

So, you want to be a letterboxer or geocacher? You can do both!

To find a geocache you must have a GPS enabled device. GPS stands for Global Positioning System. The device takes information from satellites and tells you exactly where you are. It can show your location on a map or give you your coordinates in degrees latitude and longitude or some other coordinate system. All brands are different so make sure you know how to use your device before you head out. To find a letterbox, the only extra tool you may need is a compass. Some clues require a bit of research and some involve solving puzzles. Ready?

First off, you need to select a trail name. Pick a name that fits your character. Do you already have an online avatar? You can use part of your real name, but you NEVER want to use your entire name for safety reasons. Next step is registering at one of the websites to get the clues. Keep in mind that someone else may have already registered with the trail name that you selected. If you want to get geocache coordinates, you need to register at www.geocaching.com. Letterbox clues are found at www.atlasquest.com or www.letterboxing.org. All of these sites have helpful instructions on how to carry out your adventure and you can log your finds online. You can sign up for free or pay for a premium membership to get special perks. Always have a parent handle this part of the game. Never go to a website and give out personal information.

Next step is to decide if you want a signature stamp. This is used to sign the logbook located in the letterbox or geocache. While you can always just sign your trail name and the date, a signature stamp is a creative way to mark your participation in the adventure. Other seekers will page through the logbooks to see who else has been there. Your signature stamp can be purchased at a store, hand carved, or just a thumbprint doodle (use an ink pad to leave a thumbprint and then use markers or pens to make an animal, face, flower, or space alien). Your signature stamp should reflect something you are interested in.

If you want to carve your own stamp, there is a tutorial on the Atlas Quest website. Parents need to use their own discretion about allowing children access to sharp carving tools. Some signature stamps can be made out of rubber erasers and a gouging tool. There is a starter kit available at craft stores such as Michael's and Hobby Lobby. This contains a piece of carving medium, carving tools and instructions. You don't have to be artistic to carve. Copying a design onto the carving material and then using a gouging tool to remove the material you don't want is actually easy. For smaller children, let them pick out a store bought stamp or a thumbprint doodle that they can do themselves.

You have picked out a geocache or letterbox to find, now what? Read the entire clue BEFORE you leave the house. Geocache coordinates often contain an extra clue. Letterboxes usually specify where to start. Look at a map of the area. Now, put together a pack with all of the tools you will need. Geocaches will require a GPS device. If you want to keep track of your finds, a logbook is needed. This can be a bound journal without lines, homemade, or just 3" x 5" cards. You can take the cards and mount them in a scrapbook along with photos of your expedition. You will also want to pack your signature stamp, a few pens or pencils, an ink pad, wipes or paper towels, and a small first aid kit. Keep your logbook, stamp, ink pad, and a pen in a gallon plastic zipper bag for quick access. Some clues require a compass (yes, there is an app for that). Other tools you can take are a heavy glove for reaching into bushes, tongs (NEVER reach into a hole with your hand), a walking stick, bag for trash you may pick up along the way (you might want to pack some gloves to pick up trash), and a camera. Don't forget water and snacks! Pack some bug spray and sunscreen.

Be a good cacher or boxer: park in designated spaces, stay on the trails, don't leave any trash, keep your dog on a leash, **LEAVE THE BOX IN THE SAME PLACE THAT YOU FOUND IT**, and, unless there are specifically labeled trade items, **RETURN EVERYTHING TO THE BOX**. Sometimes you have to be stealthy when retrieving the cache. If there are other people around,

try to grab the box and move to another location to fill in the logbook. To stamp, place the logbook on a flat surface, wipe the stamp across the inkpad and then press the stamp on the paper with even pressure. Press in the middle of the stamp to ensure a good transfer. Many geocaches and letterboxes are vandalized right after planting (usually because the box did not blend in) while some last for years. There are 2 million caches and 80,000 letterboxes around the world.

Respect the rules of the greenway trail. Some trails are hiking only while others allow bikers. Most of all, HAVE FUN! This is a way to get your family out and to get exercise. Explore the area and learn about it. After you have found a dozen or more of these treasure boxes, you may want to plant one of your own. The Earth Day boxes were planted with permission from the City of Oak Ridge.

When you are out hiking, wear appropriate shoes – flip flops and slides are great for going to the store, but not for the trail. Getting poison ivy on your feet is NOT FUN. On trails with great elevation changes, a jacket may be needed. Wear a hat. Check for ticks when you are done. If you wear light colored clothing, they show up better.