

On the edge of age six, a challenging persona arrives



Melissa Favara

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

Way back when I was Very Pregnant in the early summer of 2006, my charming husband Marshall and I spent the evenings dreaming of who the person we would soon be living with might be. We knew she'd be a girl. We knew, from her frequent calisthenics in utero that she'd be energetic, even feisty. Beyond that, we went between wishing and worrying as we talked and thought about what it would mean to be shepherding a brand new human through Life.

"I hope she likes sports," said Marshall.

"I hope she digs literature," said me.

"Kids can be cruel. It's going to suck when some kid is nasty to her," said Marshall. I agreed. We came together on hoping that she wouldn't be bullied overmuch.

Fast-forward almost six years. Ramona is, in fact, energetic. She is also feisty. We were right about those things. She has a fantastic 1920s haircut I do myself with kitchen shears. She smiles a lot, and waves at strangers, and asks phenomenally interesting questions about the world and says unexpected things like kids do and wows me by using words such as "narrator" and "actually" and "ambiguous." She's fun. And so far, her fellow kids have been pretty rad to have around. Young Jascha, our neighbor and Ro's bestie since diapers now serenades her with "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" on his miniature violin; young Charlie and her mom have Ramona over for snacks and play when I teach a late class Mondays; Charlie taught Ro to ride a bike with training wheels in her much-better-cared-for-than-ours backyard; gentle Laila invites Ro over to her place across the street for coloring and impromptu picnics. No bullies on scene. Except one.

At my desk grading midterms, I heard my cell phone chirp and hurriedly answered when I saw Ramona's school's number on the screen. Was she sick? Did I forget to pack lunch? Had she been abducted from the playground? (We are a people who catastrophize. Hold the molehill. I'll take the mountain.)

"Ms. Favara, this is Mr. (Disciplinary Officer) calling from (Ramona's School). Ramona and another child had an incident today."

"Oh! Is she okay?!"

"Ramona is fine. But the child whom she kicked in the stomach in the lavatory ..."

I'll omit here the expletive I actually said

out loud. Suffice to say that it wasn't good news. Kicked. In the stomach. Mr. Discipline calmly informed me that Ramona was to spend the rest of the afternoon in the principal's office while her injured friend recovered in class, and that he'd be happy to discuss the kinds of conversations that I might productively have with my child while she was spending the day at home with me tomorrow. She was suspended. Suspension in kindergarten? Really? Is that even constitutional? I hung up shakily and began the long process of wondering what thing I had done to ruin my child. Or things.

The car ride home from school was especially long. If I had expected remorse from my bright-eyed little cherub, I'd been wrong.

"She took the jump rope from me and then I took it back and then she said she was telling on me and I kicked her," Ramona related calmly, as though knocking the wind out of the child she'd assaulted had been the only rational response to a grievous offense. Matter of fact. Cool and calm. I flushed and was speechless, until I wasn't, and then I harangued at, reasoned with, and finally pleaded to Ramona that she recognize that she'd hurt someone and that it was very wrong.

"But she was gonna tell on me!"

Sigh. I could stomach her losing control in a moment of anger, but that she had hurt someone and wasn't even sorry made me question who she was, and whether I'd taken a wrong turn and was creating a monster.

We got home, I handed her to father, who'd been briefed and wore a suitably serious expression, furrowed brow included, and locked myself in the bathroom to call my mom, who offered an odd flavor of comfort.

"She's going to be six in August. She's practically six. Six is another of the terrible ages that you hear less about than two. They're little animals at six," my mother pronounced sagely. "Think of it that way: they're not evil — they're still half animal, half human. That whole empathy-moral-compass-remorse thing really only happens consistently later. Right now, you just have to make them accountable — give them unpleasant consequences. They get that."

Sigh.

I half bought it. I know one incident doesn't make my kid a sociopath, but I can't

abide even this level of meanness. I decided we'd start with concrete consequences of the you-did-something-bad-so-no-movie-night-plus-other-deprivations category and keep talking, hoping to get to understanding and something like empathy. It wasn't as though she'd always been so callous about other kids' feelings—only a week before, Jascha's bursting into tears over a slight injury had inspired her to cry, too. She can feel for others. She just doesn't always — especially when she's also frustrated or afraid. In those moments, maybe the lizard brain takes over, the body kicks, and the mind is compelled to defend what one's already done. Or something.

"Part animal," my mother repeated.

"You can't make her regret what she did, but you can talk to the human part of her, ask her how she'd feel if someone hurt her, help that part to grow. She's still figuring out how to express herself, and sometimes she'll express with her hands and feet before she can put together what to say. You can work on that."

And so we are. During the day of suspension, Ro had to write "I will not hurt other children" 10 times. She didn't get her half-hour of approved video while I made dinner for that night or the next few (file under consequences). And I asked her what she thought we could do to apologize to her victim.

"If I got kicked, I'd feel better if I had a cookie. We should make her cookies," Ro said, almost reflectively. File under empathy, if a rudimentary form.

We've had a good week since then. Ro hasn't made a set of brass knuckles out of Play-Doh or anything like that yet, and she did make a nice card to go with the cookies. It had a picture of a stick figure girl frowning and holding up round fists and another stick figure girl smiling and holding a bouquet. She'd drawn an X through the bully. Underneath was scrawled the word "sorry." Yet I doubt that we've seen the last of Mean Girl: Ro may lose it and lash out again, and we'll have to work through it again, and we will. Wish us luck.

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