# Hiking with kids – its about fun, not distance

**By Mary Meehan, Lexington Herald-Leader**

Author Jeff Alt didn't have to look far for inspiration for his book about hiking with children. He has two kids and started hiking with daughter Madison, 8, "right out of the gate." Son William, 5, also takes to the trail.

His hiking philosophy? If you start hiking with kids in a carrier when they are little, they will be more than ready to take to the trails on their own two feet as they grow older.

Alt's new book is "Get Your Kids Hiking: How to Start Them Young and Keep It Fun" (Beaufort Books Inc., $13.95).

Alt is a member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America. He has walked the Appalachian Trail, has hiked the John Muir Trail with his wife, and he carried his daughter, when she was 21 months old, across a path in Ireland.

He wrote the book "because we as a nation have become lazy. Everything is at our fingertips now."

Life is so fast-paced and programmed, he said, that even kids get into a dull routine: school, home, school, home. They are not exposed to the sensory experiences that come with being out in nature. He said he hopes the book will help encourage families to get off the couch and hit the trail.

The key to hiking with kids, he said, is letting them be the leaders. And, he said, parents need to focus on the experience – the butterflies on the trail, the mud on their shoes, the sounds of the forest. "That helps them engage in the outdoors. They can touch, feel and just see, learn and discover."

Distance is not a priority, he said.

“I let the child lead. If they stop, I stop,” he said. “The child is showing me what they are interested in. You may only get a half a mile into the forest, but they are going to have so much fun they will want to do it again.”

Alt, a speech pathologist, laid out the tips in his book to match the developmental stages of children. Hiking with elementary school-age children is different from hiking with teenagers.

He admits that getting teens to disconnect from their digital world to take a hike can be a challenge.

“With teenagers, you kind of have to intrigue them,” Alt said. One way, he said, is to invite them to bring a friend along.

The right equipment is important, too, he said, no matter the age of the child. Food, water, a backpack and proper shoes are the basics.

There is another advantage to being on the trail and away from things, he said. It’s a great time to talk to your kids.

“You can talk to them about some life lesson or ask them how they are feeling just before the go off to college.”