

CAMPING

WITH KIDS

Used to technical lightweight backpacking with fancy kit and wild camping in isolated spots, says **BECK LAXTON**, I was a bit dubious about camping with children: blow-up beds and family-sized stoves packed into the car seemed a bit naff. But actually, as well as being about the cheapest holiday you can have, family camping is huge fun. And it's simple, wholesome, outdoor fun, too: a useful antidote to our over-branded, advertisement-packed lives.

However, camping can seem complicated when you start out – all that stuff! In fact, you only need a few basics and they don't have to cost the earth. As a seasoned family camper these days, I offer my suggestions for getting started.

The first thing you need is a tent. Unless you have lots of money to spend, put aside thoughts of fancy geodesics that will withstand hurricanes: if the weather is truly horrible, you're going to stay at home. What you want is space. When you browse the catalogues from Argos, Milletts and Blacks, look at the floor plans. You want separate bedrooms you can zip the children in; a bit of a porch you can sit in for meals if it's windy or raining; space to store gear so you don't have to traipse to and from a car. And you don't necessarily want to pack people in like sardines, as the diagrams so optimistically show, so I'd suggest going for a tent that sleeps at least two more bodies than you plan to put in it.

We've got a six-person version, which gives one room to wedge two kids in, and one room for my partner and me (designed for four people – they'd have to like each other very much), which has space for the baby at the side. There's a covered bit in the middle where we can store food and eat meals. It was a cheap one from Argos, but we've had it three years, and it hasn't leaked or ripped, though we've had to replace the elastic in the poles. We've used it as early as May and as late as September. It takes about half an hour to put it up: the pegs just push into the ground so we don't even need a

mallet. We've seen fabulous teepees, gigantic geodesic domes, and spring-loaded lime-green things that popped out of a bag and assembled themselves, but all these are pricier options. I'd be wary of anything super-trendy, as it may be expensive without necessarily being at all functional. Fancy bunting, candles in jars and gingham tablecloths are for pictures in magazines.

Next you'll need beds. You must have something more than a groundsheet between you and the ground or you'll be in agony, as well as freezing cold. The expensive option is a Thermarest, but those blow-up mattresses that are red on one side and blue on the other are brilliant: tough, comfortable and cheap. Do buy a pump as you'll get very bored of blowing, and pumping is easy: on our last two

trips, our five-year-old has taken it over and inflated all three mattresses by herself. Up to a point, you can improvise: our two-year-old has been sleeping inside a Grobag on top of a sheepskin, and has been fine.

On top of your mattress goes a sleeping bag. Again, we bought ours from Argos, but as they were cheap and thin we got a few extra so everyone can double up.

When you're in a tent you're pretty much outside so the temperature can vary a lot: we've found it's useful to have layers. Children's sleeping bags? I wouldn't bother: buy them a full-sized decent one and it might well last them a lifetime. Or get one with an all-round zip and you can use it as a duvet too. If you're worried about their faces getting covered, tie a piece of string around the bag to shorten it.

Really good bags are filled with down. If you're looking for good quality without the brand names, have a look at Alpkite.com: this company makes its own gear – down sleeping bags, self-inflating mats, and titanium cookware – and is well spoken of in backpacking circles. Even quite fancy sleeping bags can be zipped together for a couple, but don't forget that you'll need one bag with a right-hand zip, and one with a left-hand zip. Finally, if you use



Wholesome family fun snuggled up next to the trusty Trangia

pillows at home, you'll need them for camping too, and all the camping alternatives I've tried have been really uncomfortable, so now we just take ours from home.

Lighting is important if you plan to stay up after sunset. My most vital piece of kit is a head torch, which illuminates what you're looking at while leaving both your hands free. I don't leave home without one! The poncey make is Petzl, and they are brilliant: I got mine free with a magazine subscription, so I haven't tried the cheap alternatives. A lantern for the tent is also nice so you can read after dark (and easier to share than a torch): again, you'll find them in Argos or Millets for £15 or so. There are gas versions too, but gas is pricey and you have to be careful not to knock them over.

