

First Time Camping Guide: Beginner Camping for the Whole Family

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Let's get real – you don't have to be a “camping person” to camp! I certainly wasn't, but that changed after great outdoor experiences and the sense of accomplishment I got from properly preparing.

To the masses of aspirational first-time campers and, dare I say, camping-haters who want to make sure their kids still spend valuable time outdoors, we've got your back. Just because you don't know how to set up a tent yet doesn't mean your kid is doomed to a life devoid of outdoor skills (and neither are you).

Many have come before you and braved a weekend outside for their first time camping. You can, too. In fact, you'll probably enjoy it.

Here are a few tips that recently got me through an extended camping adventure (*trust me*, if I can camp, you're definitely going to be able to).

6 Ways to Prepare for Your First Time Camping

1. **Opt for an organized campsite.** [National parks](#) and [Scout camps](#) are a good choice. Finding locations like these mean you'll know ahead of time if you have access to fire rings and restrooms. Just be sure to use the contact information of your chosen campsite to ask a ranger or camping personnel all your questions (pro tip: definitely ask about toilets/showers and plan accordingly). You'll also want to make sure there's not a burn ban in place if you plan to have a campfire.
2. **Invest in a few pieces of quality gear:** a tent, a sleeping bag that suits the temperature you'll be camping in, a sleeping pad, a head lamp, and a reliable lantern are my top picks for investment pieces. These little comforts mean a lot when you're sleeping outdoors or navigating to the bathroom at night. Plus, mid to high-quality versions of these items last, so your spend pays off.
3. **Use this [checklist](#)** (below) to consider everything you want to bring. For instance, if you're planning to cook canned goods during your camping trip, you need to have a can opener on hand. Avoid leaving essentials behind by formulating a packing list in the days leading up to your trip. (Hint: essentials for your trip will vary based on what you're cooking, weather, region, etc. A checklist like [this one](#) (below) allows you to sort through what you need and what you can leave behind).
4. **Know how to navigate to your campsite.** There's a good chance you'll lose cell service on your way. Print out or write driving and walking directions before you set off for your camping adventure. Also let family or friends who aren't camping with you know where you're camping and when you plan to return.
5. **Do research and practice runs ahead of time.** If you want to study up on your tent's online setup video, make sure you watch it before you're out in the elements (remember you may have no cell service). You could even take notes and should definitely do a test run in your backyard to make sure you're ready to camp sans-Google.
6. **Scope out your campsite when you arrive.** Look for hazards, like swift water, steep drops, and poisonous vegetation. Set up your tent away from these hazards and make sure your camping party knows to avoid them too.

If you're still not convinced your inner-camper exists, here's a great way to dip your toe in the camping waters: Get involved in Scouting. When you camp with Scouters (these are the adult volunteers in the Boy Scouts of America), you have a huge knowledge-base at your fingertips.

From setup basics to five-course campfire meals, camping with Scouters helped me bridge the gap from first-time camping to confident camper.

To find Scouters near you, head to [Be a Scout](#) and let a local pack know your family is interested in a first-time camping trip.

Family camping gear for all ages

By Gretchen Sparling

[Features](#), [Gear](#), [Magazine](#), [Outdoors](#)

Gear that will help elevate your family-friendly campsite. Sample packing lists provided by Helen Olsson, author of *The Down and Dirty Guide to Camping With Kids*. **Find a complete family-camping packing list on Olsson's blog, [maddogmom.com](#).**

Hardware

Tent (with poles, stakes, and rainfly) / *Scouting* magazine pick: the [Big House 4](#) (\$400) by Big Agnes

Tarp (ground cloth)

Extra plastic tarp

Rope

Vestibule mat

Sleeping bags / *Scouting* magazine pick: the [Woobie 30](#) (\$65) by Kelty for kids up to 4 feet tall and the [Illumi-Bug](#) (\$35) by Coleman for kids up to 5 feet, 5 inches tall

Sleeping pads / *Scouting* magazine pick: [Megamat Duo 10](#) (\$370) by Exped fits two adults

Pillows

Screen house

Camp Kitchen

Camp stove / *Scouting* magazine pick: [Triton Propane Stove](#) (\$70) by Coleman

Fuel

Pots / *Scouting* magazine pick: [Bugaboo Base Camper Cookset](#) (\$95) by GSI Outdoors

Pans

Skillet

Grill rack

Cutting board

Sharp knife

Measuring cup

Measuring spoons

Spatula

Big spoon

Long-handled tongs

Strainer

Plates

Bowls

Cups

Insulated coffee cups

Coffee making device / *Scouting* magazine pick: [Adventure Percolator Coffee Pot](#) (\$40) by Stanley

Water bottles / *Scouting* magazine pick: [Thermalock Maddie Stainless Steel Water Bottle](#) (\$13) by Contigo

Utensils
Marshmallow sticks
Corkscrew
Bottle opener
Pot lifter
Aluminum foil
Small plastic bags
Large plastic bags
Plastic tablecloth
Extra-large tablecloth clips or tablecloth weights
Tupperware containers
Matches, lighter, or fire stick
Collapsible water container
Water purifier (optional)
Drink coozies
Coolers

Camp Kitchen Cleanup

Plastic washbasins
Sponge with scouring pad
Small scrubber brush
Old washcloths or tea towels
Biodegradable camp soap
Grocery-store plastic bags (for small amounts of garbage)
Tall kitchen garbage bags
Paper towels
Baby wipes
Clothesline and clothespins

Find the full family-camping packing list on Olsson's blog, maddogmom.com.