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A Campsite Full of Opportunities

Next Generation

By Barbara Bray



If you go on a camping trip, leave the television and electronic games at home. The kids will complain at first that "there's nothing to do," but before long they will see lots of possibilities.

Summer is the perfect time for getting away from it all. We pack our pop-up camper, load the car with anything that doesn't fit in the camper, and head to one of our favorite destinations – a Michigan state park or recreation area. Our destination may be as close as the next county or a full day's drive away, but we always approach our trip with the same enthusiasm. Why? Because not only is it a chance to have fun, but it is also an opportunity to help our children experience the simple enjoyment of being part of the natural world.

Let's say that you decide to go on a camping trip this summer. What should you consider? First, leave the television and electronic games at home. The kids will initially complain that there is nothing to do at the campsite. (I call this "Game Cube withdrawal" in our house). Surprisingly, children are very resilient and they will soon see a smorgasbord of possibilities. Interesting sticks become magic wands, scattered rocks become stepping stones, and leaves become umbrellas or wrapping paper for "natural presents." When children are confronted with boredom, it forces them to use their imagination and to pay attention to their surroundings. Second, don't be afraid to let them explore on their own near your campsite. All children like to be explorers of a "new land." A quick lesson on poison ivy would be appropriate now, as well as a reminder to tread lightly.

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What happens when you confront adverse conditions? Last year, when we went camping over Memorial Day weekend, we had two days of rain. We set up our campsite in a downpour and then ate dinner inside our camper. The next morning, it was still raining. Rather than stay inside our camper, we decided to go to a picnic shelter in the day-use area for our breakfast. As we ate our oatmeal, a wood thrush was singing nearby in a forested low area just above a lake. Then I heard the sound of a loon. I excitedly asked my children if they wanted to go down to the lake to see it. They agreed and all three of us sprinted down the wet hillside. At the lake's edge we listened as the loon's call faded into the thick gray mist. We never saw the loon, but it was exhilarating just the same. The rain started falling again, so we turned to walk back up the hill. Pausing for a moment, my son

asked me if I had noticed the wildflowers blooming next to the beach. I smiled and told him yes, and thought to myself how wonderful it was that he had noticed them too.

Camping trips often provide special opportunities to see something unusual, or perhaps notice something that one never paid attention to before. If it is raining on your trip, watch for interesting creatures like slugs which seem quite at home in a totally drenched environment. Show your children a "really cool" plant that has a funny name or perhaps looks unusual. Float an oak leaf "boat" down a stream, and watch where it drifts. Weave dried grasses or yarn on the branching ends of a small stick for a natural art project. The possibilities are endless, and limited only by one's imagination!

Barbara Bray is president of the Oakland (MI) Chapter.