Top tips for walking with children

**Preparation is key** Pack a rucksack before you go. You don’t need any special equipment, but you’ll often have a much nicer time if you’re prepared for a few eventualities. Here are some things you might want to take:

* A snack and water
* A towel/wipes
* A spare pair of pants, socks and trousers if you’re walking with younger children or children who are toilet training
* A basic first aid pocket (i.e. plasters and bite cream)

**Plan together** Children will be excited about a walk if they’ve had some input in deciding where to go/what to take/what to wear etc etc. Your aim is for them really to enjoy it. If it’s difficult to give them full ownership on where to go, then give them a couple of options to choose from, and be happy to compromise on superhero costume/heavily sequinned sari/swimming costume/brand new Christmas present clothes + wellies (if you’ve managed to insist on the wellies, then you’re winning).

**Think about the distance** Make the walk doable. For younger children they need to be able to achieve it. For older children, you want them to enjoy it and be up for going again.

**Schedule realistically** Your walk will take slightly longer than the simple distance multiplied by speed! Someone usually needs to go back for a wee just as you’ve got everyone out the house. Or you’ll decide to take a different path home. Or you’ll spot a bird/animal/ice cream van and decide to follow it. Of course it’s perfectly possible to go for a ‘quick walk’, but in order for you to enjoy it, and not to be nagging your children to hurry up the whole way round, mentally schedule in an extra 20 minutes. It really can make all the difference to having a nice time.

**Look up** What can you see? Children are naturally curious – notice what they see, ask them what they think, and share your questions and knowledge as you notice things too.

**Connect** Walking together is a brilliant time for conversation. Ask your children questions and take the time to listen properly to their answers.

**Respect their solitude** Children need time to think and wonder. Many children do this very naturally while walking outside. They also need solitude and silence. Many children don’t get a lot of ‘unscheduled’ time. If your child is lagging behind, talking to themselves and holding everyone up, it can be tempting to assume they’re dragging their heels and being anti-social. Of course, there are times when you need everyone to stick together, and when children need telling to catch up, but if you notice your child is hanging back in their own little world, they may well be having some formational moments. So try not to insist that children talk to you, or join in with things, or walk right next to you. If it’s safe to do so, allow them time to wander and wonder – this is an essential part of their healthy development!

**Distraction** At some point, children will decide they don’t want to walk. This usually happens at the moment you’re furthest from home. Distraction is your counter-move:

* Strike up a conversation about something totally unrelated to the walk, something that they really like
* Sing/chant songs, rhymes or poems, or make up silly songs and rhymes of your own
* Mix up you walking style – although they absolutely cannot walk another step, you’ll be surprised how easily they might suddenly find skipping/leaping/stamping/tiptoeing etc
* Break up the journey – show them the journey in small steps (“we just have to get as far as that tree on the corner”)
* Stop for a snack – children get hungry! Sometimes they just need to refuel.

**Phones**  Model the behaviour you want to see. If you don’t want your children to be on their phone, don’t be on yours. You could set some boundaries with your children before the walk begins – talk to them about what the time is for and what it isn’t for. Is it possible for everyone to leave their phones at home? If you have children with you who will have phones in their hands, then turn them into a positive, and set a photo challenge. As a family you could each try to capture a picture on your walk that reflects a word or idea (i.e. ‘colour’, ‘peace’, ‘dusk’ etc).

**Enjoy!** Walking with children can be one of the most enjoyable experiences, and is likely to contain some of the special moments they will remember for the rest of their lives. Don’t take yourself to seriously – just enjoy this time you have in the outdoors with your amazing children. Look at how beautiful the world around you is, and how beautiful they are. Have your eyes opened by the things they see and say.

**Be thankful** When you get home, say thank you to your children for a lovely walk, and verbalise one or two things you especially enjoyed. You’ll find this simple act of gratitude toward one another is very powerful, and helps people associate walking together with feeling secure and happy (which means they’ll want to go again!). Children can learn the act of being openly grateful for time outside with others from a very young age – it’s never too early or late to start thanking your children for walking with you.