

A hiker is seen from behind, walking away on a dirt path that winds through a field of tall, golden-brown grasses and white wildflowers. In the background, a large, densely forested mountain rises under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. The overall scene is bright and sunny, suggesting a clear day in a natural setting.

Start 'em young: finding the littlest PCT hikers in Washington

By Liz Hummer





Previous spread: *The PCT brings joy to children and thru-hikers alike.*

Left: *Every day is a good day for a walk in the woods.*
Photos by Gabriel Olson, Owl 'n Tree Photography.

The hikers on this stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail are no taller than the sword ferns they dart past, giggling as the feathery fronds tickle their faces. They collect pine cones in their tiny hands while their miniature hiking shoes stomp up and down the narrow trail, pausing only to squat and examine the tangled roots of a fallen tree.

They've hiked maybe 1/64 of a mile on the PCT, but their wonder is as big and infectious as any thru-hiker's.

You may be lucky enough to meet these enthusiastic toddlers and preschoolers from nearby **Play Frontier** in Carson, Washington, about 22 miles north of the Bridge of the Gods. The nonprofit nature playschool for infants to 5-year-olds opened in April 2019.

"We knew the PCT was nearby, but one day during our walk, we were suddenly on it," said **Tiffany Pearsall**, Play Frontier's founder and director. "Less than a mile from school, we saw the PCT signs. We pushed on through the trees, and this big meadow opened up, and the toddlers could run as far as they wanted. It was magical."

Now a trek to the PCT happens at least once a week. It's one of the many adventures that these youngsters enjoy at school, nestled in the towering evergreens of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest.

"I want it to be like summer camp all the time," Tiffany said. "We're outside as much as we can be, rain or shine. We're playing and connecting to the place that we live and our environment."

Nature as teacher

Play Frontier is part of Washington's Outdoor Preschool Pilot Program, which is testing new licensing requirements adapted from indoor to nature-based settings, as well as a larger global movement to reconnect children with the outdoors.

Journalist **Richard Louv** coined "nature-deficit syndrome" in his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*, which details how our growing disconnection from the natural world is negatively influencing children's well-being. Meanwhile, study after study shows that free, independent play in the wild helps kids regulate their emotions and develop their imagination, problem solving abilities, positive social skills and physical health.

These are the seeds growing every day at Play Frontier.

"Until you've experienced true play and true freedom in nature with children, there's nothing else like it," Tiffany said. "There's this sense of breath and pause and possibility that I think many adults nowadays don't experience often. The air just feels different when everyone is at the same place of mutual trust and learning."

Leave Some Trail Magic for the Kids

Hiking the PCT in southern Washington? Share your "Fairy Tale from the Trail" for the kids to read in the Play Frontier journal posted by the meadow, 0.8 mile past the Trout Creek crossing.

"We want to hear about your experiences out there!" said Tiffany Pearsall, Play Frontier founder. "A wild animal encounter or a favorite place or who you met or where you started, the weather, the sunsets, the plants, the stars."

Perhaps the story you share will inspire the next generation of adventurers!

A16'er Shihan Sung on the PCT 2013

ADVENTURE 16
Outdoor and Travel Outfitters
— Since 1962 —

**LIGHTWEIGHT, HIGH-QUALITY
THRU-HIKING GEAR & CLOTHING**

Western Mountaineering • Osprey
MSR • Vasque • Arc'Teryx and more!

Visit one of our mountain shops or adventure16.com

A16 San Diego | A16 West L.A.

Tiffany is also a passionate advocate of Louv's rallying cry: "The health of children and the health of the earth are inseparable." She believes that instilling a sense of environmental stewardship starts early, by creating opportunities – and memories – for babies and toddlers to develop their sense of wonder, love and trust in the natural world.

"If a child has that sense of place and relationship with the environment, that carries with them for life. So they'll protect natural places and seek out adventures like the PCT when they're older because they know what it feels like and they want more of it," she said.

That's why Tiffany is pioneering outdoor school with babies and toddlers, while other programs focus only on older pre-schoolers. Their forest location makes it easy to walk right outside with even the tiniest tot and be on the PCT in less than 15 minutes.

