

Introducing Children to Adventure in the Wild (and Local) Outdoors

Lester R. Zook, *WILD GUYde Adventures*

“Remember thy creator in the days of thy youth. Rise free from care before the dawn, and seek adventures. Let the noon find thee by other lakes, and the night overtake thee everywhere at home. There are no larger fields than these. No worthier games than here may be played. Grow wild according to thy nature, like these sedges and brakes... Let the thunder rumble; what if it threaten ruin to the farmers’ crops? That is not its errand to thee. Take shelter under the cloud, while they flee to carts and sheds. Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport. Enjoy the land but own it not. Through want of enterprise and faith, men are where they are, buying and selling and spending their lives like serfs...” (H.D. Thoreau, Walden)

“Why is it that every time we go on an adventure with Dad, we have to get up before the sun..?”
(Aaron, Lester’s son)

Richard Louv sates, *“Our children [today] are the first generation to be raised without meaningful contact with the natural world.”* (Last Child in the Woods, 2006). The author continues on to expound the numerous benefits accruing to families that intentionally engage with nature. From skill learning to enhanced self esteem, from individual character growth to a slower paced and less technologically dependent existence, and from large-muscle fitness oriented activities to natural science learning, the potential payoffs are manifold. All told, the primary benefit the outdoors can give us as families is *sustained and meaningful time together in a beautiful and naturally stimulating environment*. The purpose of this article is not to rehash Louv’s research and material. If you saw the title and started reading this piece, you are probably already convinced. The purpose of this article is to give some practical suggestions and guidance to families who are already persuaded that exploring nature together is a good thing. Let’s get started...



Are there opportunities nearby?

The Shenandoah Valley and adjacent mountain ranges offer a variety of nearby areas and activities for the outdoor family. Did you know that in August of 2009, Backpacker Magazine listed Harrisonburg Virginia as No. 15 on their list of the top 25 cities to raise an outdoor kid! The George Washington and Jefferson National Forests (VA) consist of nearly 1.8 million acres of forest, rivers, mountains, and trails for hiking, fishing, camping, mountain biking, boating, hunting, and rock climbing. The operational philosophy of the Forest Service is “multiple use.” Similarly, Monongahela National Forest (WV) has over 919,000 acres dedicated to the public’s enjoyment. Some public areas in the Forest have been developed (campgrounds, picnic/day-use areas, boat launches), but much of the land is simply wild and available to explore. Shenandoah National Park (VA) boasts over 197,000 acres, with over 79,000 designated as *wilderness*. Use is more restrictive in a national park (no trail biking, dogs must be leashed, backcountry camping requires a permit, etc.), but for beginner families, there are also more amenities (visitors’ centers, well-labeled trails, ranger stations, restrooms, and gift shops).

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 this. 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 will 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 hiking, climbing, and paddling? Most kids are into team sports at a young age, is the solitude of outdoor activities 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). Hiking and climbing are 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 bodies and be “athletes” 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 the outdoor sports that they can still experience physical effort, striving, fitness, and exhilaration, without all the other garbage. So I would say that nature activities probably sit 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?



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 program, 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-rope climbing 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. An attentive parent will have their “leadership radar” on, maintaining awareness of their child’s reactions, and adapting the activity as necessary.

Are there any common mistakes that parents make when trying to introduce their kids to the outdoors? Is it difficult to keep your personal expectations in check when hiking and 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 rock 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 hike or 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 outdoor 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."

What are some considerations parents need to take into account when taking their young children into higher risk activities like caving or rock climbing?

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) and the PCIA (Professional Climbing Instructors Association) are professional mountain guides' associations in the United States with certification, so an AMGA or PCIA guide is

going to have training, a Wilderness First Responder credential, 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 caving guide is going to have adequate protective equipment, and will have received training from the National Cave Rescue Commission. 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; you can contact SOLO, Wilderness Medical Institute, or Wilderness Medical Associates for details, rates, and dates.

