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Accessible Hiking Guidelines for Developing Family-Friendly Hiking Trails



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Accessible Hiking Guidelines for Developing Family-Friendly Hiking Trails

Project: “ **Forest and Coastal Hiking Trail’s accessibility improvement for different social groups**” (EE-LV0013), 01.07.2023. – 30.06.2026.

Project partners:



Latvian Rural Tourism Association “Lauku ceļotājs”



Kurzeme Planning Region



Vidzeme Planning Region



Movement Spontaneous, Latvia



Riga Planning Region



MTÜ Maaturism, Estonian Rural Tourism Association



Pärnu Bay Rotari Club

The Municipality of Häädemeeste, Estonia

Setomaa Municipality, Estonia

NGO “Peipsimaa tourism”, Estonia

Table of contents

1. Objective	3
2. Target Audience Involvement	3
3. Participant Characteristics	4
4. Partner Involment and Persmissions	4
5. Process of Testing.....	4
6. Testing Phases.....	4
7. Enhancements to the Hiking Experience	7
8. Challenges and How They Were Addressed	8
9. Feedback Collection and Improvements.....	8
10. Recommendations.....	8
11. Involved Project Partners.....	10
12. Training video	10

Specific target audience: families and people with young children.

Non-specific target audience (transferable experience):

- **municipalities and local governments**, especially those responsible for tourism development, environmental management, and family-oriented public spaces;
- **state institutions**, such as nature protection authorities and agencies managing protected areas, hiking trails, or nature parks;
- **tourism information centers** and regional tourism organizations promoting active and sustainable tourism;
- **non-governmental organizations (NGOs)** working in the fields of outdoor education, nature conservation, family activities, or children's wellbeing.
- **educational institutions**, including schools and preschool organizations, in cooperation with municipalities or land managers.

Social expert organization or individual experts: consultations were carried out with SIA “Aktīvā tūrisma centrs Eži”, an active tourism and outdoor activity provider, and Madara Brūvere, a travel expert specializing in family travel.

1. Objective

These guidelines describe the experience of developing and testing two short loop hiking trails designed specifically for families with children of all ages, including very young children. The aim of the guidelines is to share practical knowledge on creating family-friendly hiking routes that are safe, engaging, and easy to use, and that encourage families and school groups to spend time outdoors.

The guidelines are based on hands-on experience gained during the development and pilot testing of both trails. Pilot activities were organized on both routes and involved families with children as well as school and preschool-aged children who completed the trails together with their teachers. This allowed the solutions to be tested in real-life conditions with different user groups.

One of the loop trails, located on Section 8 of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes-Valmiera), near Sietiņezis, is 3.8 km long and includes four on-site educational activities designed to support learning through play and exploration. The second loop trail, located on section 10 of the “Forest Trail” (Strenči-Spicu bridge) near Kauči, is 3 km long and offers a digital hiking game played online via the Loquiz platform, combining physical movement with interactive digital content.

2. Target Audience Involvement

Pilot activities were carried out on both loop trails with a range of participants:

- families with children from Valmiera and Cēsis municipalities;
- school children from Strenči Primary School, accompanied by teachers and parents;
- school children from Valmieras Viestura Secondary School and preschool children from the “Sprīdītis” kindergarten, accompanied by teachers and parents;
- children's folklore group from Estonia invited by project partners;
- project partners from both Latvia and Estonia;
- representatives from Valmiera TIC (Tourism Information Center) and their families;
- representatives of the Nature Conservation Agency.

3. Participant Characteristics

As the target group for this part of the project is families with children, and children in this group require the most specific adaptations, particular attention was paid to ensuring that children were well represented among the participants. This approach allowed the project team to gather meaningful and relevant feedback directly from children's participation in the pilot activities. Therefore, the participants in the pilot events included children across a wide age range – from children in strollers to adolescents (approx. 15-17 years old).

Main focus, though, was on:

- older preschool children (5-6 years old);
- early primary school children (ages 7-9).

This reflects that the trail lengths (3-3.8 km) are especially suitable for these groups and useful for excursions, simple hiking, and educational outdoor learning activities.

4. Partner Involvement and Permissions

The activities and the digital game installed on both trails were designed and developed by SIA “Gpulse63”, an organization specializing in active recreation and outdoor experiences.

