

GET GEARED UP

Iain Duff looks at what kit you need for camping with youngsters

When you take your first tentative steps into the world of camping you'll probably just concentrate on buying the basic equipment. But once you've been bitten by the bug, it won't be long before you're tempted by the massive amounts of equipment available in your local camping shop or online. There is such wide range of gear out there it's difficult to know where to start, especially when it comes to kitting out your kids.

Initially you might just decide to let them

wear 'normal' clothes and adapt adult-sized equipment like sleeping bags and chairs. But you'll soon find it makes more sense to invest in stuff specially designed for young campers. A pair of jeans is difficult to dry in a tent if you get caught in a downpour so waterproof trousers make far more sense. And that trendy jacket you bought in Next might look good, but it won't protect them from the rain like a proper waterproof jacket.

On the next few pages we've come up with some suggestions for the gear you might want

to consider for camping with kids. Of course, a lot of it is down to personal taste but hopefully there will be enough ideas here to point you in the right direction.

TENTS

Choosing the right tent for camping with kids is your most important job and it's no easy task. There are literally hundreds of different models out there, each competing for your attention with some special feature or another. Unless you're planning to pack your little ones off to wild camp at the summit of Skiddaw (and we've all been tempted) you can rule out the lightweight backpacking tents. And most three and four berth tents are going to be too small for your needs as well.

After that you have to decide what you'll need your tent for. Are you likely to be going away for short weekend breaks or holidays lasting a week or two? Chances are, like most of us, it will be a combination of the two. If you're lucky you'll be able to have a different tent for each, but it's more realistic that you'll have just one tent to cover all eventualities. That's where flexibility comes in, and I don't just mean the fibreglass poles.

The temptation when you go into your local camping store or start searching the online stores is to go for the biggest tent you can afford, but this isn't always the best course of action. Huge tents, like Kampa's Broadhaven 8 (our family tent of the year) are fantastic for



longer holidays where your tent will be pitched for a couple of weeks and you'll need loads of space for living. But they take time to put up and even longer to fill with all your gear. All very well if time isn't an issue, but if you're only going to be onsite for a weekend then you won't want to spend a large chunk of your valuable time getting set up.

Instead you might want to consider going for a slightly smaller tent that has the option to be 'upsized' using optional porches and extensions. We chose Coleman's Galileo 5 as the Tent of the Year in our 2013 awards, not because it's a well-made and well thought out tent (which it is) but because of the flexibility it offers for families. In its basic form it will provide comfortable accommodation for a family of four for a short camping break, but for a longer stay you can add a front extension, which will double the living area and transform it into a spacious home-from-home.

In the last few years, the Danish firm Outwell has led the way in developing tents that meet the needs of families. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, which must make their Montana the most flattered tent in history. And it is probably the most successful family tent in history, with hundreds of them appearing on campsites up and down the country every weekend. Their Fantasy Collection of a few years back was aimed squarely at family campers, with features like kids' rooms and the games wall proving

popular. This year their Malibu 5 tent has the option of a kids room with fun print design, darkened ceiling and even their own child-sized entrance. A games wall is also available as an option.

CHECKLIST

SEWN-IN GROUNDSHEET - Purists will no doubt be horrified, but no-one wants pools of water in their tent every time it rains, especially if you've got children crawling around on the floor, so for me this is an essential feature. The first family tent we owned had a separate groundsheet and while it did the job, it was a revelation the first time we used one with a built-in.

BEAT THE WEATHER - On a similar theme, keeping dry and warm when the rain is falling is essential for a successful family trip. To make sure your tent is sufficiently waterproof, look out for taped seams and a good hydrostatic head rating of between 2,000 and 3,000mm. The flipside is that when the weather is hot, you won't want to be sweltering, so choose a tent that has plenty of ventilation.

LAYOUT - The practicalities of a tent's layout are far more important than fun features. If you have younger kids you might want to have them close-by during the night, so a tunnel tent where the bedrooms are all at one end would suit best. On the other hand, older children like their privacy so a vis-à-vis style tent with the sleeping areas facing each other across the

living space is a better option. Pod-style tents, which have three or four rooms branching off a central living area are also good, but are less popular these days, mainly because they are large and more difficult to pitch. Storage should also be a factor as should the amount of living space you have. Hopefully the kids will be outdoors most of the time, but its inevitable they'll be playing inside the tent at some point, so they'll need some space to avoid getting under your feet.

