

# Survival Skills for Kids

If your child got lost in the woods, would they know what to do to stay safe?

Written by Josh Leventhal

If you watch TV or stream Netflix, chances are you've come across a show about survival in the outdoors.

Often these "survival of the fittest" programs feature contestants fighting for their life (or at least for their share of prize money) in harsh conditions and in some cases without any clothing. They eat insects, build shelter out of anything they can find, make fire like a caveman and hang on for their lives. It's exhilarating. And, like much of reality TV, it's not particularly realistic. "Survival is really boring. It's about making good decisions and mitigating risks," said Andrew Herrington, an outdoors survival expert who teaches survival skills and leads a search-and-rescue team in the Smoky Mountains. "What we see on TV

that's being projected as survival is more bushcraft and primitive than any skills. I love the connection to the outdoors that these shows bring, but it all comes down to context. What we see out there from a search-and-rescue perspective is completely different from what you see on TV."

Understanding basic survival skills is important for anyone heading outdoors, particularly children who are often taught to stick close to adults or to rely on Mom or Dad for safety. What happens if your kid gets separated from you during a hike? Would he or she be prepared? Would you know what to do?

For most casual hikers and recreationists, the answer to both questions is likely no. Few people expect, or prepare for, an emergency when heading off for a day hike. An extended trip on the Appalachian Trail could be a reason for concern, but not a day hike, right? Data shows the opposite is often true. In this article, outdoor survival experts share tips and basic survival skills with an emphasis for children. They discuss how you and your kids should prepare for going in the woods, how to stay safe while in the woods and what to do if you and your child get separated or lost.

"So much of [survival] is about not getting lost," said Daniel Manget, an education specialist at the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission's Pisgah Center for Outdoors Education. "It is about what you do ahead of time."



JEREMY MCKNIGHT/UNSPLASH

## A SERIES OF BAD DECISIONS

A family of four visiting the North Carolina mountains on a summer vacation decides to take a late-afternoon hike before heading into town for dinner. Dad says he knows the perfect spot—a 2-mile loop; quick and easy. Mom calls for the kids to get into the car. "Bring a bottle of water," she says as they walk out of their condo. "It's hot out."

They arrive at the trailhead 20 minutes later. It's 5:30, an hour before they are to meet relatives for dinner. "Did you call your brother and tell him we might be late?" Betty asks her husband. "Nah, we'll be good," Rob answers as he gets out his trail map. "It's a short hike. Follow me!"

Down the trail they go, chatting and laughing.

"I forgot my water bottle," William, age 10, says. "Don't worry, you can share mine," his 13-year-old sister, Jenny, replies.

After 10 minutes, Mom and Dad begin to pull away from their kids. They pause to wave before rounding a corner. Their kids wave back, so Mom and Dad turn right to continue up a winding trail. What Mom and Dad didn't see was Jenny and William fiddling with William's cellphone, trying to get a signal so he could post a hiking video on TikTok. They stop at the turn where their parents had waved, deciding whether to go right or follow a narrower path left. Confused, they go left—"I think this heads back to the parking lot,"

Jenny says—and pick up their pace. They come to another fork and go left, and then another (right). Convinced they made a wrong turn, they turn around and jog down a trail before William trips and cuts his knee.

Mom and Dad, deep in conversation, don't check on the kids for five or 10 minutes. When they do, Jenny and William are nowhere to be seen. They turn around and retrace their steps. They pass another group of hikers but don't bother them for help—"They must've gone back to the car," Dad says. No kids to be seen anywhere on the trail and now Mom and Dad are worried, especially since storm clouds are rolling in and the air is getting cool. "What do we do now?" Mom asks.

That's a question better asked at the beginning of a hike: "What do we do now in case of an emergency later?" Sure, the hypothetical situation took place during a simple day hike, but even day hikes can lead to trouble because basic safety precautions are often overlooked. This happy family made several mistakes before their kids got lost. Can you name them?

According to a National Park Service study, day hikers comprised 42 percent of the 46,609 people who required search-and-rescue missions at its parks between 2004 and 2014. North Carolina is no different. Manget has taught survival skills classes and finds himself helping others on a regular basis while in the woods. Similarly, Herrington estimates that roughly 90 percent of his team's search-and-rescue missions involve day hikers.

"The reason [day hikes] become a survival situation is because people don't have the gear they need [in case of an emergency]," said Herrington, who runs the Big Pig Outdoors survival school ([bigpigoutdoors.com](http://bigpigoutdoors.com)) and leads the Backcountry Search & Rescue Team ([TeamBUSAR.org](http://TeamBUSAR.org)). "Day hiking [presents risks] because we let our guard down."

Manget breaks down basic survival skills into three simple categories:

- How to prepare
- How not to get lost once started on a hike
- What to do if you are lost during a hike

## SURVIVAL SKILL TEACHING OPPORTUNITY

To help kids feel more comfortable in the woods, consider teaching them basic land navigation and orienteering skills. Although search-and-rescue experts want kids to stay in place when lost in the woods, basic map and compass reading can help them avoid those situations. Manget notes that sometimes when hikers stop for a break on a trail, they can forget which direction they are heading, especially on cloudy days without the sun to help. Instructional videos can be found online and more formal classes are offered in person, including at the Pisgah Center.



MELISSA MCGAW/NCWRC

## An Ounce of Prevention...

The best way to stay safe in the woods is to avoid getting lost altogether. Parents can play a key role in their kids' safety by helping them be prepared.

The first step before going into the woods is to share your plans with someone and make sure you are expected afterward. Manget said a common scenario leading to hikers getting lost is relying on one person to know the route. Remember the dad grabbing the map and ordering his family to follow him? The better plan would have been to make sure each of them had a map and to review the route together. Point out landmarks that they might pass on the trail. Planning ahead can help kids create a mental picture of what the route is going to look like.

