

Rockin' It: Why Rock Climbing Is Great for Kids

Sign up for the Fit Family FREE rock climbing workshop at Momentum indoor climbing on April 30. Hurray, space is limited! Visit fit.utahfamily.com to register.

By Joanna Nesbit

One sunny afternoon, with no footholds left to lunge for, my seven-year-old son is stumped four feet into his rock climb. "I can't do it, Daddy, it's too hard," he says to his dad, who is belaying from below (belaying is securing the climber by holding the rope and belay device). Ty's goal is to scale what climbers call a "chimney." Think fireplace chimney with no front wall.

"Stick your feet to the side walls, Ty, and use your hands for balance," says Curt. Ty places hands and feet on opposing walls, just narrow enough for his limbs to span, and hesitates, spread-eagled, like a small blonde Spider-Man. To reach the top, he must "stem"—in other words, pretend he has suction cups.

"It's too hard," he calls. Ty hasn't done much outdoor climbing, and stemming is new to him.

"Try inching your way up. See how it goes."

My husband is a 20-year veteran climber, but Ty discovered climbing for himself at age four. He began with bouldering (climbing un-roped just above the ground) at our local indoor wall. By age five, he was climbing vertically.

Ty loves problem solving, a key component of climbing, and it doesn't hurt that he's lean and lanky, but he sees himself as an indoorsy Lego kind of kid. His dad and I are often trying to lure him into physical activity. Preferably outside. A typical conversation:

"Hey, Ty, how about a bike ride?"

"Mmmm, nah."

"Want to kick the soccer ball around?"

"Nah."

"Let's go for a hike."

"Noooooo!"

But when we suggest rock climbing, he's all ears.

The Benefits of Rock Climbing

Admittedly, rock climbing isn't the impromptu activity that biking is, but with the advent of indoor climbing walls, classes and walls abound. And kids tend to be natural climbers. They have a high strength-to-weight ratio—which means they have less body weight to haul up the wall than adults do—and their bodies are more flexible. They're also not fearful (but if they are, that's normal, too), and they have fewer personal limits than adults do. "Adults tend to think they know what their body can and can't do. Kids are less likely to limit themselves this way," says Kevin McCluskey, Program Director and Head Instructor at Seattle's Vertical World climbing gym.

Kids acquire all kinds of positive skills. Because climbing requires a combination of creative thinking and physical output, less athletic kids often shine, surprising even themselves. Kids also learn problem solving. Climbing is a puzzle to unlock, sometimes requiring the ability to back off, look at the route anew, and start again, says Bobby Ferrari, owner of High Xposure Adventures in New Paltz, New York. Additionally, kids learn to focus, concentrate, and persevere, essential for getting to the top. Along the way, they gain confidence, competence, strength, and body awareness.

If your climbing gym teaches kids how to belay, McCluskey says kids also learn safety skills and responsibility. "Kids take that responsibility seriously, and that's empowering," he says.

Getting Started (Safely)

Whether kids start with an indoor wall or an outdoor crag, it's critical they learn from a professional. Five to seven are good ages to start, but don't be surprised if your child isn't inter-



ested until later. Younger children will benefit from starting indoors, where outdoor distractions aren't a factor.

Indoor climbing: Choose a climbing gym with kids' programs or instructors with plenty of experience working with kids. Consider taking an introductory class yourself to learn the fundamentals.

Outdoor climbing: Locate a professional guide service that works with families, and request a guide experienced with kids (for a list of accredited guides and schools, visit American Mountain Guides Association at amga.com). Don't be afraid to ask about instruction even if you don't climb yourself. A good instructor will teach kids how to use their feet properly, a key component for becoming proficient. Typical cost for a day: \$100+ per person.

Go as a family: You may not want to climb, but your kids will benefit from seeing you try something new. "You can role model how to learn," says McCluskey. "Kids are supportive of their parents trying something new."

Think small: Beginning climbs should be short and simple so kids feel successful, says Ferrari. If kids display a fear of heights, don't push them to keep going. Scaring them can turn them off the sport.

Try bouldering: Bouldering is the art of climbing boulders or small cliffs, or just above the floor if indoors, that doesn't require being roped. Bouldering takes less endurance, offers instant gratification (no waiting around to tie in), and is a great way to gauge your child's interest—for free. Spotting your child is a must.

As Ty inches his body up, he discovers momentum with friction and "opposition." He pauses, rests, keeps inching. "He's doing it," I say. No one cares if he makes it—the goal was to go outdoors. But then extra bonus: Ty is at the top. He grins down through the chimney shaft, and we cheer.

Climbing taps many skills, but what Ty likes best, though he can't articulate it, is that climbing is a solitary achievement, intensely personal. After he's lowered, he runs along a trail, spots a bird, and discovers the perfect stick. Part of the fun of outdoor rock climbing, after all, is messing around on a beautiful day.

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Join Us On April 9 At The YMCA Healthy Kids Day For The Official Roll-out Of Fit Family:

YMCA Community
Family Center

4223 S. Atherton Drive
Taylorsville UT 84123

10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Family Fun Run
Basketball Workshops
Tennis Workshops
Bicycle Rodeo
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SO, SO MUCH MORE!

Register online for these
other FREE Fit Family
workshops in the
month of April:

April 16

The Swing Of Spring with
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April 25

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April 30

Reach for Fitness with
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Our Fit Family Passport To Fitness program is coming in May. Have fun getting fit as a family and your kids will earn really cool monthly rewards!