An additional challenge occurs when your growing children gain some competence, and you begin entertaining the notion of going outdoors 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 risks of hiking, climbing, and caving?

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 whistle on a lanyard is a great tool for leaders/parents in the outdoors – I am wearing one all the time. It gives a lot of effect with very little effort. I teach my children’s groups that one blast means “Stop,” two blasts mean “Gather,” and three mean “Help.” I have stopped kids from doing dangerous

jumps across slick-rock streams from fifty yards away with one blast. I have brought lost groups back to the trail, signaled lunch time for scattered rope parties, and stopped bouldering attempts from going too high, all with a \$1.29 piece of plastic. When hiking all day or caving with groups, I have a whistle on every kid, so they can call for help too if necessary.

- 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.
- The Ten Essentials for any backcountry outing are: water, whistle, pocketknife, extra food (Powerbars, dried fruit), extra clothing (rain jacket or fleece), flashlight or headlamp, map, compass, first aid kit, and fire starter (matches, candle). Even daytrips can turn into unexpected overnights, so go prepared. And take the Eleventh Essential -- your BRAIN -- and know how to use it!



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!

Some Local Resources

Maps and Trail Information:

- **North River Ranger District office**, George Washington National Forest, 401 Oakwood Dr., Harrisonburg, VA, 22802 (540-432-0187, www.fs.fed.us/r8/gwi),
- **Shenandoah National Park Headquarters**, 3655 US 211 East, Luray, VA, 22835 (540-999-3500, www.nps.gov/SHEN)
- **Monongahela National Forest**, 200 Sycamore St., Elkins, WV, 26241 (304-636-1800, www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf)

Equipment and Supplies:

- Walkabout Outfitter, 90 N. Main St., Harrisonburg VA 22802 (540-434-9900) [Walkabout Outfitter | Virginia Outdoor Equipment and Apparel](http://WalkaboutOutfitter.com)
- **Appalachian Outdoor Adventures**, 18 E. Main St., Luray, VA, 22835 (540-743-7400, www.appalachianoutdoorsadventures.com)
- **Wilderness Adventure**, 50 Middlebrook Ave., Staunton, VA, 24401 (540-885-3200, www.wildernessadv.com)

Guides and Outfitters:

- **WILD GUYde Adventures** (*hiking, rock climbing, caving, and canoe trips*), 1047 Stuart St., Harrisonburg, VA, 22802 (540-433-1637, www.wildguyde.com)
- **Mossy Creek Fly Fishing** (*fishing gear and guiding*), 1790-92 E. Market St., Harrisonburg, VA , 22801 (540-434-2444, www.mossycreekyflyfishing.com)
- **Shenandoah Mountain Touring** (*mountain biking*), 222 Campbell St., Harrisonburg, VA, 22802 (540-434-2087, www.mtntouring.com)
- **Shenandoah River Adventures** (*canoes, kayaks, fishing, and tubing*), 415 Long Ave., Shenandoah VA, 22849 (540-478-5032, www.shenandoahriveradventures.com)

Environmental Interest Groups:

- **Sierra Club** (www.virginia.sierraclub.org/shenandoah)
- **Wild Virginia**, P.O. Box 1065, Charlottesville, VA 22902, (434-971-1553, www.wildvirginia.org)

Author's Biography: Lester R. Zook is owner of WILD GUYde Adventures LLC in Harrisonburg – an adventure guide service specializing in providing beginner and intermediate level outdoor adventure guiding and leadership training (rock climbing, caving, hiking, and canoeing) for families, groups, and individuals. In addition, Lester led the Outdoor Ministry program at Eastern Mennonite University for 27 years, and has been taking people into the outdoors for 4 decades. He is a PCIA Instructor Provider, a Wilderness First Responder, and a father of four. WILD GUYde Adventures has commercial use permits in both nearby national forests and the national park, and is a member of the Access Fund, the National Speleological Society, the Shenandoah Valley Travel Assoc., and the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Chamber of Commerce. Lester can be reached at lester@wildguyde.com or 540-433-1637.