

CANOEING WITH KIDS



Wilderness canoe tripping can teach kids about nature and about teamwork.

by Joanne Culley

I knew all the planning, packing and driving had been worth it when, on the first day of our canoe trip in Algonquin Park, we rounded a corner and came upon a moose and her calf feeding in the marsh by the side of the river. Motioning the kids to be quiet, we sat mesmerized, watching the pair for several minutes before paddling on.

This was just one of many magical moments that my husband Mike and I were to share with our two sons while canoeing in the wilderness. Canoeing with our kids over the years has instilled in them a deep appreciation for the natural world, and has allowed our family to spend quality time together away from the hustle and bustle of our urban lives.

Before we had children, Mike and I were avid wilderness canoeists – travelling down the Coppermine River to the Arctic Ocean, running the rapids on the Bazin and Dumoine Rivers in Northern Quebec, and retracing voyageur routes on Ontario rivers. When we had kids we wanted them to share the experiences that come with wilderness canoeing – the awe-inspiring vistas, the close encounters with wildlife, the companionship and teamwork, the freedom and sense of accomplishment, and so much more.

Short excursions first

To introduce our two sons, Stephen and Peter, to the joys of canoeing, we began with short excursions usually at a lodge or cottage with other family members present. We would go out for an

hour or two with one or both kids, giving them small paddles, to get them used to it.

After we thought they were comfortable in the canoe, we tried longer day trips. One of our first day excursions was in Quetico Provincial Park, regarded as the “canoeing capital of Canada.” Packing our lunch and bathing suits, we set out to give the boys a feeling for a real wilderness experience. The boys still talk about the pristine, sandy point on a remote lake in the park where we swam and basked in the sun on our own private beach.

When Stephen was 12 and Peter, 9, we embarked on our first three-day trip, to the Poker Lakes near Bracebridge. Stephen had been on a short canoe trip at camp that summer so we knew he would be comfortable with it. We were surprised at how the boys relished the portages, enjoying the opportunity to stretch their legs and run around.



We took two canoes, with one adult and child in each boat. Sometimes when Peter got tired, Mike would paddle solo in the centre of the canoe to ensure that they didn't fall behind.

On the first few trips we would camp in one spot and explore during the day, so that we didn't have to pack up and make camp at another site each night. We also chose routes with short portages, so that it didn't become an arduous experience.

At the beginning, we all shared one tent, but as the boys got older, they and we needed more privacy. We bought the boys their own lightweight, two-person tent that is easy to erect and holds up well in a downpour. Part of their fun now when arriving at a campsite is to choose the best spot, as far away from us as possible, and see who can put up the tent the fastest.

One of our outings took us to the Magnetawan River, where we endured a gruelling two km portage – made bearable by the breathtaking views of the raging river below.

On that trip, we stopped several times to look out from the safety of high granite cliffs, wondering at the First Nations people and voyageurs who passed this way centuries before. At the end of the day, we soothed our aching shoulders in the cool waters at our campsite, probably much like those early travellers had done.

Last summer we embarked on our most challenging family trip so far: a six-day white water trip on the Spanish River. After we demonstrated a few

white water techniques, the kids felt more confident. By the end of the trip, they were the first ones going down a rapid, showing off their newfound expertise.

Delightful close encounters

The slower pace and silence of paddling puts the canoeist on the same wavelength as wildlife. We have witnessed the surprise of a loon as she pops up a few metres away from our canoe, and then quickly dives under when she realizes she isn't alone.

We have had the pleasure of observing mothers teaching their young in their natural habitat. Our campsite on the Poker Lakes was next to a marsh where we watched a mother otter teaching her offspring to slide down the bank one by one into the water. She came back frequently with fish which the young hungrily devoured.

On the Magnetawan River, a mother merganser and her babies were swimming down the river alongside us for several days, while she tried to teach them to fly. The first few days, the babies didn't seem to be making much progress, rarely lifting themselves up for more than a few seconds, but by the end of our trip, they had all become airborne. We cheered along with their mother at a job well done.

Last summer, as we were wading in the Spanish River, lining our canoe through some difficult rapids, Peter felt something furry brush his legs. When we looked closer to where he pointed, we saw a beaver lodge sticking up from the water. He was thrilled to have been so close to a beaver.

Tread lightly

Canoeing in a wilderness area is a good opportunity to teach and practise environmental stewardship with children. Because Mike is a biologist, we have been long practitioners of no-trace camping. We make sure to pack our own garbage out, and pick up whatever we can that has been left behind by others. As a family, we make it a habit to leave campsites cleaner than we find them. The boys know firsthand the disgust of coming upon a site in the wilderness that has been trashed with beer cans, food scraps and other garbage. The sharp contrast of a beautiful forest next to a junked campsite has more impact than any lecture we can give them about preserving the environment.

