Time to ***G. O.*! (Get Outdoors),** planning a family day hike

With the sun finally starting to shine and dry out our trails, and spring vacation week quickly approaching, may I suggest a family day trip into the great outdoors? Bringing children along on a hike might seem daunting, but with the right preparation, hiking can be a lot of fun for them and for you. Although we have several great places in town to take a hike, I have broadened these suggestions for a wider range of hiking experiences. Use these few basic tips to have a safe and healthy day outside with the whole family.

***BEFORE YOU GO***

*1. Choose the right trail.*

Think about your experience and fitness levels, and those of your family. Shorter, flatter hikes are the most universally enjoyable. If you bring children, choose trails where it is easy to turn back, in case the kids can't hike as far as you expected. For children, it's more about the journey than the destination. Look for trails that have features to engage children along the way. That doesn't mean lookouts - children aren't as interested in pretty views as adults are; instead, think waterfalls or bridges across creeks, where they can stop and look for frogs and bugs.

*2. Be aware of the weather. Dress appropriately*

Checking the weather is about more than knowing whether the sun will be out. The warmer the day, the better the kids will enjoy it. If you cannot go out for a full day, try just ½ a day, preferably a warm sunny afternoon. Clothes should breathe, go for synthetic fabrics (remember cotton kills) that wick moisture away. Worried about blisters? Wear two pair of socks.

*3. Pack for safety.*

Over the years as a Boy Scout leader I learned of many a list of “things to bring” on the trail. The idea behind this list is making sure that you can handle an accident or emergency. I have found these following “10 essentials" crucial for any hiker, and family day trips are no exception:

-- Navigation (map, compass and GPS, if you have one). -- Insulation (extra clothing).

-- Sun protection (sunglasses, sunscreen, and hat). -- Knife or leather man.

-- Illumination (headlamp and/or flashlight and extra batteries). -- Nutrition (extra food).

-- First-aid supplies. (Including child medications and Benadryl) -- Hydration (extra water).

-- Fire source (waterproof matches, lighter, candles, etc.). -- Whistle.

*4. Pack with kids in mind, and then pack it out.*

Be sure to pack child-friendly versions of such items as sunscreen and insect repellent. Also, that extra clothing can come in handy with children who like to play in mud puddles so bring a plastic bag for wet or dirty clothes. Engage your children in the packing process, especially when choosing what food or snacks to bring. They absolutely will need to eat out there for energy, so you want to make sure that they're totally sold on what you've got for them. A great family project of making your own trail mix can be a fun pre-trip activity. A good lunch will include fruit, and sandwiches with ingredients that won't perish quickly in a backpack. Be sure to pack out what you don't eat, even fruit pieces such as apple cores. Many of us in the outdoors are espousing the “*leave no trace*” ethic; carry out everything you carry in. To learn more about *Leave no trace* visit: <http://lnt.org/learn/7-principles>

***ON THE TRAIL***

*5. Avoid becoming lost; and if you do become lost, know how to be found.*

Knowing how to read and follow a topographical trail map and using a compass can help you avoid becoming lost in the first place, but it's best to have a backup plan. Cell phones are helpful but are not enough, as service can be spotty and batteries can die. Have a plan and share it! Always let someone know when and where you are going, and when you plan to return. Call that person when you get home. If you don't call, your contact person will know to report that you're missing. If you do become lost, stay put. It’s has been well documented, lost people walk in circles. It's better to just sit and wait it out.

*6. Watch your step, watch for animals*

Trails along hillsides often have drop-offs, besides looking out for yourselves, it's crucial to keep children away from exposed areas. Hold their hands in dangerous spots, and find other creative ways to keep them close, so that even on flat ground they stay on the trail. Walk with one adult in front of a child and one adult behind. That keeps them in view in case they trip. Although rare, animal encounters can happen, especially if the animal is rabid. The safe thing to do is make loud noises and back away rather than turn and run away, try to make yourself look bigger by holding your arms above your head. If you have small children with you, hold onto them. Don't crouch or turn your back and don’t scream! Talking or whistling is usually enough to keep wild animals at bay. Black bears only attack people if they are surprised or have cubs with them, so if a bear does appear, stay calm, make some noise and walk slowly back the way you came.

*7. Monitor body temperature and hydration.*

Hiking is a great way exercise, remember to ask your children along the way if they are too hot or too cold, and remind them to take a drink every 20 minutes. Remember to keep babies in carriers warm enough in cool weather.

***FUN FOR THE CHILDREN***

*8. Adjust your perspective.*

With children in tow, hiking no longer means climbing to the top of the mountain or getting all the way to the lake and back. Set a reasonable goal for your children to be comfortable and safe, be flexible, you may have planned for a two mile hike, and only get a quarter of a mile. Think of this as a successful day, because sometimes that just happens. Patience and flexibility are really important when out with children. One way to extend your hike is to motivate your children by saying things like, "We're going to come to a bridge and when we get to the other side of the creek, we're going to stop and have an energy bar."

*9. Make it an adventure*

A few supplies can turn a regular hike into an exciting adventure for children. Bring a magnifying glass so they can examine objects they find and a sketchbook so they can do leaf rubbings or draw a cool tree or insect. Stop for a few moments in silence and listen to the sounds of the forest. Children who are old enough might want to carry their own small backpacks, with water and a snack. Finally, remember that everything is better with a friend. Scouting recommends a “buddy system” so consider inviting one of your children’s friends along too.

Taking your family out for a day hike can be great way to enjoy the outdoors. Although many of our open space lands are not so large as to present a real problem, being prepared is more than a Boy Scout motto. Getting outdoors as a family is also a terrific way to address nature deficit disorder. Let your children run and explore, be prepared for some great questions, and HAVE FUN!

***Volunteer and learn about our trails***

Not sure where to go on your first family hike? One great way to learn about trails on our open space lands is to volunteer on a trail day and come out to help! Our first volunteer trail day for 2013 is set for Saturday April 13th, 8 AM at the Heins Farm Conservation lands, 197 Leadmine Rd. Come join members of “FrOST” and the trail committee and other volunteers in making improvements and maintaining the 2.8 miles of trails of the Heins Farm Lands. Future trail days will be held on the third Saturday of the month thru the spring, summer and fall.

Don’t know what “FrOST” is? It is short for “Friends of Sturbridge Trails” the recently formed nonprofit friends group to support the Sturbridge Trail Committee. Membership information and applications will be available on April 13th.

See you on the trail!