

Have a Great Backyard Campout: Lessons Learned from the TCS Outdoor Education Program

For almost 50 years, The Children’s School’s students in grades 3 - 8 have headed into the outdoors on overnight camping trips to expose them to the physical and ecological diversity of Georgia and to build lifelong skills like teamwork, self-reliance, and independence.

Since we can’t gather together for an overnight camping trip, I’ve pulled together some tips from my 23 years of experience leading camping trips for TCS. Here are some of the skills our students learn while in the outdoors. I hope they will help you plan your own backyard camping trip with your family and help your family pick up or sharpen the very skills our students work on while in the woods.

One important lesson TCS outdoor education leaders (i.e. teachers) have learned over the years is to be flexible in expectations and execution. Not all of our students are prepared for the same experiences and challenges. As the trip leader in your household, you should also plan a camping “trip” that works for your family.

#1 Learn to Love the Outdoors: Most third-graders have spent a night away from home and some have even spent the night in a tent, but most have not spent two nights away from home in a large group in the outdoors. Third-grade teachers become experts at balancing being in the woods and feeling comfortable with new experiences. Third-graders set up and sleep in tents with a small group of classmates, but the bathroom isn’t too far away and is well lit to be easily found during dark nights.



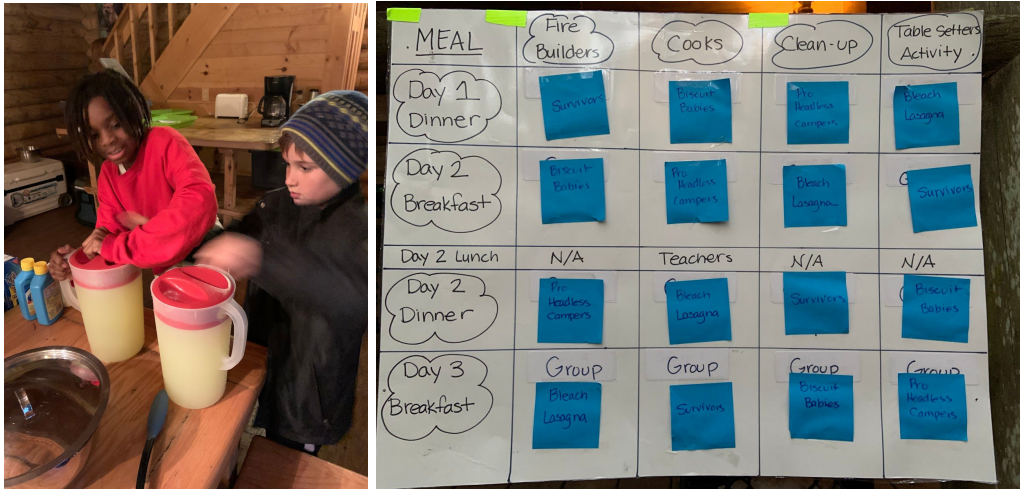
Plan your family campout to meet your family’s readiness. It might be enough to set up a tent (or something resembling a tent) and start the night there, but end up in your own beds. Or, your kids might be ready to spend the whole night by themselves in the backyard.



#2 Teamwork: Every fall, in the North Georgia mountains, fourth graders work in teams to make their two-night camping trip a success. Prior to the trip, groups of students work to create menus, organize shopping lists, and plan group activities. On the camping trip, their classmates and chaperones rely on the teams to prepare and serve meals.



On your family campout, choose a meal or activity for your child to plan or to help plan.



#3 Self-Reliance: On a three-night camping trip in the Coastal Plain of Georgia, self reliance is a major focus for fifth graders. Students must not only navigate Tupelo Gum and Cypress trees while paddling, but also are in charge of themselves while making decisions without a teacher in the boat with them.





Challenge your child to go beyond their comfort level. It might be a kindergartner going into the house by themselves to use the bathroom, a third grader walking twice as far as they've ever gone, or a fifth grader mixing and cooking the pancakes for breakfast.

#4 Independence: Last year, 7th and 8th grade students strode into newfound independence by carrying their own gear and food on a two or four-night backpacking trip in the mountains of North Carolina.

Once you've conquered your backyard, you can start to plan your next campout. What is the next challenge your family is ready to take on? Are you ready to move into the woods or an area outside of your backyard? We are so lucky in the Metro Atlanta area to have so many wonderful natural places to explore. Choose one and start planning your own outdoor adventure!