Working as a team

On a canoe trip, kids learn that parents are fallible – we don't always know the answers, and we can get angry and frustrated if conditions aren't favourable.

They also learn that we need them as much as they need us.

Last summer on the Spanish River, it rained practically every day of our trip. By the sixth day, I was getting fed up, and facing the prospect of preparing supper in yet another downpour was almost more than I could bear. Upon reaching our campsite, however, the boys surprised us by climbing out of their canoe and immediately putting up the tarp over the fire area, thus ensuring that we would be dry while making supper. Their gesture improved my morale substantially and made us all more willing to face the following day, which fortunately brought much-needed warmth and sunshine.



Everyone learns teamwork while on a canoe trip. Getting everything across a long portage requires planning to ensure that no packs, paddles or gear are left behind. We usually make three passes over the trail. When the kids were younger, they couldn't carry as much, but now they can carry a canoe by themselves, thus lightening the load for Mike and I.

There was a period when our sons fought a lot. At home, they could retreat to their rooms for downtime. However, on a canoe trip, they are faced with spending extended time with each other in close proximity in both the canoe and the tent. Siblings have no choice but to be friends and try to get along. On the last trip, they took turns reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to each other before bed, something they would never have done at home. I think, ultimately, that our family canoe trips have made their relationship stronger.

Enjoying special moments

Going on canoe trips has brought us many once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Nothing can compare with seeing ancient pictographs on a granite rock, waking up in the middle of the night to the sounds of wolves calling in the distance, picking blueberries beside a portage, or seeing a shooting star while sitting by the campfire.

Our kids are now old enough to plan their own canoe trips with their friends. As parents, there's no better satisfaction for us than to know we have passed on our love of wilderness canoe tripping.

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What You Need

Canoe Tripping Equipment

Our list has evolved over the years, with the changing needs and interests of the kids, but this can be a starting point.

- canoes
- personal flotation devices (PFDs)
- paddles (one extra for each boat)
- bailers, kneepads, whistles, throw bags
- ropes
- fishing rods, tackle
- first aid kit
- maps - waterproofed, compass
- fire mitt, matches
- shovel, toilet paper, duct tape
- folding knife, fish filleting knife
- water filtering equipment
- 1 litre water bottle or more per person
- lightweight stove, extra fuel
- pots, cutlery, dishes, frying pan
- four or more canoe packs
- tent(s)
- sleeping bags and camp mattresses
- towels
- candle lantern, flashlights, extra batteries
- books, note paper, cards, cribbage board, games
- wildflower & bird guides, plant press
- rain gear
- personal clothing (quick drying), toiletries and bathing suits for each family member
- hats
- sunscreen
- bug spray
- camera
- food for duration of trip

Food for the Journey

Paddling burns up a lot of calories, so make sure you pack enough food. Many people think that if you don't take a cooler, you have to buy expensive freeze-dried foods. Over the years we've developed alternatives that are tasty, inexpensive and kid-friendly. Only you know what your kids like - if they won't eat it at home, they probably won't eat it on a canoe trip. And make sure you bring lots of treats such as Eat More chocolate bars, granola bars, licorice, trail mix, cookies and marshmallows.

Here are some meal ideas that have worked for our family:

Breakfast - oatmeal packets, powdered milk, granola, dry cereal, breakfast muesli, pancakes, syrup, bread, peanut butter, jam

Lunches - summer sausage, kielbasa, cheddar, parmesan or gouda cheese, rye crackers, solid breads, oranges, plums, dried apricots, dried apples, cookies

Suppers - falafels, pita, cabbage, cucumber, hummus, tabouleh, cury with potatoes, onions and other vegetables, spaghetti and sauce, creamed tuna over rice, pre-packaged macaroni dinner, carrots, potatoes, onions, drinks - powdered fruit crystals, hot chocolate, tea and coffee.

Books

The Happy Camper, Cottage Country Canoe Routes, Gone Canoeing: Weekend Wilderness Adventures in Southern Ontario, A Paddler's Guide to Ontario, and A Paddler's Guide to Algonquin Park by local author and canoeist Kevin Calkin. Excellent books on accessible, family-friendly canoe routes.

Wanapetoi Canoe Trippers Cookbook by Carol Hodgins. Filled with recipes to enjoy while canoeing.

The Dehydrator Bible, by local food writer and recipe developer Jennifer MacKenzie. An invaluable resource for preparing foods for longer trips.

Online

www.orca.ca. The website for the Ontario Recreational Canoeing and Kayaking Association's has instructions for flat water, moving water and canoe tripping.

www.paddlingontario.com. This website has information on canoeing instruction and outfitters.