

Geocaching with Kids

Geocaching offers you a great way to do just that. It's a high-tech treasure hunt that can help engage your kids in the natural world.

What Is Geocaching?

The short, humorous answer: "Using billions of dollars of military hardware to find Tupperware® hidden in the woods." The more helpful answer: Geocaching uses handheld GPS units to find hidden "caches" in your neighborhood or out on the trails. These are containers of all sizes that may be camouflaged to blend into their surroundings. Inside there will be—at a minimum—a logbook to sign, with larger caches also containing an assortment of inexpensive trinkets for trade.

How Do I Start Geocaching?

Start by looking up caches in your area. Geocaching.com lists more than 1 million active geocaches around the world, so chances are excellent there will be several near you. Some caches are easy to find while others may require a long hike, so check the difficulty and terrain ratings on the web page before you go. A "1 star" difficulty and terrain rating are just about right for a young child. Cache sizes are also given online, so if your child is looking forward to finding and exchanging "treasure," be sure to select a cache that is "regular" size or larger.

What Do I Bring Geocaching?

Treat a geocaching-hunt as you would any hike by dressing your kids comfortably for the outdoors and carrying essential supplies such as water and snacks.

To find a cache, you will need to enter its coordinates in a handheld GPS receiver. A GPS unit with all the bells and whistles for navigation may cost from \$300 to \$600, but there are also geocaching-specific units available for around \$70. Pick one that is simple to use so the kids can lead the way.

Caches often contain small trade items or trinkets. The rule of geocaching is that if you take something from the cache, you must replace it with something of equal or greater value. So, have the kids pack an assortment of trinkets for trading. For poking into dark cache-hiding places, bring a trekking pole or hiking stick and a flashlight. Lastly, you will want to sign the logbook in the cache to prove you found it, so don't forget to bring a pen.

Looking for a Cache

Understanding how a GPS works and what it is telling you will greatly increase your chances of finding a cache. A GPS is a radio receiver and needs a clear view of the sky for best reception, so keep it out of your pocket while hiking.

You may find the compass view, which gives the bearing and distance to the cache, to be the most informative screen. It will point you in the right direction while you are moving but may not be accurate while stopped. Keep an eye on where it is pointing while you are hiking, and you may be able to guess where the cache is hidden from a distance.

Safety tip: Be aware of your surroundings. Take your eyes off of the GPS occasionally and look around so you don't fall down a hill (or worse).

Most GPS units are accurate to within 20 feet, so when you are closer than this to the cache, it really can't tell you much more. At this point you should put it away and just start looking in the obvious places.

Tips to locate a cache:

- Look for likely places or objects that appear out of place (unnatural piles of sticks, etc.).
- Recall the size of the cache (from geocaching.com), and use the hint if needed.
- Take your time and be patient.

Caches may be hidden in old logs or rock piles that are home to other creatures as well, so teach kids to look first before reaching in. Kids will likely search enthusiastically, but make sure they AVOID tearing up the countryside looking for the cache! If you turn over a rock, replace it as found. Remember to follow [Leave No Trace](#) principles.

Once You Find a Cache

You found it! Congratulations! Now what?

1. Take something from the cache.
2. Leave something in the cache.
3. Write about it in the logbook.

Take time to look through the cache. You can take an item and leave an item, and enter your name and experience into the logbook. Some people don't care to trade, and that's OK too. Make sure to reseal the cache carefully and place it back exactly where you found it. Hide it as well as you found it. Don't leave markers for the next cacher to find it or place it in a "better" spot.

Now is a good time to practice a little CITO (Cache In, Trash Out). If there is any trash in the area, pick it up and pack it out.

Once you get home, go to geocaching.com and write a log to let the cache "owner" know you found it. Let them know the condition of the cache, your experiences on the trail and any trades you made. This can be a fun creative-writing experience for the kids.

Now off to the next cache... and the next one... and the next one. Hmm, kind of addicting, isn't it? After finding a variety of geocaches in your area, you may be ready to hide some of your own.

Hiding Your First Cache

Some kids will really enjoy creating and hiding geocaches of their own. Follow the guidelines provided by geocaching.com to make sure it is something you would enjoy finding yourself.

1. Will it be easy to get to? If it is close to roads or high-traffic areas, there's a strong chance someone may stumble on it. Either find a place that will take a bit of time to get to, or create some challenging camouflage to hide it.
2. Will it be easy to find? If it is too visible, will someone spot it (the gardener, kids walking through the park)? You can make the hide a challenge, but be sure to include some hints!
3. Will it be on private or public land? If you place it on private land, you **MUST** get permission. Caches are not permitted on lands of the National Park Service or in national wildlife refuges. Stay away from archaeological sites and sensitive habitats as well.
4. Consider the impact searchers will have on the area. If it is difficult to find, will the actions of frustrated searchers do any damage or alarm those who are not aware of the cache?
5. Would you want to go there? There are a lot of caches hidden behind dumpsters. Is that really where you would enjoy searching?
6. Review the guidelines at geocaching.com before placing.
7. Review the locations of other caches in the area. They must be at least 0.1 mile (528 feet) apart.
8. You are ultimately responsible for the cache, so make sure you know the rules for the area where it is being placed.

The Bottom Line

Geocaching is an enjoyable activity for the whole family. Geocache hunts can be used to introduce your kids to new parks, new activities and/or the natural history of your area. It also can make a fun addition to your next vacation. Be sure to look up cache locations along highways and near hotels to make the travel time more fun.