PITCHING - The easier the better really, with kids needing occupied, and it doesn't come a lot easier than an inflatable tent. Vango was first to take inflatables into the mainstream family camping market with its AirBeam range and many of its competitors are following suit this year. Outwell, Kampa and Sunncamp have all joined the Scottish company with their own versions of pump-up technology and there are some who are convinced poles are on the way out and that this is the future of family camping. Time will tell but you can't argue with the speed and convenience and that's something you'll really appreciate onsite with youngsters in tow. If you're sticking to traditional pole construction, then tunnel tents are likely to be your next best bet.

ACCESSORIZE - A few years ago I'd have scoffed at the idea of a tent carpet, but these days I wouldn't consider camping with our kids without one. Are we going soft? Probably, but I don't care and neither should you.

1 Kozi Kidz and Spotty Otter specialise in kids clothes that are practical and look good

2 Snuggpak's Laponie Junior sleeping bag, comes in blue or pink

3 The cow-print Wilderness sleeping bag from Vango

4 LittleLife's Arc 2 travel cot

5 Good quality boots like Brasher's Tora GTX are essential if you're serious about walking with your kids

6 The Fjallraven Kanken Mini is the junior version of a Scandinavian design classic

7 Regatta's Sally fleece for girls

8 A poncho towel like LittleLife's animal themed range is fun and practical for camping

9 You'll need good socks to go with boots. Brasher's Adventurer come in boys and girls' versions

10 Wellies, like these Vivobarefoot boots, are an essential part of a child's camping wardrobe



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▶▶ CAMPING WITH KIDS BEST KIT



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SLEEPING

After a day of campsite play, a good night's sleep is essential – for your youngsters and you. In days gone by, kids simply slept in adult-sized sleeping bags. Or at least they attempted to. The problem was that small people can easily slip down into full-sized bags and if it's chilly at night, all that empty space soon gets cold. Far better to invest in a junior sized sleeping bag and there are plenty to choose from. The most striking design this year is Vango's Wilderness cow print bag (available for around £25), but the Bat Boy and Butterfly Girl range from Outwell (£30) come a very close second. Snugpak's Laponie Junior is an example of a more traditional looking bag that comes in either a mummy-style or square bottom design and at around £20 is a bit cheaper than the others. Of course price is always a factor and you can pick one up for less than a tenner, but you get what you pay for and keeping warm at night is such an important element of camping that it makes sense to pay a premium to guarantee that. That doesn't mean you shouldn't be shopping around and looking for bargains, though. The style you go for will largely depend on personal taste – some children will enjoy the cocoon effect of a mummy bag, while others need a bit more room to thrash around in their sleep. As we discovered on a recent trip with our three year

old, a machine washable bag is essential. For very young children, you'll probably be looking at a lightweight travel cot like LittleLife's Arc 2

Once you've chosen your sleeping bags, you need to decide what to put them on – airbeds or mats? As with bags, it's a question of personal taste and you get what you pay for. Sleeping mats (especially the self-inflating variety) are my preference as they are less bulky and tend to keep out the cold better than a traditional airbed. And like sleeping bags they are also available in kids' sizes (see Outwell's Batboy and Butterfly Girl ranges, for example). A useful tip is to bring pillows from home – not only are they more comfortable than those you get built into some sleeping bags but your youngsters might prefer the comfort and security of their own pillow.

CLOTHING

In the middle of summer, when the sun is shining and the mercury's soaring, it's easy to dress your kids on camping trips. All you need is T shirts, shorts and a pair of trainers, really. It starts to get a bit more tricky when the weather is not doing as it's told, and as we all know, in Britain that could be any time – spring, summer, autumn or winter. As the Scouts say: Be Prepared. The day might start with the sun splitting the sky but that could soon change and you need to be ready to react.

In some ways it's about practicality – designs and colours that won't show the dirt are a key consideration as is gear that is easy to get your kids in and out of quickly. But of course we also want our little darlings to look good.

For babies and young toddlers, all-in-one rainwear is a great option. Kids-only brands like Spotty Otter and Kozi Kidz specialize in this sort of thing and while they are not cheap, they offer excellent quality and guaranteed protection from the elements. Waterproof dungarees and trousers should have reinforced knees.

Big, bold primary colours appeal to youngsters and they don't come much bolder than the rainbow-coloured waterproof jacket by Kozi Kidz. And there's a practical side to it too – you'll be able to spot your offspring a mile off.

