



Families on the Appalachian Trail

Planning a Family Hike



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Thinking about going on a hike with your family? Nervous about what could go wrong? This guide is here to help! Here at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), we'd like to see more families, in all their various forms, out enjoying the Appalachian Trail (A.T.), and we want to help you get out there! Even if you're an experienced hiker, hiking with children or novice hikers requires a different approach.

When you introduce kids (or adults) to the A.T. for the first time, focus on making sure they have a good time, rather than on completing your planned route. What you consider an easy hike may be a challenge for young or inexperienced hikers, and you want to be sure they come back again! These guidelines for planning and leading a family hike have been adapted from the collective knowledge of experienced hike leaders and cover how to choose a hike, how to prepare, and how to stay safe and have fun on the A.T.!

Choosing a Hike

If you're already familiar with the A.T., you may have a particular hike in mind for your family hike. If not, though, you can find a list of family friendly hikes [here](#) on the ATC's website. There is at least one hike listed for each of the fourteen states that the A.T. passes through.

Your local A.T.-maintaining Trail Club is also a great resource in choosing a hike. While some clubs only offer hikes for members or potential members, many welcome all folks on their guided hikes so long as you RSVP in advance, and most all of them have information on local hikes available on their websites. Find your local club on our [interactive A.T. map](#) (just turn on the "A.T. Trail Clubs" layer).



Additionally, in conjunction with National Public Lands Day, the ATC hosts a Family Hiking Day each September. On this day, dedicated A.T. volunteers lead guided hikes specifically geared toward young and novice hikers, and open to anyone who wants to come. Even if you can't join a Family Hiking Day event, the lists of Family Hiking Day hikes offered in years past could be a good starting point to find your hike. They are archived [here](#). Please note that, because Family Hiking Day hikes are guided, these hike descriptions do not include detailed directions for the trail, so you will need to do some more research before setting out on these hikes.

Whether you choose a hike from our list or choose your own route, factor in the age and experience of your hikers. Some things to keep in mind:

- Consider a maximum of 3-4 miles for an all-ages hike. Older children and teenagers may be able to take on longer hikes.
- Be realistic about the time it will take you to hike, especially when hiking with young and or inexperienced hikers. Family hike leader Loren Lang of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club suggests that you "estimate the amount of time it will take to complete the hike, and then double it." While speed can depend on many factors, an average hiking pace can be assumed to be about two miles per hour. So, using Loren's rule, assume one mile per hour with kids in tow. And remember - it's not a race! Take your time and enjoy the experience.
- Remember to stay flexible – it is more important that your family has a good experience than that they complete the planned route. For novice hikers, don't wear them out on their first time. Make them feel like they can do it.

- Out-and-back hikes or loop hikes can be much easier to organize (no shuttle), especially when hiking with very young children. It's difficult to rely on shuttle transportation when you're juggling a car seat.
- Choose a hike with special features or points of interest to appeal to young hikers. Favorites among youth are rocks to scramble on, water to play in, great picnic spots, hollow trees to stand in, caves, and, of course, great views. Hikes listed on ATC's website usually include descriptions of interesting features, but you can also do some research through your local tourism board or a good old internet search!
- If possible, consider having two leaders on hand. This ensures that there is an adult to lead the group as well as to stay in the back and "sweep," and it may offer the option to modify the hike (easy version, harder version) along the way.

Getting There

Sometimes, even popular trailheads are down windy, unpaved, and/or poorly marked roads. Be sure you feel comfortable with where you're going before you set out. Google Maps and other navigational platforms can be quite useful, but can sometimes be inaccurate in rural areas. Check the directions that result from your search against other descriptions before you leave the house. And hey, we know it's the 21st century, but consider printing or writing down directions and bringing them with you in case your phone loses reception on the way!

Getting Ready

Have you heard that old hiking adage, "take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints?" It's really



a way of talking about a set of principles called [Leave No Trace](#). Taken together, the Leave No Trace principles help us make decisions to protect the earth and preserve its beauty for future generations, something that family hikers perhaps understand better than anyone.

The first and arguably most important Leave No Trace principle is to *Plan Ahead and Prepare*. It is hard to put the other principles in place if you haven't taken the time to do this - plus, having a solid plan in place will help you stay safe, feel confident, and enjoy a worry-free hike! This section details what to pack and what to think about before heading out the door.

Hydration

Just like with any other form of exercise, water is critical to a successful hike! The amount of water you'll need depends upon the length and difficulty of your hike, but fill up at least one reusable water bottle per person before you leave the house - more if it's hot outside.

