

CANOEING WITH OUR KID

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For over a decade, from spring thaw to winter freeze-up, Rita and I had enjoyed freedom together in a canoe. Then Jamie came into our lives. Little miracles can sure make big changes.

We were truly grateful for Rita's parents whose generosity in providing babysitting services made it still possible for us to paddle together on occasion. However, we wanted our son to love the outdoors as we did and we wanted to enjoy our leisure time together as a family. This meant that we had to adapt our outings to his interests and limitations if we expected him to enjoy canoeing with us.

Much to our initial annoyance we learned that young children do not share our feeling of personal challenge in trying to get from Point A to Point B in the fastest possible time. It was necessary to change our outlook to learn to relax outdoors, to savor the sense of being there rather than getting there. Our early outings were confined to afternoon or single-day poke-about on local rivers and lakes that allowed Jamie ample time to play, explore, and discover our natural world. As he began to increasingly enjoy and feel comfortable with these excursions we started to move further afield on progressively longer trips.



Rita and I were fortunate that by the time junior came along we were experienced canoeists and campers who felt at home in a canoe and in the bush. We could still remember the frustrations of the early years as we learned the ropes and were glad that we did not have to worry about mastering the J-stroke while trying to appease a bored and unhappy child. It was because of our confidence in our abilities that we felt the risk of paddling with an infant was reasonable for us. Nonetheless, as Jamie couldn't swim and was too small for a PFD, we ventured out only in warm, dry weather and hugged the shoreline with him regally enthroned in his car seat—straps undone, of course.

It wasn't until our son was big enough to fit properly into a PFD that we were able to do any serious canoeing. That purchase of his first life vest was a milestone for us.

Still, a PFD was not a substitute for the feeling that every paddler must have, that of being at home in the water. So swimming lessons for Jamie followed. We also made games of capsizing and re-entering the canoe, and he learned to float through a rapid safely with dad and to grab a throw line. Our decision on what kind of a life vest to buy our son established the direction we would take in the purchase of all his outdoor equipment. The foam-filled vest-style PFD with Fastex-buckled straps at waist and crotch and big collar grab loops for frantic parents had all the features we wanted, but it was twice the price of the horse-collar PFD at the discount stores. We've always opted for good gear for ourselves on the assumption that we wouldn't have much fun outdoors if we were cold, wet, or uncomfortable. And when it came to safety-related equipment we've never scrimped. After all, how much is your life worth? The choice was obvious and Jamie was so proud with a PFD just like ours. His only beef was: "Why don't I have a Tekna knife?"

Fortunately we found that we didn't have to spend a bundle to purchase a good wardrobe of outdoor clothes for junior. A visit to the children's section of any discount department store would get us almost everything we needed. Warm, quick-drying acrylic socks, track suits, and sweaters could be found at bargain prices. Toques and mitts were easily acquired, but we had to have the foresight to buy in January. Cotton-polyester blend shirts and pants proved as hardwearing for him as they were for us. Over it all we added a light nylon shell suit — a K-Way or some far-eastern facsimile — to protect from bugs and mud on the trip and to save us a lot of post-trip scrubbing of his other clothes.

It took some experimenting to find adequate footwear, but we finally settled on rubber boots. These were cheap, durable, warm, quickdrying and easy to clean. Jamie also likes them because they didn't leak, which for him meant that they made good water containers for playing on the beach. Then at the end of the day he changed into dry runners for around camp.

For several items we found that we couldn't avoid the camping specialty shops. The children's rainwear sold in the department stores was of two varieties; either cheap, flimsy vinyl with cartoon characters on it, or heavy, bulky rubberized cloth. Consequently, Jamie ended up with a junior version of a coated nylon rainsuit, which kept him dry even it wasn't high tech. A tube of glue and some patching material proved to be a useful accessory for the rain pants which were, alas, never designed to withstand bum-sliding down rocks.

For some reason the concept of vapor-transport underwear has yet to penetrate the world of department store children's underwear. Kids, we learned, were thought to be comfy in something called cotton thermal underwear which soaks up water like an old dish towel. It took considerable searching to find synthetic children's underwear, but we finally did locate it in the larger ski shops. Inexplicably, the price wasn't much less than for the adult sizes. However, end-of-season clearance sales enabled us to pick it up at a