Remember to pack nightclothes, and if you have cold feet, bed socks – or woolly walking socks that can double up for daytime hikes. Wees before bedtime are vital for grown-ups as well as children if you don't want to go stumbling over guy ropes in the middle of the night (did you forget the headtorch?). Take tomorrow's clean knickers and socks to bed with you, so you can get dressed inside the tent first thing. (I've only once seen someone wearing a dressing-gown at a campsite, and they looked very odd.) If you can organise clothes as you pack them, this will pay dividends later: have a PVC bag (or box or bucket) for each person, labelled with their name. Don't forget your own soap, and towels – remember that if there's a beach you'll want to use them there too.

Remember that once it's dark there won't be much to do other than reading with a head torch – better take one each. If you're away from civilisation, make sure you take a moment to lie and look at the stars: the night skies can be spectacular. For the grown-ups, invest in some sturdy plastic wineglasses, a corkscrew, and a bottle stopper.

That's sleep; your only other need is food. You don't need to cook at all when you camp, of course. Some campsites have a café where you can buy breakfast; our favourite, in Sizewell, has a bar and café where you can eat all day, and is close enough to the nearest town to nip in for fish and chips. But eating outside is one of the joys of camping and it'd be a shame to miss out – food eaten outdoors tastes wonderful.

The perfect cooking stove for decades has been a Swiss-made set called a Trangia. This has a burner that you fill with meths, a windshield that it sits in, two pans and a frying pan, a handle, and a strap that keeps the whole lot in a neat little package.

“Kids won't think there's anything wrong with rain unless you tell them there is.”

The small '27' costs about £45, the large '25' about £50, and the optional kettle is well worth the extra £5 – have a look on eBay too. You can buy an attachment that lets you cook with gas (for around £40 – ouch!), but meths is perfect: it's cheap, it comes in child-proof bottles, and you can see how much you've got left. Don't forget the matches, and put them in something waterproof.

Campsites always have cold water available, so you'll need something to carry it in: camping shops sell large plastic containers for this, or use old milk containers. You'll need a sharp knife and a chopping board, plus cooking utensils, especially if your cutlery is plastic; and don't forget a scouring pad and washing-up liquid. Most campsites now have rooms you can wash up in, or you can just rinse in the traditional fast-running stream. Take lots of old carrier bags to put your rubbish in.

For crockery, we bought one of those sets with six plates, bowls, mugs and cups plus knives, forks and spoons, packed into a case: it only cost a fiver or so. Woolworth's was always the place for stuff like that; now, try shops such as Superdrug. To supplement it, tea addicts will need a proper mug for the morning cuppa, as you can't drink tea out of plastic. A cheap china one will probably survive, or get a metal one – titanium is the thing for us gear nerds. I always take a proper metal teaspoon too. You can use the cutlery from home, of course, if it's not too precious: or buy a cheap metal set.

If it's hot, you can leave your milk in the shade, but many campsites now have a communal fridge. Butter is good for cooking and to put on rolls: if you get the kind that comes in a plastic pot it'll be contained if it melts. We like to take things to drink if the milk goes off: Bovril is lovely and warming, and can be spread on rolls when everything else has been eaten. Ribena is also good, especially with a dash of lemon juice to make it less sickly for grown-ups.

And now for cooking. Our all-time standby is corned beef hash. At its ultra-simplest, this consists of one tin of baked beans and half a tin of corned beef for two people (or two tins of beans and one of corned beef for two adults and two children), chopped up and mixed together, then heated until it combines into a wholesome sludge. I know it doesn't sound appealing, but it tastes great and is very

filling, and is suitable for breakfast as well as lunch or dinner. It can also be refined as much as you like. A thinly sliced onion fried in butter before you start is a great addition. If you need extra padding, add some pre-boiled potatoes. For more flavour, add

FINDING A CAMPSITE

Ask around for recommendations, or search the web, or look for campsite symbols on the relevant OS map. Tourist information offices can often tell you what's around, too. At popular times, you'll need to book. Don't go anywhere without getting in touch first: some places get listed as campsites when in fact they only host caravans.

