid kit, map, compass, shelter (can be extra clothing), and whistle.*
3. On family outings, set up experiences for your kids to begin to demonstrate self reliance. Let them lead the hike back to the car, or read the map. Ask them to point out to you where they would create an overnight shelter if they needed to (look for natural starters like overhanging rocks shelves or large blowdowns).
4. Make family activity of practicing outdoor skills (fire building without lighter fluid, map and compass reading).

In addition to the peace of mind that you will begin to gain about your children's preparedness, you may discover that these activities are fun, that they are quality time with your family, and that they testify against our culture's preoccupation with high tech and battery-operated entertainment. Happy hiking!

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