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The Best Hiking Carriers for Mountain Kids

Featuring: Poco Premium

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This project's been a while in the works, mostly because every time it seems ready to wrap, a new state-of-the-art baby carrier hits the market. This is a good thing for parents, who not so long ago used to be resigned to a couple of less-than-ideal options: cumbersome external frame packs or saggy soft carriers that put all of the weight on your shoulders, guaranteed back-busters when you hit the trail. The truth is, different packs work for different parents and different stages of your child's growth. Here's a roundup of six stellar choices for hitting the trail with newborns to preschoolers. We did the legwork so you don't have to.

OSPREY POCO PREMIUM *Best for:* Nine months (or holding head up) to 40 pounds. Several features set the top-of-the-line Poco apart from its rivals: One, no question the "Fit on the Fly" hip belt adjuster was the easiest and fastest to cinch down and size to my waist. At its smallest setting, it fit me snugly, with no extra room for rubbing. Two, it has the most ample, sun-and-rain cover. Pre-attached, it unzips from its sleeve and pulls forward to attach via clips to the side of the shoulder straps. Three, the zip-off daypack compartment is ideal for shorter outings when you need less gear. No need to haul the extra weight; simply unzip and go. There's still a cavernous lower compartment for diapers (changing pad included), snacks, and a change of clothes. Better yet, when your child wants to walk, the low-profile daypack can become your child's "practice" pack. When they get tired, just zip it back on. Four, stirrups. Yup, this ride sports a pair of nylon stirrups that keeps tired little legs from dangling. Other niceties: A hidden hydration slot holds a bladder, and the child's harness was the easiest of the batch to attach; ample padding keeps the strap from disappearing into the cockpit, so no more rooting around for tangled shoulder straps. True to Osprey's pack-building pedigree, the Poco has no fewer than seven smaller pockets, both mesh and zippered, including a small one sized for a cell phone or pacifier on the chest straps. \$299; www.ospreypacks.com.