- Bring lemonade powder or something similar for little hikers that don't like plain water.
- Once you're on the Trail, remember that even though natural water sources may look and smell clean, they can still be contaminated by microorganisms. If you are going out for a full day hike or an overnight camping trip and can't bring all the water you'll need, bring some way to treat or filter the water. Learn how to make water safe to drink [here](#). *Never* drink untreated water, and keep an eye on children when they are near water sources.

Food

Packable and **snackable** are the key words to remember when it comes to choosing food for your hike. Foods that are heavy or easily squished or spoiled are usually foods to leave at home. Substitute things like tortillas for bread (squishable) or tuna in a packet for tuna in a can (heavy). For a day hike, lunch meat works fine, but don't bring it on an overnight trip unless you are bringing a cooler. Be sure to bring a trash bag or plastic grocery bag to pack out any food waste. Trash doesn't belong on the A.T., and neither do orange or banana peels! They can take up to two years to decompose, and meanwhile they attract animals and look gross. Please make sure to take any wrappers and any leftover food back home with you to throw away.



As far as snackable goes, snacking throughout the day will provide more energy than a few big meals. Many people picture energy bars or a big bag of trail mix, or “GORP” (good old raisins and peanuts) when they think of hiking snacks, but feel free to get creative! Some of our favorite snacks include fruit (dried or fresh), toaster pastries, jerky, cheese and crackers, and yogurt-covered pretzels. And trail mix doesn't have to just be raisins and peanuts - try adding chocolate pieces, dried mango, almonds, crystallized ginger, sesame sticks, banana chips, raisins, or cashews to your mix. Find your family's favorite combo! For more information on food and water on the Trail, click [here](#).

Clothing and Gear

What you need to carry depends on how far you're going, where, and when. You can probably wear clothes that you already own, and don't need to invest in any specialized gear before your first hike! Below are some suggestions for what to bring and how to dress for the Trail.

Footwear: Hiking boots are optional for day-hikes, particularly when the terrain is not that rough. Many hikers wear tennis shoes or even comfortable, securable sandals like those made by Chaco, Teva, or Keen. The most important thing is that your shoes fit well and are well broken-in before you hit the Trail — nothing ends a hike quicker than blistered feet!

Clothing: Always put a **rain jacket or poncho** in your day pack, even if the forecast is hot and sunny. It never hurts to be too prepared, and weather can change quickly, especially at higher elevations. **Hats** are always useful to protect yourself from sun and rain!

It is also a good idea to bring **warm layers**. Many of the mountains on the A.T. are thousands of feet higher in elevation than the towns surrounding them, so assume that you could see temperatures 10-20 degrees lower than the weather forecast for town. Layering articles of clothing like a long-sleeved quick-dry shirt under a fleece jacket is much more effective than wearing one big coat. This way, you can adjust easily to changing temperatures or activity levels.

Avoid cotton clothes if possible, particularly if you are anticipating rain or cold weather. Once cotton becomes wet, it offers almost no insulation and gets very heavy, and can even make you colder than if you were wearing nothing at all. Instead, choose synthetic fabrics (usually found sold as athletic wear), wool, or silk.

Gear: The first and most important piece of equipment you'll need is a backpack, used to carry your food, water, and other supplies. A simple school backpack will suffice for most day-hikes! We prefer packs with straps, not strings, as string backpacks put more pressure on your shoulders. The youngest hikers will may want to be carried for part or all of your hike – there are a variety of baby carriers for hiking available, and some simple internet research will help you decide which one is right for you!

Use the following checklist to make sure your backpack is packed with everything you'll need:

- Water (at least 1 liter per person, more if your hike is long or hot)
- Snacks/lunches
- Whistle for each hiker
- Map
- Sunscreen and sunglasses
- Trowel, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer (more on that later)
- Garbage bag
- Warm layers (depending on season/location/elevation)
- Cell phone
- Rain jacket or poncho for each hiker
- First aid kit adapted for young hikers - include bandages, children's Tylenol, tweezers, gloves, [blister treatment](#), and any personal medications



On the Trail - Have Fun and Be Safe!

This last section covers safety concerns on the Trail, as well as a few last tips for having fun once you're out there. We hope that you enjoy your hike on the A.T., and that you find it to be a new and fun way of connecting with your family and friends. *Please help us preserve this experience for other hikers by taking care of the Trail and doing your part to Leave No Trace.*

To learn about the seven principles of Leave No Trace and some easy steps to take care of the A.T., you can watch a few short, fun, kid-appropriate videos with your family [here](#) (scroll down to the Leave No Trace principles videos) before going on your hike!

