

Campfires, Critters and S'Mores A Mom's Guide to Camping Solo

Hello Everyone,

I hope you enjoy this sample of my new book. Above all, camping is an adventure that the entire family can enjoy, regardless of individual preferences or differences. It's a voyage of discovery we can experience together and as individuals.

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Chapter One: Why Camp?

I'll bet I have taken more than 200 kids camping. Notice that I survived. The complete list of traumas I have endured while camping includes a myriad of minor inconveniences and several short-term and wholly forgettable discomforts. Camping nowadays is easy, safe, cheap, and fun.

As a working mother of three children, I know exactly what you're thinking... "I spend 24/7 cooking, cleaning, and chasing after a family and you want me to do it all *where?* I've got dirt on the floors, filthy toilets, spiders in the closets...my life *is* a giant campout!"

Chances are you and I have a lot in common. I read. I'm a mom. I work. I run a household. For me, the very word "camping" used to conjure images of waking in the middle of the night to find a tarantula sharing my sleeping bag. I would picture myself calling for little Timmy, my frightened but ever-courageous voice echoing through the canyons as I refused to give up the search for my poor lost child. (Did I mention he was blind?) I imagined peering out of my tent in the middle of the night to discover that we were surrounded by a pack of wolves, panting and drooling and slowly advancing to mete us our inevitable fate.

Perhaps also like you, I remember when I couldn't have imagined having enough time to *read about* a campout much less actually leading the charge to go on one. Now, however, armed with 18 years of experience camping with kids in dozens of different locations and situations, I am prepared to show you to the last inscrutable detail that a family campout is easy to plan, simple to carry out, relaxing, fun, and memorable for everyone in your family.

Camping is a vacation. Camping is a great getaway. Camping is a chance to change your environment, try something new, get some exercise, change your attitude, and see your family in a whole new light.

Reconnect With Your Family

A family campout guarantees you a golden opportunity to reconnect with those you love the most. Once upon a time in an era fewer and fewer of us can recall, families whiled away long hours every evening by sitting down together. In the summer they sat on their front porches, and in the winter they sat in their living rooms. And while they sat they filled those hours, lots of hours. Moms and dads discussed the news; children studied and played. They talked, they hummed, and they read aloud. They listened, they observed, they advised, and they comforted one another. Family members looked into each other's eyes and knew each other's hearts.

If you're lucky, you are old enough to recall watching Sheriff Andy Taylor sitting on his front porch strumming a guitar. Know why he did that? Because in Mayberry, there was nothing else to do. Aunt Bea sat with him on that porch, contentedly knitting or mending. Opie, of course, read or played on the floor. Together they quietly solved each other's – and the world's – problems.

Now think carefully about the last time you and your family sat and shared one entire evening together, with everyone home, the TV off, and no interruptions. If you can't recall it, go camping. Camping guarantees a chance to leave the usual hectic routine behind, and sit down together through long evenings of family and firelight.

Bring Out The Best in Your Children

Ask any kid if they would rather go to a museum, an aquarium, a history center, an art gallery, or spend the weekend camping, and the answer will be the same every time. Kids love to camp, and for hundreds of simple reasons you and I forgot long ago. For one thing, it's exciting to sleep in a tent. Food tastes terrific when it is cooked and eaten outside. Even better, they get to play with matches! A weekend campout is one of the least embarrassing family trips your teens can report to their friends while they are pushing jewelry through their pierced belly buttons, and tugging their blue jeans below their bottoms in the school bathroom on Monday morning.

As well-meaning parents, we spend a sizable chunk of our lives and vast fortunes helping our children find their talents in a particular sport, a musical instrument, or a school club. But perhaps their talents lie in the great outdoors! This could explain a lot. What if Junior has been splitting your eardrums and offending the neighborhood cats, popping neck veins while spitting into a trombone, when what God really had in mind for him was to be a mountaineer and ace fire builder! I once discovered on a weekend Scout campout that the one child whose parents were debating the advantages of a Ritalin regimen was a talented hiker... tireless, observant, and able to lead our group across trails the rest of us could barely see.

At the risk of sounding sexist, I believe in the importance of taking girls camping. Too many of our daughters live in a world of mega malls, music videos, and Internet chats. Too mature too early, they fix their hair in multi-level ponytails and sport tri-color fingernail polish. No wardrobe is complete without trendy tee shirts and designer sneakers. Eleven-year-olds now dare each other to send emails to the boys they like. But they will drop it all like a weekend at Great Aunt Edna's for a chance to go camping.

I love to watch girls on a campout as they turn their attentions from cell phones and personal CD players to campfires and hiking trails. As the first day of camping progresses, girls stop caring about their hairstyles, their nails, their clothes, even boys. The topics of their conversations change to the availability of firewood, the challenge of an upcoming hike, and whether or not there are trout in the river.

Camp for the Memories

My family did not camp when I was growing up. The closest I came to family camping was spending an occasional night in the ‘camper’ parked behind my grandparents’ farmhouse in South Dakota. The camper itself sat atop a pickup truck. In addition to its doll-sized sink, hundreds of secret compartments, and fascinating hiding places, the camper featured a double bed that protruded out the front like the cockpit of a jetliner, only with more windows.

