

By Dione Chen, Co-founder, Go CampKit (www.gocampkit.com)

Thinking about camping with your baby or toddler?

Mention the idea, and you're bound to be met by words of encouragement and stories of fun-filled evenings around the campfire by some; awe and praise for your adventurousness from others; and looks of horror at the very prospect by a few.

First of all, let me congratulate you for considering the idea. Kids love camping. While your baby may be oblivious to the wonders of Mother Nature, even children as young as toddlers usually love the sounds and sights, the opportunity to sleep with their whole family in a tent. And getting dirty? Doesn't seem to faze them in the least.

But let me be honest. Camping with a young child under the age of three does merit special consideration.

Here are a few questions that will help you determine if your little one is likely to enjoy camping. Chances are, you'll enjoy camping only if your child does, so it pays to be realistic and plan ahead.

IS YOUR YOUNG ONE READY FOR CAMPING?

Score 1 point for every "yes" answer to the questions below. Score no points for every "no" answer.

A. Sleeping

When you're sharing tight quarters in a cozy tent, there's just no way you can not mind a restless, crying, noisy child. (And what's more, your campground neighbors aren't going to love your sleepless child either.) Your child's sleeping habits will directly impact your (and others') ability to enjoy the evening.

- Is your child a good sleeper?
- If your child awakens at night, can he or she quietly be comforted and go back to sleep, with minimal disturbance?
- Is your child able to sleep in unfamiliar surroundings (noise, light, temperature, bedding)?
- Is your child sensitive to temperature changes?

B. Mobility

As any parent whose chased a young child around knows, it's tough to relax anywhere and anytime if your child is an active crawler or a "cruiser" who loves to explore but isn't steady on his or feet. Babies who aren't crawling yet and toddlers who are can walk confidently will be easier to "contain" in one spot.

- If your baby is not crawling yet, is he or she content to sit in a stroller or baby backpack?
- If your young one is already walking, does he or she do so with confidence (doesn't need to hold onto people or things; does not fall)?

C. Other Considerations

Some children are more likely to adjust to the novelty of camping than others. Some ages are easier to deal with than others. Here are some additional factors to consider in calculating ease in camping.

- Does your child often put non-food objects in his or her mouth?
- Is your child easily disturbed or upset by new surroundings and changes in routine? Will children outnumber adults on your camping trip?
- Do you have more than one child under the age of 5?

What Your Score Means:

0-3 points. Proceed with caution. It may make sense to wait another year before you take your little one camping. Note: this doesn't mean the whole family has to miss out. Perhaps this will be the perfect opportunity for older siblings to experience more "alone time" with just mom or dad on a camping trip. If you choose a campground close to home, your little one can come with the "stay at home parent" for just a day outing or do something altogether different at home. There are other alternatives to car camping in a tent, too. Consider renting a motor home or staying in a cabin.

4-7 points. Preparation is essential. You know your child best. For example, if your child is likely to wake up at night, you may want to choose a campsite that's some distance from others. If your child is sensitive to temperature changes, be sure to pack appropriate clothing. And if your child is a handful, then invite extra adults who love young children to join you. You can count on families with similarly aged children for sympathy and assistance – after all, they're in the same boat!

8-10 points. Go for it! Your family is a great candidate for camping. Keep logistics and meals simple, be prepared, and enjoy! (Note: refer to <http://www.bigbluetrunk.com/ourcorner/535> for camping tips and to www.gocampkit.com for resources).

GOING CAMPING?

If you are still up for camping with your little one, please read on for some tips.

Keep your camping trip short and simple. Test the waters by going somewhere local for only one or two nights. If you need to return home earlier than planned, it won't be such a big deal.

Do not disturb. It's exasperating for the interrupted by noisy neighbors. Even worse could be the chagrin of knowing that it's your family that everyone else wishes would shush.

Sleep tight. Babies and small children will get lost in an adult-sized sleeping bag. Here are alternatives. Set up a porta-crib or other bedding that's baby/kid-sized. We have friends who had an inflatable toddler bed-sized mattress with raised bumpers around the edge that worked well. Alternatively, bring a large, inflatable air mattress and comforters and sleep you're your little one in this makeshift bed. (Note: While you might be tempted to buy several individual twin-sized air mattresses, the fewer gaps between mattresses the better. If there's a chance someone can end up between the gaps of two mattresses, someone will (and sleep poorly for it).

Split up. If you're apprehensive about bringing your young one camping, but hate to disappoint older siblings who are keen to go, consider splitting up. Nominate one parent to go camping with the older siblings while the other stays home this time. Going camping with "just mom" or "just dad" can be a special experience, too.

Camping is all about having fun. If you're considering camping, my advice is to go ahead and give it a try! The key is to be prepared, relax and enjoy Mother Nature. You can find plenty of resources available on the web for planning your camping trip, including campground reviews, online campsite reservations, recipes, packing lists, gear reviews and online communities where you can give and receive tips from other campers.

For a list of some of the best of these online resources, please visit

<http://www.gocampkit.com/resources.htm>

About the Author: *Dione Chen is a happy camper and mother of two. To encourage more people to camp more often, she has co-founded Go CampKit, which offers ready-to-go camping kits that include essential items for car camping in one compact, portable box. Go CampKit makes it easy, fast, convenient and affordable to prepare for environment-friendly camping. Visit www.GoCampKit.com for information on Go CampKit products, and unbiased advice and links to resources for campground reviews and reservations, recipes, and checklists. Anyone interested in camping is invited to post an entry to Go CampKit's blog and online community of campers to ask a question, share information or contribute a comment.*