

**I**t was a pivotal moment in parenting. My son Parker, 16, walked up the path as if it were a sidewalk in a city park at sea level rather than a narrow, steep trail at 9,000 feet in the Rockies. His backpack, which contained our tent, stove, fuel and most of the food for our backcountry fishing trip, outweighed mine by 15 pounds. His excitement at the prospect of catching wild brook trout propelled him forward, but he moderated his pace to stay close to me.



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# Raising an O

“We’re almost there, mom,” he said encouragingly, “Only a half-mile more.”

My step was not so bouncy. My breath came in quick, shallow gulps. My legs felt heavy. A narrow stream of perspiration flowed from the base of my neck to the belt of my pack then wicked back up my shirt to my shoulders. Keeping up with my kid had become a challenge, but as I watched Parker stride up the trail, I felt a pang of pride at the flip in our mother/son outdoor equation. Only a year ago,

Whether hunting, fishing  
or exploring the natural  
world, here are tips to  
help kids embrace the  
outdoors

By Lisa Densmore Ballard

outdoorsman

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I was the family Sherpa carrying the community gear and coaxing my son to keep on moving. Now he toted the bigger load with little strain.

I spied a patch of columbine beside the trail.

"Hold up, Parker. I want to take a photo," I said, in need of a rest long enough to quell the pounding in my ears.

Parker paused patiently, taking a swig from his water bottle. Wildflowers held little interest for him, but forest fires, game animals, birds of prey and trout certainly did. As I clicked a few frames, he examined some tendrils of fur on an aspen tree.

"There are elk around here," he announced, "We should come back in the fall."

My son had become not only a strong backpacker but also an avid outdoorsman — and not by chance. In our household, doing things outside has always been a way of life. The fact that he now embraced that lifestyle made me happy for several reasons. In addition to the challenge and excitement of obtaining one's food from the land, the wild places where he would roam would give him a forever-stamp toward better health, lower stress, a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie. Within these reasons also lies the recipe for raising an outdoorsman or outdoorswoman:

**Better Health.** The first step is simply to push a kid out the door. Throughout the last decade, much has been publicized about the health risks of inactive, indoor-bound children. Kids who play outdoors tend to be more fit and healthy. Once outside, their natural curiosity kicks in. When my son was 2 years old, I took him hiking for the first time. It was a short hike, a mile total. We never reached the top of the little hill. There were too many mud puddles to splash through, too many toads to chase and too many logs on which to test his balance.

By age 5, Parker unwittingly gained higher ground. Rather than whining up a trail, he searched for gumdrop trees and M&M bushes. He found marshmallow plants with gummy worms crawling on them. A few years later, he uncovered Pokémon cards and then baseball cards. Kid-bribery got him up the trail without dampening his fascination for his natural surroundings. A hairy spider always trumped a piece of candy, and if a grouse suddenly burst from the undergrowth, an hour of enthusiastic trail-chatter ensued.

As Parker got older, he had fun foraging for wild raspberries and huckleberries rather than sweets and man-made collectibles. Last summer, he scaled Mount Sopris eating only the snacks in his pack.

**Lower Stress.** Studies have shown when kids regularly spend time outdoors, they are calmer and less anxious. It allows them to release energy which helps them concentrate better and feel good. In my son's case, nothing made him happier than catching his first fish.

About the time Parker started hiking around rather than through mud puddles, a friend invited us to go hero-fishing in his backyard pond which he regularly stocked with rainbow trout. The outing really started the prior evening, with a worm hunt in our backyard. After capturing a dozen or so crawlers, we carefully made them a temporary home in a small aerated Tupperware container stuffed with soil and leaves.

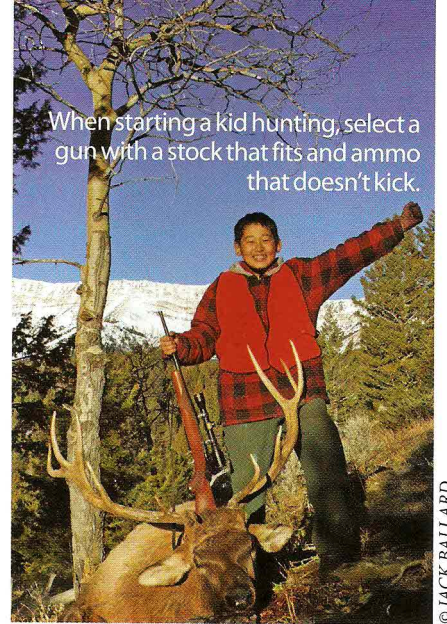
The next day, Parker squished a worm unceremoniously onto a hook then dropped it into the water. Nothing. We tried another worm. This time, I showed Parker how to thread the hook through the back of the worm. Nothing. Just as Parker's interest in fishing began to fade, the owner of the pond showed up carrying a grain bag.

"Those fish won't eat worms," he said, "You've got to feed them these."

He pulled a handful of pellets out of the bag then chucked them into the pond. The surface erupted as if piranhas were feeding. Eyes wide, Parker chucked a handful of the small brown nuggets into the water, causing it to boil again. My friend offered him a pellet glued to a hook, which Parker lowered into the water. Within moments, he had a trout, then another and another. A little success goes a long way. He's been hooked on fishing ever since.

**Sense of Accomplishment.** Like any angler, Parker is pleased to reel in a fish, but his biggest sense of accomplishment outdoors came through hunting. His first hunt, for waterfowl, had a much bigger build-up

When starting a kid hunting, select a gun with a stock that fits and ammo that doesn't kick.