Permissions and approvals for work in nature were obtained in advance from the Latvian Nature Conservation Agency and Latvian State Forests (a state-owned joint stock company).

Exact locations were strictly coordinated and approved before installation for:

- each on-site educational activity;
- information stands for the digital game.

5. Process of Testing

The project team from Vidzeme Planning Region accompanied all pilot groups on both trails. During the guided walks, emphasis was placed on:

- trying out each activity station and the digital game;
- assessing whether the trail length and difficulty were appropriate;
- gathering direct feedback on the enjoyment and understanding of activities and the game;
- assessing whether the trail signage and marking were clear, understandable, and unambiguous.

6. Testing Phases

The testing process was carried out in two distinct phases to ensure both the physical suitability of the trails and the quality of the installed activities and digital game.

Phase 1 – Physical suitability of the trails:

The first round of pilot testing took place in 2024 and focused on assessing the trail distances, terrain, and overall physical suitability for the target groups:

- 06.09.2024 on Section 8 of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes-Valmiera), near Sietiņezis (a total of 56 participants took part in the event) (Figures 1, 2, 3);
- 26.09.2024 on Section 10 of the “Forest Trail” (Strenči-Spicu Bridge), near Kauči (a total of 41 participants took part in the event) (Figures 4, 5).

During this phase, particular attention was paid to whether the trail length and difficulty were appropriate for families with children and school groups.

Based on the outcomes of the pilot activities, recommendations and guidelines were developed for equipping trail sections with game-based elements.



Figure 1. Pilot test participants who participated in the testing of the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera) near Sietiņezis on September 6, 2024



Figure 2. Participants who explored the additional loop of the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera) near Sietiņezis



Figure 3. Participants who explored the additional loop of the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera) near Sietiņezis

Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera) near Sietiņezis



Figure 4. Participants who explored the additional loop of the 10th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Strenči–Spīci bridge) near Kauči



Figure 5. Participants who explored the additional loop of the 10th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Strenči–Spīci bridge) near Kauči

Phase 2 – Testing of activities and the digital game:

The second round of pilot testing was conducted in 2025 and focused on evaluating the installed educational activity stations and the digital hiking game.

- 12.06.2025 on Section 8 of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera), near Sietiņezis (a total of 39 participants took part in the event) (Figures 6, 7, 8);



Figure 6. Pilot test participants who participated in the testing of the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera) near Sietīņezis on June 12, 2025



Figure 7. Pilot test participants who participated in the testing of the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera) near Sietīņezis on June 12, 2025



Figure 8. Pilot test participants who participated in the testing of the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera) near Sietīņezis on June 12, 2025

- 24.09.2025 on Section 10 of the “Forest Trail” (Strenči–Spicu Bridge), near Kauči (a total of 37 participants took part in the event) (Figures 9, 10, 11).



Figure 9. Pilot test participants who participated in the testing of the 10th section of the Forest Trail (Strenči–Spicu bridge) near Kauči on September 24, 2025



Figure 10. Participants who tried the digital game “Forest Trail” at stage 10 (Strenči–Spicu bridge) near Kauči



Figure 11. Participants who tried the digital game “Forest Trail” at stage 10 (Strenči–Spicu bridge) near Kauči

At this stage, the usability and clarity of the activities and digital game were assessed in real-world conditions with the target audience, as well as how engaging the installed game elements were for the target audience.



Figure 12. Project partners from Latvia and Estonia at the in-person consultations held on September 25, 2024 at the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera)



Figure 13. Project partners from Latvia and Estonia at the in-person consultations held on September 25, 2024 at the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera). Picnic area

In addition to the pilot activities, on 25.09.2024. On the 8th stage of the “Forest Trail” (Caunītes–Valmiera) near Sietiņiežis, the Vidzeme Planning Region

project team conducted on-site consultations with project partners from Latvia and Estonia (Figures 12, 13).

During the hike, representatives of SIA “Aktīvā tūvismas centrs Eži” led games at various locations, demonstrating how creative, skill-building activities can enrich the hiking experience and engage children, creating a new and exciting way to experience nature, while strengthening the idea that time outdoors can be fun and inspiring (Figure 14).

