

Neither too big nor too small, this family is just right



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.

I don't remember where I read it, but I recently encountered an article that discussed a new and disturbing phenomenon: People are getting depressed by reading old friends' Facebook pages and comparing their own lives to the evidence of "Bigger, Happier Lives" in cyberspace. I've been thinking about that study a lot, as seemingly everyone I knew in high school is having a second or third child. Bright faced babies and grinning parents festoon my news feed daily in silent, delighted accusation, as though pointing right at me and asking, "Why didn't you get on that, already? Betty has a baby brother, and so does Amalia, and so does Iris — *Do you care nothing for Ramona's desire for siblings and her joy in life?*"

It's not that we don't know other families with only children — we do. It's just that all of the other parents of singletons we know are unapologetic and unconflicted about their choice, whereas Ramona's father Marshall and I were on the fence for a long time before looking at our finances, ages (we're both pushing respective decades that are not thirty in my case and not forty in his), and the state of our house (we *will* one day fix the giant hole in the den ceiling the plumber had to cut to reach the ancient line to the toilet), and deciding that the better part of valor would be to raise one kid really, really well and maybe foster when we feel like we're on top of that task. Raising Ramona is daunting enough for us, a pair of late bloomers who started this whole parenting project later in the game.

And we have some workarounds, primarily in the form of Ramona's pseudo-sibling, young Jascha down the street, the precocious and sweet 6-year-old boy who is son to Eric and Jill, a musician and a natural health practitioner. We swap sleepovers (which include little sleep, natch) and child care, and we eat dinner together a lot, and we commiserate on navigating the next squally age and how to respond to gems like, "You're the worst mommy *ever* and I'm *not* eating dinner and I'm *not* going to bed *ever!*" But most of the time, both children err on the side of delightful, and I don't have much to complain about. This Saturday

was, therefore, typical.

We had a late morning inspiration to take Ramona and our faithful dog Vera Katz (she was the runt of her litter, female, and the alpha pup, so the mayor's moniker was a fitting tribute) to Sandy River Delta Park off I-84. The park is 1,400 acres of forest, meadow, and access to the Sandy and Columbia rivers, and it's all designated off-leash after the parking lot. It's our favorite place to give both our human and canine girls exercise, fresh air, and a dip among scores of other likeminded people and swell, exuberant dogs. We had the last minute foresight to invite Eric and Jascha (Jill was off at work) along for a pre-back-to-school romp.

Note to those of you single child families contemplating taking up hiking with the kid: *always* bring a second child, even if you have to borrow one. It puts off the moment when your child hurls herself bodily onto the trail and refuses to take another step by at least an hour, and transforms your experience from being that of nudging your kid to catch up every 90 seconds or so into having to up your own pace as the pair of them, in this case Ramona and her honorary brother, race ahead for the first hour in pursuit of blackberries and other people's cute dogs. And if you choose Sandy River Delta Park, and you're lucky to have a perfect Portland late summer day with sun and drifting clouds and 78 degrees and a slight breeze, you may get to quiet your mind and sit on a log, swinging your binoculars between the equally compelling sights of the family of three osprey wheeling just overhead and the two friends, their shorts rolled up all the way to their bottoms, wading, hand in hand, on a sand bar too far away to hear what they are discussing with such animation. (Ro later told me it was a mutual interest in acquiring glow-in-the-dark pajamas.) A hike like that, with great friends, on a great day, with the not-quite-siblings getting along like gangbusters and sharing truly family-like time is precisely the kind of thing one posts about on Facebook for the approbation of those long-lost peers who might check your status update and feel that they themselves may have misspent their own Saturdays.

And that's the thing: I could have posted that—heck, if someone else had, I'd have been jealous. Here's what I would have left out of my status update, probably, in no particular order:

Exhibit A, in which Ramona became convinced that Jascha had been dealt a larger share of the dates I'd packed and proclaimed, "You *only* love Jascha and you *don't* love me because you *always* give him more!"

Exhibit B, in which Ramona and Jascha trailed behind a bend as we walked the Sandy's riverbank, emerging shoeless. Jascha was carrying his shoes, Ro wasn't. I spent an hour searching in scrub and puddles, and no trace. She made the rest of the hike alternating between padding along in my socks and awkwardly perching on my husband's sore shoulders.

Exhibit C, in which a husband not to be named suggested a slightly less traveled path to hook up with the main artery back to the parking lot, which gradually narrowed and became the obviously-not-an-official-path path through scratchy weeds and intermittent blackberry bramble just feet to the right of a steep cliff, and which ultimately spit out a crowd of hikers who were, respectively, apologetic, cross, sunburned, scratched, and thirsty (note: bring more water than you think you'll need).

It's an oldie, but a goodie: "Don't compare your insides to other people's outsides." That face we prepare to meet the faces that we meet — or post online — it's an edited version, and you only see the perfect moments. Family, and living in a family, single-child, friend-family, or otherwise, is complicated and messy, and our decisions are influenced by a thousand factors not visible to the naked eye. The decision we've made to breed no more is imperfect, but it's the best one for us. Our hike was imperfect, but the overall takeaway as we drove back to Portland to barbecue together was that we'd had fun and were glad to be together. That nagging doubt about having a second kid aside, that's pretty much our story.

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