

Don't Go Camping Without Reading This

Catherine Newman's tips for fun-packed—and easy—family camping

1 | Get the right tent Tents range widely: from the featherlight two-person tent you'd pack in to that pristine site, to a multi-room nylon mansion big enough to play croquet in. Ours is simply a large-ish backpacking-style tent, but if we had it to do over, we'd buy one of those huge, inexpensive recreational ones: easy to put up, with plenty of weather/ventilation options, and roomy enough to (nearly) stand up in.

2 | Practice setting up your tent Be sure to practice erecting the tent in your backyard, before you arrive at your campsite in the dark, and it's raining, and you're being eaten alive by mosquitoes, and you haven't the foggiest idea what those springy things are for.

3 | Sleep in comfort If you're hardcore, you can purchase various foam or inflatable sleeping pads, and each person can sleep on one in his or her own personal, weatherproof sleeping bag. We're not hardcore, so we sleep—all four of us—on a king-size air mattress (the campground's store lets us plug in the rechargeable pump during the day), with sheets, pillows, and our down comforter. I am not officially recommending this, and also, there is a deflating issue—but it's really, really comfortable.

4 | A camp stove isn't cheating It is so much fun to roast a wiener on a stick over the blazing campfire! It is less fun

to hunch over your coffee water, waiting weeks for it to boil while the morning wood smolders damply and you fall uncaffeinatedly all to pieces. Bring a stove, even if it's just a little stove. Buy the easiest to use, easiest to light one they'll show you at the camping goods store. We've used the same little one-burner stove for a decade, partly because the disposable canisters (while eco-unfriendly) are easy to buy and use, and partly because at night, we screw on a glass shade and it becomes a lovely, hissing lantern.

5 | Before you do anything else, set up your campsite When you arrive at the site, set up your tent first thing, even if you really want to leap into the pond or wander off to watch chicken hawks. Your children can busy themselves with the bug boxes, magnifying glasses, field guides, games, or art supplies you carefully remembered to pack—or they might want to help. Inflate mattresses, make up beds, put a doormat in front of the entrance (and make sure everyone understands about no shoes in the tent, no, not even if it's an emergency, even though you remembered to bring a small dustpan and broom for the inevitable grit situation). Then toss a pretty vinyl cloth over the picnic table, hang a clothesline between two trees, fill water jugs (we hang a solar camp shower from a tree and use it as an all-purpose faucet, with a bin beneath for washing

dishes), and put chairs and wood near the fire pit. At some point there may also be some spritzing of bug spray.

6 | Know where to go Campgrounds range from pristine hike-in spots in the wilderness to sites complete with swimming pool, horseshoes, and a family watching *Simpsons* reruns in the RV next door. Our favorites are state parks, which tend to offer the perfect mix of a lovely natural setting and flush toilets. An easy way to reserve a spot is through reserveamerica.com, which lists more than 170,000 campsites and cabins at 3,000 state, federal, and private campgrounds. We reserve six months ahead to get specific dates and sites, but we have also gotten last-minute reservations many times. For details on particular sites (terrain, shade, etc.), call the campground itself, rather than relying on their online maps.

7 | Forget these items at your peril

- Doormat
- Camp chairs
- Washing-up bin
- Clothesline
- Paper towels
- Air mattress

For the Kids

- Bug box
- Field guides
- Magnifying glass
- Art supplies
- Disposable camera

Catherine Newman's personal packing list

THE CAMPSITE

- Tent
- Tarps
- Air mattress and patch kit/duct tape
- Pump
- Beach umbrella
- Camp chairs
- Comforter
- Sheets
- Fleece blanket
- Pillows
- Bike helmets
- Bikes
- Personal flotation devices
- Sand toys
- Sun shower
- Guitar
- Whisk broom and dustpan
- Doormat
- Tablecloths (2)
- Firewood
- Kindling
- Lighter
- Bungees
- Rope
- Clothesline
- Clothespins

THE KITCHEN

- Stove
- Lantern
- Gas
- Sponge
- Bowls
- Cups/mugs
- Silverware
- Water jug
- Can opener
- Knife
- Cutting board
- Pot and lid
- Pan
- Wooden spoon
- Spatula
- Foil
- Paper towels
- Soap
- Wash basin
- Water bottles
- Trash bags
- Dish towel
- Gallon ziplock bags
- Candle

THE FOOD

- Olive oil
- Salt and spices
- Granola bars
- Milk and juice boxes
- Oatmeal
- Canned beans/tomatoes
- Cereal
- Marshmallows
- Snacks
- Cheese
- Butter
- Bread
- Peanut butter
- Jelly
- Drink mix
- Wine
- Fruit
- Tea, coffee, and filters/coffee pot

EXTRA WARM THINGS

- Fleece jackets
- Rain jackets
- Warm socks

ODDS & ENDS

- Headlamp
- Flashlight
- Sunglasses
- Bug spray
- Sunscreen
- Swiss Army knife
- Watch
- Matches
- Playing cards
- Pen and paper
- Camera
- Cell phone
- Kids' meds
 - Acetaminophen
 - Ibuprofen
 - Antihistamines
 - Thermometer
- Toiletries
- Sun hats
- Swimsuits
- Flip-flops
- Diapers
- Wipes
- Towels
- Journals
- Books and toys
- Bug catcher and magnifying glass
- Field guides
- Doll/stuffed animal
- Watercolors and paper