7. Enhancements to the Hiking Experience

During the hike, members of SIA “Aktīvā tūrisma centrs Eži” facilitated small games at various points to demonstrate how creative, skill-based elements and activities can enrich the hiking experience and engage children, creating a new and exciting way to experience nature and reinforcing the idea that spending time outdoors can be fun and inspiring (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Participants who participated in a creative skills game during the hike

At the pilot testing events, a Senior Nature Education Specialist from the Latvian Nature Conservation Agency’s Nature Education Center, Anda Andrušaitė, also

created an activity station on the trail. At this station, children were introduced to the flora and fauna of the Vidzeme region and participated in a cooperative activity focused on rivers and fish life cycles (Figure 15). The activity could only be successfully completed through teamwork, thereby strengthening participants' collaboration skills.



Figure 15. Children participating in a collaborative nature education activity about rivers and fish life cycles during the pilot test

8. Challenges and How They Were Addressed

The wide age range of participants required carefully designed activities that were engaging yet accessible, especially for very young children.

Digital game usability was tested in situ to ensure both children and adults could interact comfortably with the Loquiz platform.

Feedback collected was used to refine:

- activity instructions;
- trail signage, including clear instructions for the safe use of activities and safety considerations during participation;

- trail marking, which was further supplemented and improved to ensure clearer navigation along the route;
- digital game functionality and technical performance.

9. Feedback Collection and Improvements

After the pilot events, the participants (parents, children, teachers) were asked to complete a feedback questionnaire. Collected responses were analyzed to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Based on participant feedback, the trails and associated materials were updated and enhanced accordingly.

10. Recommendations

- **Carefully assess the trail location from a safety perspective.** When designing hiking trails for families with children, particular attention should be paid to potential safety risks. Trails should be planned to avoid steep slopes or cliffs and should not run too close to riverbanks or lakeshore, as children may be at risk of falling into the water.
- **Ensure physical safety measures in potentially hazardous sections.** Where risks cannot be fully avoided, dangerous sections of the trail should be clearly marked and, where appropriate, equipped with safety railings or barriers to reduce the risk of accidents.
- **Combine safety with engaging and diverse natural environments.** Trails benefit from offering scenic views and varied landscapes along the route. Diversity in natural surroundings helps maintain children's interest and makes the hiking experience more enjoyable for both children and adults.
- **Prefer loop trail layouts for family-oriented hiking routes.** Loop trails are especially suitable for hikes with children, as they allow visitors to return

to the starting point without retracing the same route. This simplifies transportation and logistics for families and organized groups, making the trails more convenient and user-friendly.

- **Limit the total trail length to a maximum of 4 km.** For family-oriented hiking trails, it is important that the experience remains enjoyable. Longer distances may be too demanding for younger children, reducing overall engagement and satisfaction.
- **Ensure clear and continuous trail marking throughout the entire route.** The trail should be well-marked at all times, clearly indicating direction and guiding hikers along the route to prevent confusion or the risk of getting lost. Particular attention should be paid to trail junctions, where additional marking should be provided to clearly guide hikers along the correct route.



Figure 16. “Forest trails” (white-yellow-white) and trails - additional “Outdoors” circle markings

- **Consider providing a picnic or campfire.** Picnic or campfire sites are a valuable addition to family-friendly trails; however, trail managers should be prepared to take responsibility for

the regular maintenance and cleanliness of these areas.

- **Carry out regular inspections and maintenance of the trail, its infrastructure, marking, and installed activities.** Both the trail infrastructure and activity installations should be monitored regularly, and repairs should be carried out when necessary to ensure ongoing safety and usability.
- **Include clear safety warnings at activity stations.** Where activities involve any potential risk of injury if used incorrectly, clear safety instructions and warning signs should be displayed at activity stands (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Information stand with safety instructions for participants

- **Ensure convenient access and parking near the trail.** Easy access to the trail is essential for families and organized groups. Ideally, parking should be available nearby for both cars and buses.
- **Consider adding more activity stations.** If resources and funding permit, additional activity stations or playful elements should be installed along the trail, or games should be

introduced in sections where none are currently available. A greater variety of activities helps maintain children's interest and enhances the overall hiking experience.

11. Involved Project Partners

Experience exchange with project partners from the Setomaa Municipality Government.

12. Training video

The training video was created during the pilot phase (06:54), and it can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEe3TskOaI8>





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