

A photograph of three children standing in a field of tall sunflowers. One child is in the foreground, seen from behind, wearing a dark blue shirt and pink shorts. Two other children are further back in the field, one in a blue and white striped shirt and another in a purple shirt. The sunflowers are bright yellow with large green leaves. In the background, there are trees and a clear blue sky.

The best
memories
are made
outside!

20 Simple Ways

To Spend Active, Adventurous Time
OUTSIDE AS A FAMILY

By Jay & Heather Harrington

Life *and* whim®



“Let Nature be
your teacher.”

– WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Written by Jay & Heather Harrington

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Two years ago we moved from the suburbs of a large metropolitan area to Traverse City, which is a small town in northern Michigan. The primary motivation behind our move was to provide a different upbringing for our three young girls – one that focused on adventurous time spent in the great outdoors.



But that's not how we grew up as kids, and we spent our adulthoods living in more urban environments, so in order to raise outdoor loving kids we had a lot to learn ourselves. It's been great. But it hasn't always been easy.

Like many kids, if our girls (particularly our four year old twins) had their way, more time would be spent inside and in front of the T.V. Don't get me wrong – they love the outdoors. It's just that their memories are short, and so it often takes some cajoling to convince them that exploring nature is the best of the many alternatives (T.V., playing “baby” in their bedrooms, coloring, etc.) they perceive as available to them.

So for the past two years we've been committed to finding fun and imaginative ways to spend as much time as possible out in nature. Over time we've grown from a family that considered a trip to the playground an adventure, to one that hikes and camps, fishes and skis.



Don't get me wrong – we're still novices at this stuff and nothing we do is at all extreme (unless you consider camping with three girls under six, at three different campsites, over five nights extreme - in retrospect we call it foolish optimism!). But we've learned a lot from this new phase and focus in our life together.

At first we didn't know exactly why we wanted to raise outdoor loving kids, it just instinctively seemed like a good idea. If we did have a specific motivation, it was the hope that by starting them early our girls would grow up physically strong and healthy, and with a lifelong love for outdoor activity. Over time we've come to learn that the emotional benefits of more time in nature probably outweigh the physical ones.

Some of the benefits of more time
outside for kids include:



It builds confidence.

When we first started taking our girls out on hikes, it was a struggle. We'd often have to cajole them along, and they often wanted to be picked up and carried. Now we can hardly keep up with them. We never thought we'd have to jog to keep up with our recently turned four year old twins. They've gained confidence in their own abilities, and increased their stamina, which has led them to want to embark on longer and more challenging adventures. Sure, there are some bumps, bruises, and occasionally tears along the way, but in the process they've learned what it takes to adapt to and operate in different environments and that they're capable of more than they (or us, frankly) thought was possible.

It promotes creativity and imagination.

Nature play is unstructured and adventurous. It requires kids to be in tune with their senses and aware of their surroundings. Richard Louv, author of the great book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder," wrote that, "As the young spend less and less of their lives in natural surroundings, their senses narrow and this reduces the richness of human experience." Whether we're on a trail or a beach, exposure to the stillness and starkness of nature promotes a unique sense of wonder for kids that no other environment offers.

It fosters connection.

Many of the distractions – from screens to toys – that are everywhere inside, are removed from the experience. It's a time to test boundaries, create shared memories, and draw closer to one another so that when the tough times of adolescence do come, children know they can count on their family for support.

Books have been written about the importance of getting kids outside more often, so let's just all agree that it's an essential part of childhood and move on to the fun stuff! Ready for some ideas and inspiration?

Here are 20 tips to get the whole family motivated for some adventurous and rewarding time spent outside in nature.



Schedule It

Don't you hate it when Saturday morning arrives and you're spinning your wheels trying to figure out something fun to do with the kids? Us too. Time is precious, and feeling the pressure of trying to plan something while time slips away is not a good way to start the weekend. Just as you plan your shopping list, spend 30 minutes during the week mapping out your outdoor family activities. That way you can have a planned agenda, bags packed, and driving directions set in advance, so you and your family can get out the door and off to your adventure free of stress and full of anticipation!



Create a “Go-Pack”

Scheduling is important, but of course spontaneity is important, too. There are many days where the weather is unexpectedly good, or a window of time unexpectedly opens. This is a perfect time for an unplanned excursion outside. To be ready for these moments, create a nature “Go-Pack” with things like sunscreen, bug spray, granola bars, extra clothes for the kids, wipes – whatever types of things you typically spend time searching for before leaving the house. You know how Jason Bourne always has a bag full of passports, money and weapons at his ready – a nature “Go-Pack” is kind of like that (minus the passports, money and weapons!).

You could even keep a “Go-Pack” in the car for when those on-a-whim moments strike!



