

Camping with the Family

By Patricia L. Fry

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When Tom Samson suggested a family camping trip, his wife, Margaret, cast the only negative vote.

“There’s nothing to do in the woods,” she explained. “I think we should take educational vacations. What will the kids learn in a campground?”

Some of Tom’s fondest childhood memories were of camping trips with his family and his church. “C’mon. There’s plenty to learn in nature,” he contended. “Without television, telephones and computers to distract us there will be more time for family togetherness. When you’re in the wilderness, you feel close to God — surrounded by all that He created.”

That was two years ago.

Today, the Samsons go camping every chance they get.

According to Margaret, “Tom was right. It’s wonderful to have nothing more pressing in your whole day than to make sure everyone gets up in time to participate in the family sunrise devotion and to find the best place to watch the sunset. And he was right about camping being educational. There are wonderful lessons at every turn.”

If your family enjoys camping or if you’re considering it for this summer, here are some ways you can enhance the experience for your family.

Creative togetherness

You can use family camping to instill a sense of helpfulness and teamwork in your children. Even the smallest camper can help unpack the car, set up camp, gather firewood and set the table.

Ask your young son or daughter to be responsible for something as simple as gathering dried pinecones to start the campfire.

Each day, assign family members to decorate the dinner table with things from nature, being mindful to not damage live plants or animal habitat. The tabletop designers can also be responsible for saying grace at the evening meal.

Together, create a family flag for your camp and take turns raising it each morning and taking it down at night.

Reach out to others

Jesus didn't help just those He knew. He helped those who needed it. Camping will provide opportunities for your family to connect with strangers by helping other campers. Offer to help another family put up their tent or camper. Share your firewood with someone who arrived too late in the day to go scouting for their own. If you see someone struggling with a heavy load, take your kids over and offer to help.

If another camper expresses interest in the fish you caught that day, share your catch with them. If someone admires the table decoration your children made, make one for them.

A family of campers I know opens some of their activities to other campers. "We like to invite other children over to our camp to learn a craft or hear a Bible story," the mother told me. "Sometimes we have several families singing around our campfire at night."

Study the Bible

Camping provides a variety of wonderful arenas for studying the Word of God. You have fewer distractions to steal your attention away. Use this time to strengthen your faith. Read from the Bible each day and discuss the passages. If you have small children, read stories from a children's Bible-story book, or use "My Devotions," the devotional booklet from Concordia Publishing House, written for 8-to-12-year olds. Each selection includes a Scripture reading, true-to-life story and a short prayer.

Let each family member choose a favorite Scripture verse and discuss the meaning and how it can be applied in everyday life. A camping trip can be a great time to bring up sensitive issues and problems; everyone is more relaxed and focused. While you're gathered around the campfire or sprawled out on a grassy expanse after a morning hike, encourage family members to bring up things that have been bothering them. You might have an issue with a coworker or neighbor. One of the children may want to talk about a disagreement they had with a friend at school. Discover together what advice and comfort you can find in the Bible.

Study God's Creation

Take nature walks and stop to explore. Teach your children to enjoy and appreciate all things in His beautiful world. Talk about how it is our job to love, respect and help care for all life that God put on earth. Of course, be sure to teach kids to keep their distance from wild animals.

Before your trip, get books to help identify plant and animal life — including pesky insects and weeds. Encourage each of the children to study a particular subject and become the family's "expert."

Here's a great way to learn the tracks of creatures that frequent your camp area: At night, encircle a small area with rocks. Smooth out the surface inside the circle and put

down a few morsels of food. In the morning, check to see if the food is gone and if the scavenger left any prints. Try to identify the animals and enjoy and appreciate their nocturnal activities.

This is also a great time to teach your children to respect the environment. Explain to them that their health and the future of the world depends on the environment. Tell them that they are guests in God's wilderness and must show respect by leaving it as they found it. That means putting their trash in its proper place and even picking up the refuse of others.

Beauty from God's bounty

Bring arts and crafts items with your camping gear. A book on nature crafts can be especially valuable for making the best of rainy days. One activity that will help build memories is to make picture frames and scrap book pages for your vacation photos by gluing seashells or dried flowers on posterboard. Or make Christmas-tree ornaments by decorating pinecones, seashells or similar items from this camping adventure with and glitter. Put names, places and dates on them.

Wet weather just adds another dimension to family camping. When it rains, planning and teamwork are crucial. But aren't those the family skills you want to build?

A rainy day is a great time for adults to unwind, finish a novel or just take a long nap.

Use your time outdoors to teach your kids about astronomy. If you live in a town, your children will be amazed at the enormity of God's heavens when viewed from a campsite far from city lights. For this activity, you'll need a good map of the night sky and maybe a telescope.

Pursue family activities

In our everyday lives, we're often exhausted from being over-scheduled. But you will find the time and the space in His wilderness to grow closer as a family. Let everyone have a turn planning a daily activity. Activities might include fishing, biking, shopping, playing in the camp playground, or even searching for lizards.

Here are some more ideas that will get your family members thinking of all sorts of activities:

- 1.** A treasure hunt. Hide an item and then give out maps with nature clues to help the hunters find it.
- 2.** Bug Bingo (or birds or lizards or leaves). Create Bingo cards using outdoor critters or objects instead of numbers. When someone spots the critter, that

square gets covered. A good book on insects (or birds or leaves) will come in handy.

- 3.** Exercise together. This could mean anything from morning calisthenics to playing Frisbee, soccer or softball, or going swimming. The important thing is doing it together, rather than each family member going off on their own.
- 4.** Have a sing-a-long. And don't be surprised if other campers want to join you. Bring a book of camp songs to get you started. For fun, make up new lyrics to old songs.
- 5.** Make a hike special. Don't set a prescribed route; instead, leave time for spontaneous adventures. To help motivate your kids, plan hikes that have an exciting ending — such as a waterfall or swimming beach.

Establish family traditions

While you can bring some familiar traditions from home, come up with some that are specific to your family camping trips. The family flag is an example. Some families enjoy putting on a skit the last night at the camp depicting some of the events of the trip like the day Mom fell in the river, or Dad made blackened pancakes, or the day the dragonfly chased one of the kids around the camp.

Family camping trips are a wonderful way to promote family togetherness in the splendor of God's creation. And the memories it can provide you and your children can be priceless.

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