

# Cautionary tales can have happy, and fearless endings

BY MELISSA FAVARA  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

When I was 7, I listened up when my mom told me about Adam Walsh, the little boy who was abducted and murdered in Florida, and I never strayed from her at the grocery store. I believed my fifth grade teacher when he told our class that Len Bias tried cocaine one time and his heart exploded; I never dabbled in the white powder drugs. When my mom told me at 12 that if I had sex I would get pregnant and drop out of high school, I believed that for a very long time; when I finally stopped believing it, I believed my high school teacher who told us we would get AIDS if we ever had sex without using condoms once, and I used condoms. Religiously.

I grew up in the 1980s and absorbed every fear that the schools, the government, and my parents imparted during that time of Just Saying No. I never got pregnant by accident, got hooked on cocaine, or had an STD. But, man, ask my husband what it's like to have me as a passenger in a car (fingernail marks on the dashboard and a wife who pips and squeals every time you turn left). And when my daughter Ramona plays with a puppy, I'm chasing after to make sure she doesn't fall on it and injure them both. Monkey bars are problematic. I am afraid. Those healthy fears I absorbed? They kept me safe, maybe. They also made me an anxious person.

I hate that because now I'm in charge of keeping my daughter Ramona (aka Rose aka Ro), age five, safe — and the temptation is there to scare her. Why shouldn't she cross the street by herself? She might get hit by a car! Why shouldn't she climb that tree? Because she might fall and break her neck! Why shouldn't she take her shoes off at Grant Park? She might step on broken glass!

It's bad. And while it actually is a big deal to learn to cross the street by oneself, I've begun to think that, though we live in frightening times (the war on women, bad economy, nuts in governments both here and abroad), I'm not doing Ramona a favor if my tools of persuasion on taking care of herself make her less brave than she is. Climbing trees is good for you, right?

It helps to look right at what you're afraid of. We don't want to open the phone bill because we're afraid to see the amount due, but open it we must. So, I agreed to go with Ro's best friend Jascha and his mom Jill to a scene from my nightmares: the bouldering gym, where adults and kids climb man-made rock walls, clinging to tiny handholds without a net or a rope.

Jascha is six months older than Ramona, so his mom Jill, a fellow only-child-haver, has gotten to the Next Big Challenge in Parenting before me every time. I have largely parented for years via calling Jill to ask, "What did you do when your kid wouldn't stop peeing his pants/bit another child at daycare/ate dirt?" Etcetera. Jill always has answers. I've never come right out and said, "I'm afraid I'll ruin my kid by being too nervous," but like the best of mothers, Jill is psychic and offered me a part of the solution before I had to ask.

The rock climbing gym. Past the frightening adult walls that arch at 45-degree angles from the spongy floor is the kid room, where 10-foot-tall walls covered in brightly colored handholds beckon children to scramble up and then speed back down on a metal slide that dumps them off where they started. Ten feet. Up. With... no... net.

Jascha, an old hand at climbing, seized Ro's hand and pulled her to the easiest section of the wall where the places to get a grip with small hands and feet were closely crowded together while I focused on my Mason jar of tea and on not having an internal hemorrhage. Jill took my hand and reminded me that the floor was soft and Ramona was good at using her body. Ro clung to the wall like a champ, making it to the top where she rolled over the wall's edge and high-fived Jascha. No broken neck for her. No heart attack for me.

I started thinking about why my elders decided to scare me. I know that the intentions were good — keep kids off hard drugs. Keep kids safe from diseases, unintended pregnancy. And I can understand that *why* those things are to be avoided might seem difficult to articulate well to kids. It's more expedient to create bogeymen than it is to discuss tough concepts. But I think that if

my mother had said, "You'll want boys to like you. And boys get highly sexed before girls do, so they'll really want to get down, but because they're young, they might not be aware of how important it is to be safe. And it will mean something different to them than it means to you when you're 14 or 15. You should wait until college when you have a clearer sense of who you are and what you want," I would have heard that. I'd have had questions. But we could have had a dialogue that gave me a realistic sense of what I was facing. I think Ramona and I could have conversations like that. I think when the time comes, I'll be ready. For now, we can practice street-crossing skills, and her dad can teach her the finer points of tree-climbing so she can move in the world without my panic limiting her.

At the rock climbing gym, emboldened by the success of her first climb, Ro went for the hardest end of the kiddie wall with Jascha, where the grips were much farther apart and the wall angled out enough to make hanging on really challenging. I resisted the impulse to run to her as she bit her lip, reached above for a place to pull, and missed. She fell about five feet and landed on her bottom. A brief thought of crying flickered across her face. Then she stood up, went to the middle-difficult section of the wall, and climbed. A couple of minutes later, she was cresting the wall, hurtling down the slide, high-fiving every kid around. She has to fall sometimes to learn her own limits and expand them. I have to let her.

As we left the gym, Jill high-fived me. "Good job, Mommy," she said. Part of growing up, and continuing to grow up, involves taking risks. When we're lucky, we have people who care about us there to encourage us to try new things, brush us off when we tumble, and talk about it after. Post-climbing, Ro said, "I was NERVOUS to try, Mama. But I'm proud I can CLIMB!" Thanks for that, fearless kid. Let's keep talking about it.



Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 5. She hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

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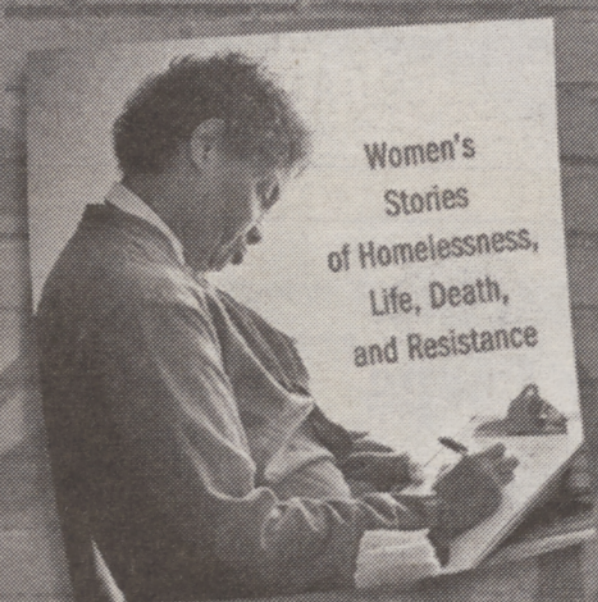
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