Make it a Game

For most adults, fresh air and beautiful scenery are reason enough to head out for a hike. But kids often need something more to nudge them out the door. In our experience, finding or creating adventures that excite them is the best motivation. On a recent outing, we had our girls create “adventure maps” that they could follow while hiking. Our oldest daughter’s map was full of “dangerous” obstacles – jumping frogs, angry pirates, bears and quicksand – that the girls had to navigate as they made their way up the trail. The twins carried their own construction paper maps, filled with indecipherable scribbles, that in their minds posed just as much peril.

Other ideas include having kids engage in role playing (“I’m an explorer!”), or trying to mimic the characteristics and traits of an animal (“I’m a red fox!”). There are countless ways to create games in nature. The point is that if we, as parents, can help kids turn the outdoors into a playground where their imaginations run wild, their bodies will follow.



Get Messy

This is one we struggled with for awhile. We like our yard and our house to be neat. We also like our kids to play outside as much as possible. Neat house. Kids outside. Yeah, something had to give. So we've evolved and come to accept that if our kids are going to love the outdoors, then we're going to have to let go of certain things (like clean shoes and fingernails). It may not be easy, but next time you're out on a walk with your kids and come across that mud puddle...tell them to let it rip! Give kids permission to be messy (maybe just have them leave the shoes at the door on the way in!)



Embrace all Weather

Humor columnist Dave Barry once wrote, "The problem with winter sports is that – follow me closely here – they generally take place in winter." I think we can all identify with that

sentiment to some extent. Sure, it's easy to curl up on the couch and binge on Netflix for hours on end when it's cold out. Now that we're living in northern Michigan, we've come to learn that a big part of beating the winter blues as a family is getting outside and being active regardless of the weather.

There's an old Scandinavian saying that "There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes." With that in mind, it's important to have some high quality gear to make sure that soggy clothes and cold toes don't prevent family fun all year round.



Camp in the Backyard

Sleeping on a lumpy lawn in a tent in the backyard doesn't sound like that much fun to most adults, but it's pure magic for kids. Throw in a campfire and some marshmallows – that's a recipe for an epic childhood memory. Plus, getting kids comfortable with the idea of sleeping in a tent in a safe, familiar setting can help get them ready for more rugged camping experiences to come.



Bring the Outside In

You don't even need to be outside for your family to enjoy the great outdoors. We recently read about the idea of creating a "world-watching window" in Outside Online and we love the concept. A world-watching window plus a pair of binoculars or a telescope allow kids to gaze at stars, spot clouds, and watch birds in the trees.



Join a Club

Almost every community has groups and clubs of like-minded people who love the great outdoors and regularly schedule outside activities. There's an awesome biking group in our community whose entire mission is to encourage kids to spend more time on bikes. Joining – and getting active in – groups and clubs is a great way for kids and adults, alike, to meet new friends to enjoy the outdoors with. Nature is better when enjoyed together.



Focus on Expectations vs. Outcomes

Sad but true: hiking, camping, fishing or almost any other outdoor activity with young children is hard work, and sometimes not that fun. But it's time well spent, and necessary, if you want to raise kids that love the outdoors over the long-term.

To make this time more enjoyable, it's important to focus on expectations, not outcomes. If you head out to hike a one mile trail with your family with the expectation that you'll quickly reach the scenic overlook point at the end of the trailhead, you'll almost assuredly be disappointed. You'll spend most of your time hurrying the kids along as they stop to draw lines in the dirt with sticks, gather stones, and gaze at bugs. It won't be fun for you or them as none of your expectations will align. You want to keep moving, while they want to make frequent stops to play and explore.

Instead, don't focus on the outcome – in this case the scenic overlook point – and set out with the expectation that if your kids have fun along the way, then it's a day well spent, regardless of whether you reach your original destination.



Plan an Outdoor Play Date Adventure

Instead of meeting at someone's house or an indoor play location, organize an outdoor play date at a park or beach. An adventure with friends is always more fun and gets the kids really into it too! Here's a fun activity that we like – we find rocks that we love and paint them with fun outdoor designs or messages on them. We then leave them outside for others to find.

The kids love the idea of other kids finding their rocks and are thrilled when they stumble upon one that someone else created, too!



Encourage Unstructured Play

While you've got the kids outside on their play date, sit back and relax with the other parents. Let the kids figure out how to have fun in nature without some of the stimulation many have become accustomed to. In other words, do what our parents did to us, and make the kids figure it out. Remember how much fun that was?



Implement Screen Free Saturdays

On a recent episode of his podcast, Tim Ferriss was talking about the fact that he adheres to "Screen Free Saturdays." Unless he has to order an Uber he's off his phone, as well as other digital devices. This allows him to plan and spend more time outside and, importantly, appreciate the natural surroundings more.

Tim is a wealthy and kid-free man, and presumably he could spend as much time outside as he wants. But Screen Free Saturdays seems to work well for him. Can you imagine, therefore, how great it would work for all of us hurried, harried, busy parents to better focus on what's most important during those precious windows of time we have to spend with our families outside?



