



## GETTING STARTED

# BUILDING AN ADVENTURER

Lessons learned from raising an adventurous child

BY JENN SMITH NELSON

Going what seems like way-too-many miles per hour for a nine-year old, my son, Zevin, rips down Whistler Mountain unfazed. He negotiates the 50-plus sharply angled bends of a five-kilometre downhill mountain bike trail with ease. Though my hands are cramped and my legs

ache from 45 minutes of death-gripping the handlebars and an upright half-squat position, I follow behind,

desperately trying to keep him in my sights.

We reconnect at the bottom. His face is lit with exhilaration, mine with relief. "I thought you'd fall at least once," he jokes. We're revelling in new-found mountain highs and celebrating our mud-covered bottoms.

"Can we try a blue run now, mom?" he says. I (wearily) oblige. I'll never let on about the fear that coursed through my veins as we navigated the rain-slicked, steep, rocky trails.

I've been excited about this mom-and-son trip for so long, yearning to reconnect and dive back into nature, away from routine and the constant pull of technology. At this point I'm desperate for distractions that keep him focused on something other than the video games he left behind.

It's an ongoing issue but I'm hopeful. Travel offers plenty of opportunities to discover more worthwhile things

beyond the anticipation of a new Fortnite season. I know with Zevin, I have a fighting chance—I learned very early on that my son is hardwired for adventure.

**IT WASN'T AN** easy entry into this world, but like most of the adventures with my second-born, it was a true whirlwind. We dubbed him the "Miracle Baby of 2008," after surviving oxygen deprivation (due to a placental abruption) and acidic levels in the umbilical

cord higher than my doctors had seen a newborn survive. Such a condition can result in cerebral palsy, brain damage and death, as well as a terrifying warning that he was fighting for his life following delivery. Thankfully, he didn't just survive, he thrived—instability revealing his strength and resilience.

From that day forward, I learned to never underestimate him. Instead of struggling, he displayed a physical aptitude, obvious even from infancy. Bouncing in a jumper at two months, crawling and walking by four and seven months, respectively, Zevin's confidence grew with each achievement from the get-go.

Luckily for him, he had a built-in adventure companion ready to champion his cause. Also a natural born monkey, I was the kind of kid that gave



The author has made a strong effort to help her son disconnect from the screen and push his limits in the outdoors—from mountain biking, to via ferrata (pictured, in Squamish, BC), to dogsledding and more.

## THE LOW DOWN

my less-adventurous mom a near-heart attack or two. With excess energy and an appetite for adventure, I was climbing fences and escaping yards by the age of two. Spider-manning hallway walls, scaling my school to access the roof and jumping off of our garage were a few of my earliest "accomplishments" of which she reminds me to this day.

Sharing our adventure DNA, I try to make a conscious effort to help my son tackle new obstacles and activities by creating opportunities beyond the screen.

**IT'S NO SECRET** that today's parents face overwhelming pressure balancing playtime with technology. The reality is that from the time our babies can sit up, they've mastered tablets, toddlers are YouTube fanatics and nearly

every kid owns at least one gaming system. Keeping technology out of the picture is unrealistic—it's become a part of daily life and it's only going to evolve.

However, as one of the last of the free-range generation, I, like many other parents, crave more for my kids. I want them to feel that sense of wonder and independence I once did—one that draws them out of the house. Immersing them in nature is vital, encouraging curiosity is imperative and nurturing activities that make them tick is a must.

I'm lucky with my youngest. Because we are very alike, it's easy for me to plan adventures we can enjoy together. Though he can spend hours online gaming with friends, he's already amassed an impressive travel and adventure resume. From dogsledding in northern

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Saskatchewan at four, and SNUBA diving (a cross between snorkelling and SCUBA) in Saint Lucia by seven, to our most recent trip in British Columbia, he's always been up for trying new things.

But it isn't always easy to pull him away from technology. In fact, it's become harder and harder.

**SO THAT'S WHY** last summer I upped the ante in BC, crafting an itinerary based on activities I knew would be a fit for him in particular, and that I could (hopefully) do alongside him.

Thankfully this time, it only took about a day for his focus to shift from screen time and return to the outdoors. By the time we made it from Whistler to Squamish, he had stopped pretending his umbrella was a Fortnite shotgun.

While in Squamish, he continued to respond amazingly to the environment.

His face expressed wonder and his energy could be felt; he virtually vibrated from excitement as we tried one new thing after another.

First, we tackled whitewater rafting down the Cheakamus River, and then scaled a mountain using via ferrata, where it took every ounce of my being to trust him to clip in and out of his harness to a secure line safely. Finally, we went rock-climbing on a nearly vertical face. Though my Spiderman technique had somewhat faded, I made it to the top of the pitch on my first go, but it was far from pretty. Zevin on the other hand was so impressive. Brute strength, flexibility and sheer determination had him zigging and zagging, nailing the difficult chimney-climb technique as he scrambled higher and higher.

This is nine! Where is 10 and beyond going to take us? I'm not sure but it's bound

to be wide-smile inducing. I'm going to continue to do my best to keep up, and keep lifting him up, too.

**THE JOY OF** seeing my son engaged in new, healthy activities makes me feel like I have a fighting chance to influence and further cultivate positive interests in his life. It doesn't happen as often as I'd like, however, it's times like this when I feel I am doing something right as a parent.

Beyond fun, travel allows for many moments of fulfillment, learning and togetherness. As parents we have the ability to help build our children by encouraging them to embrace independence and adventure, whether it be through travel or at home.

There will come a day when I won't be the one reaching the top first but that's OK, support comes in many forms. I'm just happy to be along for the ride. ✕

## ADVENTURES IN PARENTING

- Give them a gentle yet encouraging push—but know their limits, and never force them. Listen to your kids and trust their abilities.
- Model an adventurous attitude and learn a new activity with them. Make quality time fun!
- Teach them it's OK to not be the best at something right away—build confidence, praise independence and be their biggest cheerleader.
- Promote curiosity and allow them to suggest new things they'd like to try.
- Don't be afraid to introduce new activities, and choose destinations that offer a wide range of activities.



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