Be prepared. Not only should adults

but kids should too. Manget said he has a pack ready to go containing 10 standard safety items needed for an emergency and for spending the night unexpectedly outdoors. These include navigation, illumination, food, water, first aid, fire starter, tools and repair kit, shelter, clothes and sun protection.

Kids' packs should contain some variation of this list depending on their age. Herrington has two small kids who are active outdoors. Each one has a pack containing key items that they bring whenever outdoors. Herrington's 3-year-old daughter has a pack that includes a "puffy jacket" for keeping warm stored inside an industrial-sized orange trash bag that can be worn as shelter. The pack also includes a headlamp with spare batteries and water. It has a whistle attached to a shoulder strap that she knows to blow three times in case of an emergency. His 6-year-old son's pack is a little bigger. It contains the same



Being prepared for an emergency is important for hikers of all ages. Items to pack in your backpack include, left to right: (top row) A compass, a whistle attached to your pack, extra food, a first-aid kit, (middle row) fire steel or a lighter, sunscreen, Swiss army knife or a toolkit, a "puffy" jacket for warmth, (bottom row) a water bottle, an industrial-sized trash bag for shelter and a flashlight.

things as his sister's, along with more advanced items like a first-aid kit.

The packs are part of the golden rule of day hiking: Plan on spending the night outdoors. If you come prepared for an emergency or getting lost, then your likely worst-case scenario is an uncomfortable night in the woods. If you're unprepared, it could be much worse. The same holds true for kids: A scary night in the woods is better than a life-threatening one. If the two kids in our introductory scenario came prepared, their forthcoming night in the woods would be manageable.

"People come here [to Great Smoky Mountains National Park] and it is 84 degrees," Herrington said. "But at night,

up at the top, it's going to be in the 40s. So they come in and it is hot and they are wearing shorts and a T-shirt. But let's say they hike [to the top] and they get lost and now it's 40-something degrees at night and let's say it rains. Well, now you've got a nightmare.... Even during the summertime, I'm trying to get people to carry a puffy jacket."

Stay together. It sounds simple, but people in a group often hike at different paces. The best way to avoid getting separated is to stop and wait for each member of your group at every junction in the trail, no matter how obvious it seems. Rather than assume the kids knew to turn right, the parents in our anecdote should have waited.

"People don't want to wait," Manget said. "All it takes is for someone to get around a corner and get a little bit of separation. One person goes one way and the other person goes the other way. And almost always, there is only one person who is following the map."

Don't rely on electronics. Count on not

having a cell signal, so no Google Maps. "A compass never dies," Manget said.

## Hug A Tree

The Hug-A-Tree Program was inspired by the search for Jeremy Beveridge, a 9-year-old boy who got lost and died in the woods during a family camping trip in Southern California in 1981. The program, launched by two members of the search-and-rescue party, teaches children basic and vital survival principles should they become lost in the woods.

Chief among the principles is the one that inspired the program's name: hug a tree. It teaches that if kids get lost in the woods, find a tree, sit at its base and

wait for help. Kids can find comfort in the tree, which is alive and can help protect them from wind and rain. It also keeps kids stationary, an easier target for searchers than a moving one.

In 2017, a teenager got separated from his stepfather in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. He spent 11 days on the move, following creeks downstream and upstream, within the 6,700-acre search area. He eventually flagged down a passing boater. Herrington was part of the search-and-rescue teams. "We were either a day ahead of him or a day behind him the whole time," he said. "If he had just stayed put on Day One, we would have found him that day."

As part of the process, the program encourages kids to:

Avoid sitting directly on the ground because it could be cold and wet. Instead, either sit on your pack or pile some leaves

and sticks together and sit on those. If they are cold, put on their puffy jacket or extra layers.

Put on the garbage bag from the pack; if you have not already done so, make a hole for your face before putting it on for breathing.

Make yourself big. This can include blowing on a whistle to alert searchers, wearing bright colors, drawing an X in the ground and waving your arms.

Don't hide if you hear strangers calling your name or blowing on a whistle. These people are most likely your searchers.

Data shows that most search-and-rescue missions end within 24 hours, so food is not a necessity for kids as they wait for help. Water is more important. If you have water with you, drink it as needed. If there is a river or creek nearby and you become overheated, carefully drink it. Both Manget and Herrington note that it is typically not advisable to drink water from these resources because of potential for disease, but if you are lost it is a better option than becoming dehydrated. Chances are that you will be rescued before any illness sets in.

Learning how to build a fire and shelter are great skills for a child and both Manget and Herrington encourage kids to do so. However, neither is necessary in most situations when lost in the woods. Both are time consuming, burn energy and could lead to injury.

Parents should not wait to report their kids missing or be afraid to ask for help. "There is nothing more critical than a missing kid, so don't be afraid to alert the authorities," Herrington said. "Call out the cavalry. The worst thing is the kid walked off [and is OK]. No big deal. Everybody goes home happy." ♦

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## SURVIVAL SKILL TEACHING OPPORTUNITY

It is never too early to start teaching your kids outdoor survival skills. The younger kids, likely under 10 years old, will pick up snippets of information while older kids can be taught more advanced concepts. Since most emergency situations result from injury, Herrington recommends beginning with a good wilderness first-aid class. Even younger kids can learn the basics. He recommends following that up with basic land navigation and survival skills.

"My kids know how to apply direct pressure bandages, so they know how to deal with major bleeding and trauma," he said. "If they fall down and have major wounds, they know to put direct pressure on it and get a bandage out and start dealing with it."