The essential item of kids clothing is probably the fleece. It can be thrown on any time when you're out and about around the campsite and it's the perfect thing to stick on them when you're sitting around the tent on a slightly more chilly evening.

Kozi Kidz again do a great range of comfortable and cosy fleeces designed specifically with youngsters in mind. Thermal baselayers are also good for chilly evenings and can double up as pyjamas.

Another big name to look out for in children's outdoor clothing is Regatta. Unlike the specialist kids brands, many of their styles are scaled



11 Look out for design features like the thumb hole in this Kozi Kidz fleece

12 Velcro-fastening trainers like the Vivobarefoot Neo are easier than struggling with laces for younger children

13 Waterproof jackets for boys and girls. Regatta's Warpath and Krypton Jem

14 Thermals and fleeces, like these from Kozi Kidz are ideal for night-time in the tent

15 Spotty Otter waterproofs let kids play outdoors all year

16 Micro-fibre towels take up less space and dry in seconds

17 TumTum's lunchboxes add fun to kids' mealtimes

18 Always test out child carriers for comfort

19 The sun is shining now but those clouds could open at any time

20 Outwell's child friendly Malibu 5 with kids' room

21 Odlo do these warm baselayers for children

22 Sandals, like these from Regatta, are easy to throw on



down versions of the adults clothing. This year the ranges are divided into three - X-ert Performance (for adventurous kids who need a level of technical performance from their kit), the Adventure range (basic waterproofs, trousers, midlayers and footwear) and Wild Shores (more fashion-based summer gear, including t shirts, casual tops, jackets and sandals).

Footwear is also dependent on the weather. Wellies, flip-flops and Crocs should cover all eventualities on-site, while something like Vivobarefoot Neo trainers are perfect if you're going further afield.

If serious walking is your thing, then investing in good quality shoes or boots is essential. Brasher's Tora GTX are as good quality as you'd expect from this brand and couple them with a pair of their Adventurer socks and your youngster should be comfortable on the trail. Think about getting good quality waterproof jackets and trousers as well.

As always, the key to getting good value for money is to shop around, both online and on the High Street. Special offers crop up regularly and if you're not fussed about picking up the newest designs, you can often get really good deals on last season's styles.

LIVING & PLAYING

Kids love the independence a camping holiday brings so to keep that going, give them their

own mini-backpacks that they can fill with their toys and snacks. There are lots of these available for all ages - starting with LittleLife's cute range of animal-themed daysacks. These are suitable for ages one to four and come with reins and harnesses so you can keep wandering toddlers under control. When they get older they can upgrade to something a bit more grown up like the LittleLife Alpine backpacks or Fjallraven's Kanken Mini, the junior version of a Scandinavian design classic.

For the youngest children, I'm afraid it's you who will have to do all the carrying so you'll want to invest in a good quality child carrier. It's not just your youngster who needs comfort but you as well, so have a look at what's available and try them out in-store before you buy. Deuter, LittleLife, Karrimor and Osprey are among the brands that have designed carriers with those who love the outdoors in mind.

So what else is there to consider? Well, specialist micro-fibre camping towels are less bulky than domestic variants. They dry quicker than normal towels too and usually have anti-bacterial properties. Wet wipes and anti-bacterial gel are also useful to have and of course a first aid kit to deal with cuts and scrapes is an essential. Overall it's all about comfort, safety and letting the youngsters enjoy themselves as much as possible while making life as easy as possible for parents.

As bizarre as it might sound, in these days when kids spend most of their lives indoors playing the Xbox or Wii, they might actually need some practice in doing outdoors stuff. A range of activity kits called BattleBoxes aims to do just that. Each BattleBox contains everything you could need for an adventure, from setting up camp to planning an ambush or building a den in the woods. And they are full of the type of equipment adults don't usually think of buying, like secret 'owl hoot' whistles, catapults and stink bombs. The aim of the Adventures in a Box kits is to inspire youngsters to develop a love of the outdoors that will last a lifetime and that is something we are all in favour of. ■

NEED TO KNOW

- www.kozikidz.co.uk
- www.spottyotter.co.uk
- www.regatta.co.uk
- www.brasher.co.uk
- www.snugpak.com
- www.vango.co.uk
- www.vivobarefoot.com
- www.outwell.co.uk
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