

WHEN YOUR ADVENTURE PARTNER KEEPS DEMANDING GUMMY BEARS

HAVING KIDS HAS MADE EXPLORING THE OUTDOORS, WELL, DIFFERENT

BY MEGAN MICHELSON

I VIVIDLY RECALL MY first run after giving birth to my daughter, Nora. She was around six weeks old, and I fed her, handed her to her dad, and left home wearing two sports bras and an oversized T-shirt, determined to reclaim a shred of my formerly active self. I was operating on a Swiss-cheese-like night of sleep and leaking milk through my shirt, but still, I was out in the world, moving my body. I jogged, slowly, to a spot on the bike path that's just over a mile from my house. Then, I peed my pants a little, turned around and waddled home. It was liberating.

My daughter is seven now, and her brother, Otis, is five. In the years since they've arrived, I've gotten back into the outdoor sports I did fervently before they were born — backcountry skiing, trail running, mountain biking — but it's, admittedly, not quite the same.

People with kids will tell you this: Seeing the outdoors through your children's eyes is like discovering the world anew, a remarkable journey that you get to take together. And that is true. There's nothing more fun than chasing your five-year-old on skis through the twists and jumps of a snow-covered forest, or plotting animal shapes in the constellations while sitting around a campfire with your kid. If you love nature, you know that stunning beauty and self-discovery are easy to find in the wilderness, and that can be even more profound when you add a child's unique wonder to the mix.

But also: Have you ever tried to hike with a toddler who refused to wear anything but sparkly silver ballet flats? Have you changed a diaper blowout on the side of a trail, when you forgot wipes and had to use your own shirt instead, or packed a breast pump in your backcountry ski pack? Or pushed a running stroller up a hill with a screaming baby and toddler in it?

Try hauling your ski equipment, your kid's

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gear, and eventually the kid, too, from what feels like the farthest parking spot in the lot on a crowded Saturday to squeeze in two whiny, Haribo-gummy-filled runs down the bunny slope before naptime and tell me parenting isn't the hardest damn job in the world.

But I'm starting to see the light. As my kids get a little older, I see them getting stronger, tougher and more skilled. They can already climb a full route at the climbing gym, ski off

the top of the mountain and bike dirt trails (just don't put a hill in the way). I see my freedom extending a little farther, too, making it possible to leave for longer or more frequent stretches to do things for myself.

When I was four months pregnant with Nora, my husband, Dan, and I took a ski trip with a few friends to Japan's northern island of Hokkaido. While we were there, I skied deep powder, reluctantly abstained from eating sushi and took only mini-dips into the country's famous onsens, or hot springs. Over ramen one night, one of our friends (an adventure photographer who understood the full stop a new baby would put on these adventures) said, "So, this trip is your last hurrah, huh?"

I cringed. At the time, I despised the sentiment that having kids meant the end of your life as you knew it, that all big adventures and prodigious travels would come to a grinding halt the moment you learned how to swaddle. I planned on continuing to do the activities I loved, and better yet, I wanted to bring my kid along for the ride. Having a baby wasn't the end of adventuring; it was the beginning. Right?

Fast forward to the first day of kindergarten — when my formerly well-used expedition duffel has been replaced by an oversized mom bag littered with crushed goldfish crackers — and I'm starting to understand what my friend meant with his unsolicited comment. Don't get me wrong: I still love big adventures in the



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mountains, and I take them on rare occasions when all the pieces line up perfectly (like, grandma is willing to babysit for two whole days!). But my approach to “getting rad” out there has changed significantly. For starters, I don’t care about getting rad anymore. Give me a morning on skate skis, followed by a coffee I can drink while it’s still hot, and I’m happy.

My tolerance for risk in the outdoors is basically zero now. I no longer look at avalanche-prone slopes in the backcountry and think, “Wow, that looks like a perfect line to ski.” Instead, I see the last will and testament I signed with my lawyer friend, where I relegated my kids to live with my sister if Dan and I were to both die (insert: in an avalanche). Bleak, I know, but no powder turn is worth taking a chance on not coming home to my kids.

A 2015 study in Germany found that men and women become more risk-averse after the birth of their first child. While women experienced a slightly higher increase in risk aversion than men, the difference is small. In other words: All of us change our behavior when saddled with the responsibility of an infant we have to keep alive. That risk attitude spikes in the first few years of the child’s life, then eventually comes back down again. The study found that (Shocker!) people without children have a higher risk tolerance than those with kids.

When rock climber and new dad Alex Honnold was asked recently in an interview for *Climbing* magazine if he’d keep free-soloing — climbing big walls without ropes — after his daughter was born, he said, “I’m totally prepared for (June’s birth) to (rein) in my risk-taking a little bit, though I could see it having no impact as well. ... I’m open to the possibility that I’ll just want to stay at home and play with my kid.”

I appreciate that. He doesn’t plan on changing who he is, but he’s open to the notion that his preferences may change. Which is the mindset you need when you’re having a kid. Because when you’re raising a child, there’s only so much you can do to control the outcome. Parenting is unpredictable and challenging. It’s kind of like being on a lifelong mountaineering expedition, from what I can tell.

Some aspects of adventuring are way better in my current era: *Life After Kids*. I’m convinced that a woman’s endurance ability soars way up

after childbirth (sorry, guys, I have no idea if the same is true for you). I ran my first ultramarathon after having kids, and it felt like no big deal compared to 15 hours of labor. My body feels stronger now, like it’s survived so much.

I relish the moments I have in the outdoors. If I can sneak in a 30-minute trail run or a few laps at the ski resort with a pal, I’m pumped. Gone are the days of five-hour weekend mountain bike rides with friends that end in a lake swim. But in its place is something else magical: an appreciation for every outing, big or small.

When the kids were three and five, Dan and I decided to take them on their first overnight backpacking trip. I planned what I thought was a doable two-night route into Lake Tahoe’s Desolation Wilderness in California. We’d start with a two-mile hike to a stunning alpine lake, where we’d spend the first night, and night two would be another mile or so up the trail at another lake.

Dan and I — plus a generous friend we recruited to help sherpa — loaded our packs with camping gear and enough food for a full preschool class. We gave the kids mini-packs with water, so they felt like they were contributing. But I was a little off on my distances, and as a result, it ended up requiring nearly a five-mile hike to get out on our final day. (Sidenote: I often inadvertently sandbag my adventure buddies, and apparently my kids are no exception.) It took us over five hours to walk five painstakingly slow miles, with the kids demanding snacks every 20 steps. I had to start rationing food for the adults.

When we finally reached the car at the trailhead, both kids were asleep the moment they hit the car seats. On the drive home, Dan and I sat in blissful silence. The sense of accomplishment would come later, after a shower and a meal that wasn’t a half-chewed granola bar.

That’s often how it happens: In the moment, these missions with our kids in tow feel absurdly hard, like we might not even make it out the door with hats and gloves on. But when it’s over, no matter how much of a junk show it was, it still feels good to get out there, to share those raw moments that only happen in wild places. That sparkly hindsight — the memories we’ll hang onto even if they’re only half-truths — is the reason we keep getting out there. 🏔️

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