A toddler day on the PCT

On a recent Friday, we gathered four toddlers, 18 months to 2 years old, and four babies under 1, into two quad strollers, filled our backpacks with diapers and wipes and crackers and sippy cups (plus first aid kits and bear spray, of course), and set out for the trail.

Play Frontier carved a charming three-room school out of a former packaging plant for Douglas fir saplings, part of the **U.S. Forest Service's** decommissioned Wind River Nursery compound. The place is now clearly ruled by kids who play with no limits. They scatter toys in every corner, paint on every surface, and leave their bikes at the summit of the mountain of sand in the play yard.

Outside the school building, you look into an endless sea of trees, and the air is steeped in the scent of fresh dirt. This is the real classroom.

The Forest Service road that leads from the school to the PCT is deeply shaded and cool on this 70-degree June day. Before we even get to the trail, the little explorers insist on stopping to see the bleached animal bones on the side of the road with a chorus of "Bones, bones, bones!" Across the way, they fall silent as they gently cradle the firecrackerlike red columbine blooms in their small fingers. Forging on, we take a right turn from pavement to gravel and then spot the iconic PCT emblem on a tree up ahead.

"This narrow stretch of trail is so fun for the early walkers at this age," Tiffany remarks as she lifts each toddler out of the stroller. "They don't really run off it. They just stick to the trail and see what appears in front of them."

The babies and their teacher, **Megan Paris**, meander along the road because their stroller is not allowed on the trail, but it's only a split second before the three older boys take off into the woods. The wobbly toddlers bump into each other as they rush to look at every different leaf and rock. They scoop up the tiny hemlock cones and peer inside looking for a magical discovery. They trace tree roots in the dirt and stare up at the branches far out of reach.



Above: Megan Paris, a Play Frontier teacher, carries a child on the PCT.

Right: The smaller children get a ride to the PCT trailhead. Photos by Gabriel Olson, Owl 'n Tree Photography.

We quietly follow, respond with enthusiasm, and let them lead the way. They need no coaching from us to appreciate the world around them. It's only about five minutes until we meet the road again, cross and step into the meadow. This lush clearing is backed by what the kids call "the big mountain," officially known as Bunker Hill.

"They were all just running up to the tree saplings over there and giving them nice words of encouragement," Tiffany chuckles. "You got this, little tree! You're just like me." They see things we don't even notice.

After we set out a blanket for snack time, one little forager comes back with a discovery: Wild strawberries are scattered everywhere. Our packaged snacks are quickly forgotten for the sweet treats from Mother Earth.

And then it happens: The kids' first sighting of a thru-hiker loaded up with all his gear, making his way through the meadow. One of the little guys grabs the emergency supplies backpack and runs off to join him. He's not able to catch up this time, but they're all looking forward to talking to a PCT hiker



one day soon. "We'll definitely have to take a picture with them and hang it up on our family tree board at school!" Tiffany said.

As naptime nears, we start to gather the explorers for our hike back, and I ask Tiffany what she thinks young children have in common with PCT hikers. "The sense of adventure, hands down!" she responds immediately. "And perseverance. They don't give up easily, you know? I mean, to toddlers walking the hallway to get outside is like hiking the PCT. It's so dang hard, but it's so worth it! They have a determination to explore.

"I hope they always have a sense of home on the trail, in nature," she adds. "I mean, one day we can tell them, 'You hiked this part of the PCT when you were barely walking. You have to do the rest now!'"

So many of us set out on the PCT to regain that sense of wonder, simplicity, play and peace that we had as children wildly immersed in nature. Thanks to schools like Play Frontier, this next generation may never lose that spirit. 🌿

Play Frontier is a nonprofit nature playschool outside Carson, Washington, offering full-time and part-time child care for 30 children ages 3 months to 5 years. It's the largest child care service in Skamania County, where there's a severe shortage of quality and affordable care. Donations to Play Frontier help subsidize tuition and help families in need access this play-based education in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. You can find out more about Play Frontier's services and vision to conserve childhood at www.playfrontier.org.