

**A Kid's View of Walking  
(with Some Tips for Grown-ups)**

by  
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There are many ways to walk and many reasons to walk. I learned a new way today. A kid's version of what walking is all about.

Adults view walking as we do everything else: with a purpose. There are speed walking and slow walking, strolling, walking for exercise, and walking to get some place. Kids view walking as they do everything else in life: an adventure, an experience to be had, a process, a goal within itself. The adult view of walking for purpose or to accomplish a goal is foreign to kids. Adults who walk with kids and maintain their adult views on walking are quickly frustrated. I know. I am.

I learn so much from my kids. Like how to slow down.

Today we were walking along a marsh. It was cool, but not cold; infrequent raindrops would hit us; the first flowers of spring were up, and everything was green. We were the only ones out this day and looking around; we could have been the only ones on the planet. I would walk 20 steps forward and then seemingly go back 21 to stay with the kids. No matter how I slowed my pace, no matter how much I prodded and encouraged them, they had no interest in the goal. Or at least no interest in my goal of reaching the house. For some reason I thought the purpose of the walk was to get back home to mom and grandpa.

Their mode of walking seemed to be anything but that. Each step forward brought 15 distractions. A ladybug, a blade of grass, a bird in the distance, a rock, a story from a week ago that had to be told right this minute. The younger one would fall, and the older one would help him up. Fifteen minutes of walking, and we had gone about 20 feet. Only another half mile to go.

They weren't impatient with me, yet they did often look at me as if to say, "Hey dad, we're doing what we're doing. This is great. We are walking."

After a few deep breaths I realized my folly. I walk with a purpose, a place to go or a reason for walking. To them, the walk was the reason. My narrow definition of walking just wouldn't cut it with them. Stopping to look at each new item, watch a raindrop fall, explore a hole, listen to a sound, tell a story, laugh—this

was the walk. The essence of the walk was the experience, not the traversing of space. The stuff you do with your feet during a walk is just the means to get new discoveries in front of you.

I think the problem I have is that too often I do things for a reason and not just for the sheer pleasure and beauty of doing them.

I think I'll go for a walk later. With my kids. I need another lesson. I'll plan a shorter route and allow myself a long time to do it.

### **Some Helpful Hints for Turning Your Kids on to Hiking**

Nothing can ruin the day faster than a hungry or thirsty kid. They burn up more energy because not only are they hiking (well, my kids actually run a lot on hikes), but they are growing as well. It is always better to over-pack the food and drink than the opposite. I usually encourage my kids to help plan the meals and snacks. On a recent rainy-day hike, we stopped and had a tea party on a rock. The kids loved the hot peppermint tea with honey and pretzels on the side!

### **Select Hikes Based on Your Kids's Abilities and Interests**

Make sure the hike you choose is one your child can actually do. Check the mileage and elevation gain, and be sure the hike or the destination is something they will want to do (sand dunes, trees to climb, water to swim in?) Remember, you want the kids to have fun and fond memories.

### **Walk at Kid Pace, Not Adult Speed**

Adults tend to view hiking with a start-here, get-there attitude. To kids, often the traversing of space isn't as important as enjoying the journey. They are easily side-tracked by bugs crossing the trail, sand that needs to be drawn in, frogs that need to be caught, and other such distractions. When you can, get into it with them. Enjoy and even encourage the side trips. Remember the purpose of hiking is to have fun.

There are times when you need to make tracks, but balance your need to cover distance with their need to explore. If you pick hikes which are a comfortable length to them, this will be easier.

### **Hike Familiar Trails**

One of the greatest joys my kids have when hiking is developing a sense of familiarity with certain trails. My kids love to hike the same trails over and over again. Kids thrive on repetition. They know which rock we stop to eat at, where

the best places are to catch frogs and lizards, and where the water crosses the trail. They even know where I will stop and “surprise” them with chocolate.

It is my adulthood that urges me to always do a new trail, but I find that I too enjoy the intimacy that comes with hiking the same stretches over and over. It helps to motivate my kids to go hiking and keeps them moving once we are on the trail.