When you book, ask about the showers: many are coin-operated, so it's worth taking the right coins.

CHECKLIST

Tent, poles, pegs
Lantern or head torch or both
For each person: mat or mattress, sleeping bag, pillow, towel, rucksack, water bottle, fleece
Stove and pans
Matches in a waterproof box
Spatula
Chopping board
Cooking knife
Water container
Washing-up liquid
Scourer
Bucket to collect and carry the washing-up in

Basics and standbys:

Teabags
Ribena
Bovril
Salt and pepper
Lemon juice
Sardines in tomato
Butter in a plastic pot

For meals:

Milk, eggs, porridge, tinned baked beans, corned beef, risotto rice, bacon, sausages, bread rolls, cheese and so on
Plates, bowls, cutlery, mugs
Plastic wine glasses, corkscrew, stopper
China or metal mug
Teaspoon
Carrier bags for rubbish

Worcestershire sauce and grate cheese over the top.

Risottos also work brilliantly: our favourite is made with those smoked salmon bits that are much cheaper than the slices. Start by frying a sliced onion, then add the risotto rice and some water; when the rice is nearly done chuck in the smoked salmon bits (and some prawns if you're feeling flush). Finish off with a squirt of lemon juice.

You can go to town on breakfasts: nothing beats waking up to the combination of fresh air and frying bacon. Bacon sandwiches are perfect – don't forget the tomato ketchup! Boiling eggs is easy but they're tricky to eat without a table so you might want to stick to scrambled. Porridge is also perfect: sprinkle it with soft brown sugar or try it with honey or golden syrup. On our first trip, we took the Trangia down to the beach and had porridge by the sea.

A substantial breakfast

means that lunch can be simple, which is useful if you're planning on an outing: bread rolls, pate and cherry tomatoes, perhaps; or cold sausages left over from breakfast would be perfect. Slicing cheese may be tricky, so you could go for the squidgy triangles or those Baby Bels that come wrapped in red wax. Those little tins of sardines in tomato are a great self-contained sandwich

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filling: just mash them up and spread them. Seasonal fruits make a perfect pudding. I find that simple food feels right: there's no need for snacks in packets or bars of chocolate. You may find that you can establish different rules from what you have at home. (Or, of course, not. Humph.)

One of the things I realised on our first camping holiday is that children won't think there's anything wrong with rain unless you tell them there is. Take a few books so that if it's pouring you can lie in the tents and read while raindrops pound on the canvas, but don't be too fussy about walking in it: most kids don't seem to mind. Three tips from my own experience: if it's not too cold, shoes that let water out as well as in can be perfect, so go for sandals rather than anything that'll get wet and heavy. Having wet hair is often the worst thing, so kit everyone out with a decent hat. And the swish-swish of waterproofs really disturbs the peace, so for short walks or those with somewhere warm at the end, try just wearing fleeces instead.

Fleeces are a miracle of the modern age: they'll keep you warm even if they get wet, and they're light to carry: just tie them round the child's waist. In the spirit of self-reliance, I like each child, once they can walk, to have their own rucksack with their own water bottle in it – it's worth saving the half-size ones you sometimes get given with in-flight meals. It also means that pebbles from the beach and other treasures can be carried by the finder.

One last piece of advice: don't put your tent up for the first time in the dark in the rain in a strange place. We did a practice run in the garden, and all slept out there too – but as we live in between six pubs, it turned out that Friday night wasn't really the best night to choose. At least when we got to our campsite we really appreciated the sound of crashing waves instead! ♦

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