



Hiking with Infants and Toddlers

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Hi. This is Ranger Sarah with Preventative Search and Rescue. Heading out into the natural environment with children can be a fantastic experience for both parent and child. Children often bring our attention back to the wonder of small things we may miss while taking in the grandeur of the Canyon. Hiking with children in a place known for extreme temperatures and high cliffs also presents a unique set of safety challenges. In this podcast I will present some suggestions for keeping your infant or small child protected from heat-illness, dehydration, sunburn and falls. I will also give you a checklist of items you might want to bring with you on your hike, and some suggested trail destinations.

HIKING WITH INFANTS

Before you plan a hike with your infant first consider the age of your child and the weather forecast. Remember that a baby's delicate body has not yet developed the ability to effectively regulate heat. If the weather forecast calls for high temperatures or a heat advisory has been issued make sure you plan to complete your hike before 10 am or start after 5 pm. The temperature will increase as you descend into the Canyon so limit your hike to the first mile or mile and a half of the trail. This will allow you to return to the Rim fairly quickly if the need arises. Extreme caution is recommended for hiking with infants under 3 months of age. Remember, once you walk below the Rim you are in a wilderness area and emergency response may be delayed.

Many parents carry their infants in Snugly-type front carriers. This allows constant observation and interaction with the infant. However, these carriers also allow the direct transfer of heat from the adult's body to the child's body. That's great for keeping kids toasty in the winter but it can cause problems during summer's intense heat. Well-meaning parents may also cover their infant with a blanket to provide protection from the sun but this extra insulation can contribute to heat-illness. If you use a Snugly-type carrier check your child frequently for signs of over-heating. Remember, a quiet baby is not necessarily a sleeping baby. Consider dressing your baby in cotton clothing and make sure your cover the head. If your child is starting to get hot you can wet his or her clothing and head covering with a spray bottle or water from your drinking bottle. As the moisture evaporates it will help to pull heat away and cool your child.

HIKING WITH TODDLERS

Toddlers are full of curiosity. They love to touch and feel the natural world. Some parts of nature, however, have no place in your child's hands or mouth. The small round smelly black objects on the trail are not jellybeans. As every parent knows, toddlers are also unbelievably quick and fearless. Look away for a just a minute and you may find your child exploring dangerous territory. Consider holding hands with your child when hiking on the trails or near any of the many unprotected cliffs here at the Canyon. If you child is especially independent consider a harness-style restraint. While some parents consider these devices to be too restrictive they can prevent an over-eager explorer from becoming a tragic fatality.

Backpack-style child carriers allow both parent and child considerably more freedom to explore. However, parents should still be vigilant for signs of dehydration and over-heating. I have seen parents on the trail come up with a number of brilliant solutions to keep their children hydrated and protected from the heat. Consider some of the following parent-tested suggestions:

1. Attach an umbrella to the child carrier pack. This provides shade for your child and you. This is an especially good idea for kids who don't like wearing hats.

2. Carry a camelback-style water pack for your child and attach the spout to the side of the pack in easy sipping distance. Once your child gets used to drinking from the spout he or she can drink at will. Any extra spilled out on the clothing just helps the cooling process.
3. Teach your child to wear a damp hat or bandana. Kids can be intrigued with the idea of getting to wear wet clothes, especially on hot days, and enjoy getting to hold the hat under the water and “doing it myself”. This also teaches future hikers great survival lessons.
4. Bring a spray bottle to spray on your child's head and clothes, and yours too! This aids evaporative cooling and kids love to get to spray mom or dad.
5. Remember you are training your future hiking partner. This is an investment! Fond memories and good trail habits established at an early age will encourage kids to keep hiking. Many years from now your child may be carrying your pack and helping you enjoy the Canyon.

Here are some suggested items you may want to bring with you on your hike:

Kid carrier pack

Hat or bandana and sunscreen

Spray bottle

Sippee cup or extra bottles

Water, pedialyte and formula

Diapers, baby wipes and rash cream

Sealable trash bag (pack it in, pack it out)

Extra socks – kids love to kick them off

Lightweight blanket and changing pad

Antibacterial hand cleaner

Toys tied to the carrier pack

Your sense of humor – Remember you are on vacation. This is supposed to be fun!

SUGGESTED HIKES:

1. The Rim Trail: great views, a relatively easy walk and good opportunities for shade. Exercise caution with independent children. The cliffs along the edge of the trail can drop hundreds of feet vertically.
2. The Bright Angel Trail: This trail provides a few opportunities for afternoon shade but consider limiting your distance to 30 minutes downtrail. During the summer months water is usually available at the 1 ½ mile Resthouse.
3. The South Kaibab Trail: Ooh Ahh Point overlook is ¾ mile down trail and offers spectacular views of the Canyon. This trail is steeper than the Bright Angel Trail and is extremely hot in the afternoon. Hike this trail in the morning.
4. The Village Bike Paths offer shady trails through tall pines and are perfect for wildlife watching and short hikes during the hottest part of the day.

6. Visitors to the North Rim can enjoy the interpretive hike and phenomenal views on the Widforss Trail, a canyon edge stroll on the Transcept Trail or descend into the Canyon on the North Kaibab Trail. Hikers with small children should consider turning around at the Coconino Overlook on the North Kaibab Trail.

For more information about planning a hike with your child and to check the weather forecast contact Rangers at the Visitor Center or the Backcountry Office. Thanks for tuning in to this HIKE SMART podcast. Happy hiking!