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than his first fishing experience, beginning with a hunter-safety course during the summer. After finding a gun with a youth-sized stock, we made several trips to our local skeet club to hone his shotgunning skills. Then we found camo and waders his size, tied anchors to decoys and practiced our duck calls. By the time the hunt arrived, he vibrated with as much excitement as our retriever.

In the predawn glow on youth waterfowl weekend, we placed a couple of short stools among the reeds beside a pothole where we had seen ducks coming and going. I put out some decoys then hunkered down with Parker. We watched several ducks swimming casually across the water out of range, hoping a few of their friends would come by. About 20 minutes after sun-up, six mallards set their wings about 30 yards away over the water.

"Now!" I whispered urgently.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Parker emptied the shells from his gun. The dog broke out of the reeds flushing the other ducks on the pothole

Practice helps kids feel more confident and more skillful when it's the real deal.



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Colorado Outdoors

and began swimming in circles looking for a downed duck, but there were none.

"No worries," I said to Parker, "You'll have more chances."

Indeed he has. Since his first attempt at duck hunting, he has bagged ducks, geese and pheasants. He shot a turkey on his first try, then a white-tailed deer. As I reflect back, the fact that he didn't bag a duck on his first hunt is what kept him coming back for more. The challenge was the draw. The fun was in the preparation. The thrill was in the moment. His goal now is to harvest an elk, which is probably why he mentioned returning to the trail where I began this tale.

**Camraderie.** After a 6-mile trek, Parker and I reached the tarn where we hoped to find brook trout. We spent a couple of hours working the shoreline, pausing now and again to compare flies and to talk about the fish and the place. We each caught a half-dozen fish and saved one to enhance our Ramen-noodle dinner.

Parker gathered firewood and made a ring of stones for a campfire while I set up our camp stove. Our conversation turned to "The Hobbit" movies, the math teacher Parker didn't like and his chances of making the varsity soccer team in the fall, topics we never discussed at home. We rarely conversed at home, period, due to a constant influx of messages on electronic devices, television shows, work and household chores. The outdoors has not only given us shared experiences, but quality time to confer and debate about whatever comes to mind.

"I like when we get to do these trips together," said Parker, nursing the campfire into a steady blaze.

"Me too," I agreed, "But not when the camp stove doesn't work." While trying to boil some water for our noodles, I discovered the top of the fuel canister was damaged, preventing the little burner from screwing onto it. Hungry and tired, I wondered how I would make a hearty enough dinner for us out of a few granola bars.

"We can cook over the fire," replied Parker. With a gleam in his eye, he rearranged the rocks in the ring to heat the little pot over the hot coals. It was yet another outdoor challenge. A half-hour later, we had boiling water, and I was glad I had raised an outdoorsman. ☺

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*Regular contributor Lisa Densmore Ballard has spent the last 16 years finding ways to get outdoors with her son. Though he's lost his sweet tooth, she still keeps a package of Rolos in her pocket just in case. [www.LisaDensmore.com](http://www.LisaDensmore.com).*



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## 10 WAYS TO TURN KIDS INTO HUNTERS AND ANGLERS

Whether hunting, fishing or exploring the natural world, here are 10 tips to help kids embrace the outdoors:

- 1. Let them help.** Kids want to feel part of the process. Give them age-appropriate tasks in preparation for the outing and in the field to impart a sense of responsibility. If they don't catch a fish or harvest an animal, they'll still value the experience. If they're up for cleaning the fish or field dressing a deer and then cooking it, let them help.
- 2. Practice first.** Teach kids to cast on an open grassy spot before heading to a river. Take kids to a shooting range before hunting. Practice helps kids feel more confident and more skillful when it's the real deal.
- 3. Give them good gear.** Skimp on gear and you skimp on their chance of success. Age-appropriate hunting and fishing gear is not toy gear, and the cheapest stuff is usually the least effective. When hunting, select a gun with a stock that fits and ammo that doesn't kick. When fishing, lighter tackle and smaller hooks are easier to cast, but they should still be appropriate for the species and the conditions.
- 4. Bring yummy food and drinks.** Hot cocoa and homemade chocolate chip cookies are the perfect antidote to a cold, slow morning in a blind. One of the things that make hunting and fishing trips enjoyable is the special treats to eat.
- 5. Don't sweat the misses.** As a seasoned hunter or angler, it can be frustrating when a kid misses an easy 20-yard shot or can't land a fish on the fifth try. If you don't worry about it, your kid won't either. Be encouraging. Focus on the positive and what to do differently next time rather than dwelling on what they did wrong.
- 6. Make them explorers.** Teach kids about the flora and fauna when you're afield. The more they learn about an ecosystem and the role of wildlife species in it, the better sportsmen they'll become.
- 7. Take advantage of youth programs.** Colorado Parks and Wildlife offers numerous kid-oriented outdoor education programs, hunter safety courses, and youth hunting opportunities. Youth hunting weekends give higher chances of success due to lower hunting pressure.
- 8. Avoid stormy weather.** To help insure a positive experience, wait for a fair forecast. It's challenging enough trying to drop a grouse out of the air without adding inclement weather to the mix.
- 9. Focus on your kid.** Leave your firearm, bow or fishing rod at home. When you introduce a kid to the outdoors, your attention should be on the child. It's important one-on-one time. As they get more experience, you'll be able to participate together.
- 10. Know when to quit.** You may be happy in a deer stand for 8 hours, but kids won't be. If a child gets bored or uncomfortable, it's time to quit, even if you've only been afield for an hour. Better to keep it fun, short and not shoot than to scold your kid for squirming.