Create Something Together

Some of the most rewarding time outside is time spent building something with kids. For example, our girls look forward to planting a vegetable garden every spring. This pays “outdoor dividends” all summer, as they feel responsibility to tend to the garden as well. We’ve also built “sit spots” with our kids, which are special places in the yard for them alone. Creating something doesn’t require a table saw, ladder and carpentry skills – it just means working with your kids on something simple outside that they care for and about.



Have a Car Free Weekend

Once you've tried Screen Free Saturday, give a Car Free Weekend a whirl. This will take a bit of planning, but we've found that on most weekends – unless we have specific plans that require travel – we can get around just fine by walking and riding on bikes. Not using the family car necessitates spending more time outside. Not only that, but what normally is a routine trip to the grocery store turns into an adventurous time requiring a healthy dose of ingenuity on bikes.



Create a Family Bucket List Challenge

One of the things we like to do each summer is to create a family bucket list challenge. This can include things like visiting every national, state and local park within a 60 mile radius, or checking out a new beach every weekend.



Collect and Gather

Here in northern Michigan, you'll see kids scouring for Petoskey stones (a relatively rare local stone located here that consists of fossilized coral) on Lake Michigan beaches. We love hunting for Petoskey stones. Our oldest daughter has a real knack for finding them – she uses her plastic beach toy sifter to unearth them. The other day she spent hours at the beach searching for Petoskeys and found nearly 20 of them (some barely larger than a pebble!). Hunting for stones is a favorite pastime for all of us.

The point is that getting kids excited about collecting, gathering and foraging for things found in nature is a great way to get them to spend more time outside. Foraging is particularly fun. We hunt for Morel mushrooms in the spring and wild berries in summer. In every part of the country there are indigenous edibles that can be foraged. Not only is foraging great fun, but it's a chance to teach kids about their natural surroundings and where

food comes from. Just be careful – take the time to learn about what’s safe and what’s not before heading out with your kids to hunt for food.



Walk to School

Walks to and from school are some of the most cherished moments we have with our kids. It’s a time to be carefree and notice the changes in seasons outside. Even if it’s not possible for you to walk to school with your kids because you’re traveling long distances, try parking a few minutes away and walk the rest of the way.



Take Meals Outside

Instead of always sitting at the kitchen island or dining room table, plan to eat a couple of meals outside every week. Have a picnic dinner at the playground or lay out a blanket and

dine al fresco in the backyard. And if you have a fire pit at your house, have a camping inspired breakfast one morning by cooking steak and eggs over the campfire!



Schedule Your Own Time

If you're motivated to raise kids that love the outdoors, you probably love the outdoors yourself. So that means that you need to schedule your own outdoor recreation as well. It's obviously more difficult to find that time once you have kids, but it's necessary in order to stay motivated while nurturing your family's love of nature. Plus, it's good for your kids to see you and your spouse hurtling down the trail on a mountain bike, or cruising across the bay on a paddle board. It gives them something to be excited about as they become older and ready to take on new adventures.



Let Go

As the parents of three young girls, we obviously want to keep them safe, but try not to hover too close when we're out exploring. Scraped knees, blisters and dirty fingernails are part of the drill when you're on a hike. We want them to be creative, imaginative, adventurous, and to step outside of their comfort zones when they're out on the trail. That's what being a kid is all about.

Kids need the freedom to roam, gradually, in order to develop their own relationship with nature. For kids, the fun is off the trail, not within its groomed contours. Unfortunately, off the trail is where the scrapes, cuts and bruises happen. But we know that if we don't allow our kids the freedom to explore and test their own boundaries, then they won't become the outdoor-loving kids that we're hoping to raise.

It's tough to let go, but simply stated:
That's how our little ones grow up to be strong,
confident, courageous adults.



capas aren't just for
superheroes...

STRONG. CURIOUS. CONFIDENT.

Capes make kids feel special, especially one as comfy, functional and stylish as our Big Sky Buffalo Check cape. Our capes are perfect for any outdoor adventure! They are designed and hand sewn in Michigan, and made of cozy polar fleece and Minky faux fur, and come in three fun styles. **Each cape purchase comes with a FREE Truitt the Arrow nature pin!**

» Check out **Our North Country Capes** and more!

MAKE EVERY DAY AN *Adventure*

Life and Whim is a lifestyle blog and brand that is based in Traverse City, Michigan. Jay and Heather Harrington, the creators of this Guide, started Life and Whim after being inspired by their new hometown.

Jay and Heather feel fortunate to live “Up North” in northern Michigan so they can experience – from the outdoors, to the food, to the people – the magic this region offers. It’s a place that empowers people to live purposeful, meaningful and active lives. But the message they are trying to spread through Life and Whim is that you don’t need to live here to live this way.

Life and Whim was founded with an intrepid spirit and an ambitious objective: To unlock the essence of what it means to live boldly, simply and without regret. As we pursue our own path, we invite others to join us on this journey.

We are particularly passionate about children, and believe that the more time kids spend outside hiking in forests, skiing down mountains, and frolicking on beaches, the more they grow and prosper.

**The great outdoors inspires
greatness in all of us.**



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