### **Go at Your Child’s Best Time of Day**

Kids have internal clocks that bring them to peaks and lows each day. Use these as much as possible in planning your day and outing. For example, my kids are at their most energetic stage in the morning, are ready for a hearty meal around 10:30, and can be sluggish from 11 to 1. Our best times for hitting the trail are in the morning or early afternoon. Our hardest hikes are when we hit the trail around 11 or 11:30.

### **The Right Shoes = Happy Feet = Happy Hikers**

This seems so obvious, but it is often overlooked. Appropriate doesn’t necessarily mean a \$150 pair of hiking boots. All you need is something comfortable which provides support and is appropriate for the terrain and weather. Where we live, we often wear calf-high rain boots to keep our feet dry from the moisture on the grasses. Other times, closed-toe sneakers are in order, while other days all-terrain sandals do the trick.

### **Appropriate Clothes**

As with the shoes, there is no one answer for all kids or even your kids. Plan for comfort and protect from brush, terrain, and weather. As usual, layering generally works best. Remember to anticipate that the weather at your destination (a summit or a beach, for example) may be quite different from the weather at the trailhead.

### **Expect the Unexpected**

All too often one kid does a face or hand plant and needs to be wiped and bandaged. Make sure bandages, wipes, lip balm, sting kill, sunscreen, tissues, and the like are in your pack.

### **Encourage Your Kids to Have Their Own Pack**

A small daypack helps them feel grown-up. They feel that they are contributing by carrying part of the load. Help them be moderate in what they pack and be ready to carry it for them.

The packs also allow the child to join in the preparation for the hike, as they can choose some items to bring: a favorite toy or book, a net for collecting (and releasing), a raincoat, etc.

### **Learn to Interpret Your Kid's Messages**

Unfortunately for adults, kids cannot always say exactly what they mean. (Who can?) It is our job to interpret the behavior and determine the problem. On a recent hike my then five-year-old daughter had a major blow-out halfway up the hill. She said she was tired and needed to be carried. I got angry and tried to lure her on. My wife interpreted it to mean she was hungry. We stopped (too early and in the wrong place for me) and ate lunch. Following the rest and hearty snack, my daughter was up and running for the remaining miles up the hill. Lesson for me: I am not in control of my kids' bodies.

### **Invent Games**

Games help keep the kids moving forward and add to the fun of the day. One of our favorites is to count things as we go. Other games include hide-and-seek (along the trail), counting colors, alphabet games, rhyming games and story telling.

One day as we hiked back to the car, my kids kept stopping to pick up stink bugs. Rather than fight a losing battle, and to encourage them to keep moving, I suggested that we count the bugs as we went back to the car. That kept them moving to the car while keeping the focus on their distraction. That also happened to be a particularly good day for beetles: 47 of the buggers in less than a mile.

### **Don't Forget the Treats**

It is fun to have treats, especially on the summit or under an oak. Years ago I bribed my wife up a hill using chocolate malt balls. The trick still works on her and with the kids. Sometimes they need the boost of energy from the sugar. Sometimes they just need to have something special. Sometimes – always, as a matter of fact – they just like to eat chocolate.

### **Stop to Enjoy the Beauty**

When you see something beautiful, stop and share it. Tell the kids why you like it and ask for their impressions. Be ready to stop and appreciate the things they think are beautiful as well.

## **Enjoy the Journey**

Don't forget to have fun. Whatever you do with the kids, wherever you go, remember, it is your day off, and you are with the family. Destinations and miles walked are far less important than having an enjoyable time with your family. Sometimes it is best to make your "destination" wherever you are, rather than that arbitrary point you selected before starting.

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*Note from Editor of Sierra Club Yodeler:*

*Ethan Rotman is a wildlife educator working for the Department of Fish and Game. He works to create programs that bring urban audiences in direct contact with natural places near their homes. He lives with his wife and two children along the northern edge of the San Francisco Estuary. While his children have grown since this article was originally written in 1995 – 1997, they both continue to be avid hikers and users of the out-of-doors. While they can go further and faster than what is described in the article, they continue to remind their father to enjoy the wonders found beside the trail rather than keeping his mind and eyes glued to the end.*