From the time I was seven years old, my grandma indulged me by sleeping with me so I wouldn’t get scared (or start the engine). The nights were dead quiet. Together we stared out the windows over vast orchards and fields, at an endless black sky. We counted a jillion stars. My grandma held my hand under the covers and whispered to me until I couldn’t keep my eyes open. More than thirty years later, I can still remember every detail.

Camp for Attitude Adjustment

On a campout, the rules change. A bath isn’t necessary. The usual evening squabbles over homework, phone calls, or TV time are completely eliminated. The food is simpler. The boundaries are bigger. Your child’s playground may be a 5-mile hiking trail, a 500-acre lake, or a 5,000-acre forest.

Rock-a-bye Your Baby, In the Treetops

I have camped a dozen times with a child so young he still slept in a crib. I packed a portable crib, which was easy to transport and set up. Best of all, it kept Junior right where I wanted him when we were ready for some downtime. Do not let the fact that you have a baby keep you from camping! Big spaces, new places, lots of fresh air, and happy parents are just what the pediatrician ordered.

Show me a child who has been camping since he or she was a baby, and I’ll show you a kid who adapts well to different surroundings, who is willing to try new ways to do things, who works well with others, and who will forever harbor a love of the great outdoors.

Kid Stuff

If your toddler is abusing his new power to say no, take him camping and let him wear himself out in the fresh air without the usual confines of a playroom or the requirement to share toys with daycare friends. If your kindergartner is having trouble adjusting to the structure of a classroom, turn him loose in an outdoor place where he doesn’t need to be timed, reminded, cajoled, herded, or reprimanded.

Young children are a natural in the great outdoors. They notice and appreciate things that you and I walk right by without even noticing. And on a campout, there is ample time for simple pleasures. Together with your little ones, smell some wildflowers, explore a path, kick a ball, watch the clouds roll by. Let them run, fall, shout, get dirty, and play all day, then watch them devour their dinner and collapse into coma-like sleep.

Teen Talk

If your teen is troubled, take her camping. Make it clear the weekend is just for the two of you, and then make sure you strive to listen, not talk. Leave her friends, her computer, her cell phone, and her CD's behind. Without the distractions of peers, television, movies, and all the other electronic diversions prevalent in her life at home, the two of you will be able to spend quiet evenings getting to know each other a little better.

Don't kid yourself; our kids face pressures you and I can no longer even imagine - grade pressures, peer pressures, pressures to behave a certain way around members of the opposite sex, threats of weapons, gangs, or drugs in school. It is easy to lose touch with their daily realities. Lazing in camp chairs together under a vast night sky, staring at the same campfire during a long summer night, will let them know you are willing to listen.

If nighttime reminds your child you are listening, daytime allows her to be a kid again. Imagine all pressures removed. Pack lots of her favorite foods. Hand her the instructions on setting up the tent and let *her* tell *you* what to do for a change. Ask her to choose the Saturday activities, whether hiking, swimming, fishing, kayaking, or horseback riding. (WARNING: teenage girls always choose horseback riding! Pack long pants and a big bottle of Ibuprofen.) Bring a small present and give it to her in the van during the drive home. Breathe. Smile.

Have you noticed how many rehabilitation programs for juveniles are based upon getting kids outdoors? A multitude of programs, from Outward Bound to juvenile detention boot camps, use outdoor adventures to teach teenagers how to meet challenges, get along with others, control their behavior, and develop a sense of personal responsibility. Teens in these programs learn that when they can't change the weather or their environment, they might just have to change themselves.

Go Towards the Light...Firelight, that is!

When darkness and quiet fall like a heavy blanket, the campfire -- like one of those giant cartoon magnets -- pulls you so strongly your belt buckle and wristwatch get there first. Sitting around the campfire is as fundamental to camping as eating outside and sleeping in a tent. You and your family will draw close, pull up chairs, and argue cheerfully over the best way to heat the s'mores. Everyone will gather because, quite frankly, there is absolutely nothing else to do. On a campout, you and your family will sit and talk for hours. You will listen, observe, advise, and comfort one another.

For a child, staring at a crackling campfire on a cool, dark night brings an unexplainable comfort; a comfort akin to centering his wiry little body squarely in his mother's lap and burying his face in her warm chest as she encircles him with her arms.

For a grownup, a campfire is a place where routine worries go up in smoke. It is around the campfire that I once again take a few quiet minutes to resolve that where my family is concerned I will try (again) to be a little more accepting, to be a better listener, to be a better mom.

In an era in which put-downs and bad attitudes are as close as the next crowded checkout lane at the grocery store, it's nice to know you can spend a few hours sitting around a campfire with the people who are put on this earth to build each other up and to remind one another of their many talents and strengths. A family is a place where everyone has room to learn and to grow. A campfire is a place where everyone belongs.

A campfire brings you peace. You and your family will be alone together, cut off from outside interruptions and insulated by darkness. Suddenly you are all tiny specks beneath an enormous universe. You will stare into the flames and realize that your ancestors sat in the glow of this very fire for thousands of years. And you will feel supremely happy knowing that whatever happens tomorrow will be up to you, and that it's going to be all right.