

# Family Tramping: From little seeds...



Ten-month-old Ben on the trail up to Kaweka J Photos: Peter Laurenson, [www.occasionalclimber.co.nz](http://www.occasionalclimber.co.nz)

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My ear stretched again as Ben gave it a good tug. 'Dad, rain juice please.' 'Yes my little Maharajah.' We were on rocky ground above Sealy Tarn. It was sunny and hot. Sweat dripped from my nose-tip as I carefully swung my three-year-old and his portable throne off my shoulders and around to rest on my shins, while I located the water bottle.

Lugging toddlers up mountainous terrain is hard work – physically and mentally. Bringing younguns into the backcountry requires extra planning, extra gear and extra

patience. But that evening Ben's mum Julie and I sat back and watched as he wandered about Mueller Hut, casually chatting with other trampers. Ben has always been comfortable with people of all ages. I figure he has a high EQ. So everyone loved the little rascal. Typing this almost brings a tear of nostalgia to my eye. You see, the hard work is repaid many times over as you watch your kids' wings gently unfurling in situations like we all enjoyed at Mueller Hut. As I recall, next morning the joy on Ben's face as he

rushed across the snow field outside the hut in the morning sun, it has my other eye tearing up.

I have three boys. Ben is the eldest by quite a margin – more than six years. But that worked for me, because by the time I was starting to introduce number two, Ed and then number three, Will, to the outdoors they both looked to ‘Benny big bro’, who by then was very comfortable in tramping boots. This leads me to my first hot tip – kids love being with kids, so when you go tramping, get a couple of families together. One Tararua trip we did with neighbours and good friends, who had three kids of very similar ages to mine, was up to Jumbo Hut on the first day, then across the tops to Powell Hut for a second night, before heading down and out on the third morning. At the time Will was the youngest at four, but he walked almost the entire route without drama. In fact, energy levels only heightened when the tribe arrived at each ‘cool’ hut. Bunks to climb on and jump off. Awesome.

Hot tip number two – sugary lollies! Just understand that, no matter how much eeeevil sugar is contained in them, they’ll burn it all off, and some, in the hills. And kids love lollies, especially if they’re allowed their very own entire bag–full to delve in to as they go. My rule ‘Once they’re gone, they’re gone.

You decide when ‘gone’ happens’ (a chance to learn about self restraint). The trick is to inject as much fun as you can easily, while not shying away from a simple truth – any tramp worth doing will involve some hard graft and fortitude. Resist cotton-wooling them, because kids are surprisingly resilient – if you let them be. Perhaps my single most cherished trip with all three boys was fuelled by on-trail lolly rations and gas-burner toasted marshmallows at Syme Hut. At the time Will was seven, Ed nine and Ben fifteen (He’d just come back from a trip to Khumbu in Nepal with me). We all shared the summit of Mount Taranaki, a mountain I grew up next to in New Plymouth but never climbed until long after I’d left Taranaki, at age 33. So to share the top of my home mountain with all three meant a lot to me. A photo of us on the lip of the crater, high above Syme Hut, hangs proudly on my wall. Will is tightly clasping his bag of lollies.

For some context, I had a look back over our family trips to see just how much action has actually occurred. In total, spanning half-day trips through to two week treks, in New Zealand and sometimes as part of overseas holidays, including trips with just one boy, through to 11 full-crew jaunts, I can recall 43 trips in total through until now. Each son has made 24 or so trips, amounting

Three-year-old Ben outside Mueller Hut, with Mount Sefton behind







Toasting marshmallows at Syme Hut, Mount Taranaki

to between 53 and 72 cumulative days each in the hills. Not too bad I suppose – plenty more than many kiwi kids unfortunately, but hardly avid tramping. Remember that this spans fifteen or more years for each son, so on average equates to only one or two trips a year. So what's the point of this little dive into numbers – only to point out that, while I've set out to give my boys an appreciation

of the outdoors, I've tried to avoid inflicting it on them. It's true that there have been a few grumbles from time to time ('type two fun' has that effect on most of us), but generally they've all enjoyed their time in the hills. I don't expect them to embrace the outdoors just as I do, but I figured that while they're young, Dad could share his passion and knowledge, then, as they become

There's something about kids and bunks, Atiwhakatu Hut, Tatarua Ranges



independent, it's entirely up to them to carry outdoor trips on or not. At least I rest easy knowing I've given them some foundations.

From little seeds large plants can grow. When I set off on my OE in 1988 I discovered and fell in love with Khumbu, the Everest region, in Nepal. I've returned there every few years or so ever since and, before heading away alone on my third trip to Nepal in 1995, I promised Ben that one day I'd take him. I made good on that promise when he turned fifteen. That set a precedent for Ed and Will, who I've also taken trekking in Khumbu when they've reached fifteen. In some ways it's become the closest thing my little family has to a rite of passage tradition, and each trip has really been magnificent father/son time, going way beyond simply getting into the hills.

So, with my youngest now 17, how well have those little seeds germinated? To be honest, my eldest, Ben, has not shown any signs of shouldering a pack yet, but he's very

busy establishing his career in architecture. My middle son Ed, currently at Otago University, is perfectly placed to explore some of New Zealand's most spectacular outdoor landscapes, but just the odd ski trip so far. When I asked my youngest, Will, in his last year at Wellington College, what he felt about his time with me in the outdoors he replied 'Well, I think it's made me more resilient and helped me to appreciate the comforts of home more. I have good memories, even if some are type two – like when we got caught in that thunderstorm when descending Mount Taranaki. Man, the simultaneous thunder and lightning were scary. But sharing stress like that is bonding too. I've always enjoyed staying in huts and getting outside. I'm over your ten hour days, but even those seem kinda fun once I'm warm and showered back home.' I think he gets it! I also need to remind myself that I didn't really start up tramping until I left on my OE at age 26. So it's still early days.



On Mount Taranaki's crater rim, with Fantham's Peak below