Safety

Hiking on the A.T. is fun and healthy, but being outdoors does come with some risks uncommon in cities and towns. Proper preparation can help you avoid emergencies, so before you hike, be sure you know the following:

- Leave your hiking plan - route, trailheads, names of group members, and when you plan to be back - with someone at home.
- Three short blasts on your whistle is the international signal for help. Teach young hikers that whistles are not toys.
- If you get lost, stay where you are. Do not try to bushwhack off trail.
- Sometimes the famous A.T. white blazes can be far apart or faded, so you shouldn't rely on them for navigation. Instead, bring a map! You can buy maps of various sections of the A.T. at most local gear outfitters, or online [through the ATC](#).
- Cell phone reception is spotty on the A.T., but it is still a good idea to bring it in case of emergency. Reception is usually best on ridgetops.

Some common health and safety concerns are listed below, and be sure to check our website for more detailed information [here](#).

Weather: Check the weather report, and watch the skies during your hike to be prepared for sudden changes. If there is a thunderstorm, protect yourself from lightning by staying off ridges and exposed areas. Avoid tall structures, tall trees, boulders, rock overhangs and shallow caves. Ideally, get to your car or a building - failing that, take shelter in a group of smaller trees or in the forest. If it is hot and sunny, remember that young children are especially susceptible to sun exposure and exhaustion - make frequent stops to rest, refuel, and reapply sunscreen.

Plants and Animals: Spotting animals can be one of the most exciting parts of an A.T. hike, but use caution and respect wildlife. Don't approach or attempt to touch wild animals, as this can cause them stress or even cause them to behave aggressively. Never feed wild animals or leave your food where they could get to it. Watch where you put your hands and feet on the Trail, and watch out for poison ivy - it's common on parts of the A.T.



Shiny, green leaves of three can indicate poison ivy – watch out!

Sanitation: Don't expect flush toilets! Most A.T. shelters have privies, but you may need to use nature's bathroom during your hike. Proper disposal of human (and pet) waste is not only a courtesy to other hikers, but is a vital Leave No Trace practice for keeping water sources healthy. Hikers should pee at least 100 feet from trails, campsites, and water sources. If someone needs to poop in the woods, use your trowel to dig a "cathole" 6-8 inches deep to bury waste. Be sure to dig your cathole at least 200 feet, or 80 adult paces, away from water sources, trails, and campsites. Used toilet paper should either be buried in the cathole or carried out in a sealed plastic bag. Hygiene products like tampons or baby wipes should always be carried out - it takes thousands of years for them to decompose if you bury them! Always use hand sanitizer after using the restroom and before eating.

If you do have an emergency, use your cell phone to call 911. Identify yourself as an A.T. hiker and describe where you are. Reception is usually best on ridges, so you can try hiking up on the Trail if you don't have service. If that doesn't work, use a whistle and make three short blasts.

Hit the Trail!

You know where you're going, you've checked the weather, and you've packed your backpack. You're ready to join the millions of people who hike on the A.T. each year! Once you reach the trailhead, provide a quick overview for your group. Go over the route and any safety concerns, and teach kids what to do if they are lost: stay in one place and use their whistle to make three short blasts. Make sure everyone knows who has the first aid kit, and if anyone has fast-acting medications like EpiPens or inhalers.



Remember to stay flexible - don't wear out novice hikers on their first time, and be willing to modify your hike if the pace of your group is slower than expected.

Stop and explore the natural world along the way – look for things like animal tracks, frogs, turtles, mushrooms, ants, flowers, wild raspberries, or evidence of beavers. Compare different ecosystems you pass through – a meadow, forest, or a pond, for example. Ask young hikers what they notice and what they wonder about things they see, and encourage them to make connections by asking them if things they see remind them of anything else.

For our youngest hikers, the pace may slow significantly as they explore. Allow a balance of time in a stroller or baby-backpack and time spent walking and exploring. Encourage older kids to help and play with younger siblings or friends so that they don't run ahead. You could also keep some activities tucked away in your backpack or in your brain. "Hip-pocket activities," which you can find [here](#), are a wonderful way to begin a hike, keep a group together, spice up a destination, or occupy part of the group while the other part catches up or engages in a different activity.

Chip and Ashley Donahue, who have a large Family Nature Club in Roanoke Valley, say one of the biggest things they have learned in the process of leading trips is that it's important to have unstructured time, too. "For families who are so stretched out it's a good model not having activities – just spending time with family. We remind families 'this is your time. I got you here, now interact with your child. We're expecting you to stay and make a memory with your kid.' There's something magical that happens when families are stuck in that situation together. It's not another sports activity; it's a chance to talk together, or turn over rocks together."

We hope that this is a helpful resource in getting your family out hiking on the Appalachian Trail. If you have more questions, please contact us at 304.535.6331. Happy trails!

