

PRAISE FOR *ADVENTURING TOGETHER*

“This is a book that will transform your family for generations to come. Inspiring, wise, and deeply motivating, *Adventuring Together* is a manual for parents who are longing for a deep connection with their kids, along with practical ideas for where to start.”

—MANDY ARIOTO, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF MOPS INTERNATIONAL

“If a warm relationship with your kids is high on your priority list, you’re going to love this book. It’ll light a fire in your belly to take adventures and make memories in ways your kids will never forget.”

—SARAH MACKENZIE, AUTHOR OF *THE READ-ALoud FAMILY*
AND HOST OF THE *READ-ALoud REVIVAL* PODCAST

“Oh my, I love this book as it mirrors the very lessons we’ve learned as a family over the last eighteen years of parenting six boys. I’m not a natural adventurer, but I wholly believe in Greta’s message: adventuring is parenting with connection in mind. So to that end, let’s all make a little more room for adventure in our lives.”

—RUTH CHOU SIMONS, MOM TO SIX, FOUNDER OF GRACELACED.COM,
AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *GRACELACED*, *BEHOLDING*
AND *BECOMING*, AND *FOUNDATIONS*

“Greta’s enthusiasm for promoting family togetherness and lasting memories through shared adventures sparkles in this lovely book. Whether you hike through a museum with a baby in a backpack or try to keep up with your teens on the backpacking trail, you’ll find loads of encouragement and practical support for all kinds of daring and delightful adventures.”

—JULIE BOGART, AUTHOR OF *THE BRAVE LEARNER*

“Greta Eskridge is inspiring a whole new generation of families to live outside the box and start exploring together. This book is a manifesto, not only for reclaiming adventure, but also for the very heart of our families.”

—AINSLEY ARMENT, FOUNDER OF WILD + FREE AND
AUTHOR OF *THE CALL OF THE WILD + FREE*

“Equal parts truth and dare, *Adventuring Together* is the cheerful road map toward a more connected family. With the gentle wisdom of a gutsy tour guide, Greta Eskridge reminds us that memories are rarely made from the confines of a couch.”

—ERIN LOECHNER, FOUNDER OF OTHERGOOSE.COM

“Greta leads the way on the trail to connect with our kids. Her stories are hilarious and her voice is welcoming, but her meaning is deep and rich: time, love, and fresh air make all the difference in the world to children. And our children desperately need us. Whether you’ve backpacked on the Appalachian Trail, or you’ve only ever hiked to Trader Joe’s, Greta’s book will take you by the hand and teach you how to invest in your kids through adventure.”

—REBECCA FAIRES, AUTHOR OF *THE BOOK OF COMFORTS*, HOMESCHOOL
MOM OF SIX, AND DEDICATED FAMILY ADVENTURER

“Greta tells stories about the adventures that we all want to have with our kids, and then she gives us the tools. If you’re like me and find yourself to be more ‘indoorsy’ than ‘outdoorsy’ you are in good company—this book is for you. Through this beautiful and honest work, she is going to inspire families and change relationships.”

—RAEHEL MYERS, FOUNDER OF SHE READS TRUTH
AND AUTHOR OF *SHE READS TRUTH*

“Greta Eskridge is the friend you need shouting ‘You can do this!’ from the other side of the obstacle course. In *Adventuring Together*, Greta’s words build confidence and courage to risk comfort and pursue audacious parenting. As you cultivate adventurous environments to bring out the best in your kids, you’ll become a better version of yourself. So get outside, mamas. Greta has pioneered the way. You can do this!”

—MEGAN FATE MARSHMAN, INTERNATIONAL SPEAKER, AUTHOR OF *MEANT FOR GOOD*, AND DIRECTOR OF WOMEN’S MINISTRIES AT HUME LAKE CHRISTIAN CAMPS

“Everyone needs to read *Adventuring Together*. Parents, of course, but grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, mentors, youth leaders, and parents of teenagers, especially. Because Greta is here in the trenches of our modern world, walking in humility, honesty, and vulnerability. She lords nothing over, nor pontificates. She knows the hard work, the tears, the failures, and the near misses. But she presses on, knowing how important this is for *all of us*. If you need a fresh, fun, and approachable dose of inspiration for the work you do as parents, look no further. *Adventuring Together* is powerfully simple, profound in its implications, and potentially life-changing for all who read with a heart to connect with their children.”

—REA BERG, FOUNDER OF BEAUTIFUL FEET BOOKS

“Here is the thing about Greta, she is an intentional and wonderful mother as well as a natural born teacher. I am so grateful she has combined both her skills as mother and teacher and shared them with us in this book *Adventuring Together*. This is an important book for any parent who is looking to make deeper connection and sweet, lasting memories with their children.”

—HEATHER AVIS, AUTHOR AND NARRATIVE SHIFTER

Adventuring
TOGETHER

Adventuring TOGETHER

HOW TO CREATE CONNECTIONS AND MAKE
LASTING MEMORIES WITH *Your Kids*

GRETA ESKRIDGE



NELSON
BOOKS

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*To my darlings—James, William, Lilly,
and Davy—thank you for being the best
adventuring partners I could ever ask for.*

*And to my beloved Aaron—thank you for
encouraging me to adventure with our kids.
You've given me an incredible gift.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Stuff Lasting Connections Are Made Of

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

—J. R. R. TOLKIEN

I was sixteen years old when my dad asked me to go to India with him. It was to be a five-week trip, just the two of us. My mom and younger brother wouldn't go with us. They preferred the comforts of home to the certain discomforts we'd face while traveling in India. But I was different. My heart sang at the prospect of world travel. I'd never even been on an airplane before, and the thought of flying halfway around the world for my first flight made me giddy. Seeing new places, trying new foods, and meeting all kinds of new

people filled me with intense excitement. I was more than ready for the adventure. And to embark on it with my dad.

There was a lot to do to get ready before we left. While my friends were wakeboarding around the lake, I was getting shots for diseases like typhoid and starting my malaria medication. While they were singing worship songs and holding hands around beach bonfires, I was babysitting and gathering garage-sale donations to fundraise for my trip. Some of my friends couldn't understand why I would give up time with them, give up my precious sixteenth summer. They couldn't fathom that kind of sacrifice. Maybe they couldn't fathom that kind of parent-child relationship either. "You're missing youth group summer camp for what?" I was asked over and over again.

But I was incredibly excited to spend all that time with my dad. I was a teenager, yes, but that didn't mean I dreaded the thought of five weeks alone with him. We had a close connection, one that didn't just happen. My dad nurtured our relationship from the time I was a little girl. Even though he was a self-employed dad of four and always short on time, he invested whatever time he could in creating heart connections with his kids. Year after year, moment by moment, memory by memory, he built our relationship into something strong enough to make me say a fast yes when he suggested I travel across the world with him for the summer.

This wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision. I knew I wanted to spend that time with him because he had always shown up for me in simple, ordinary ways that stand out in my mind with crystal clarity even now. The voices of my friends and even

the voice of society telling me, “Kids don’t want to spend that much time with their parents,” meant nothing to me.

Parents, don’t be afraid to draw near to your kids! They want to be with you. They long for your presence. How many times does a toddler say to her mommy or daddy, “Watch me!”? How many times does a preschooler proudly showcase his LEGO-brick creation, crayoned drawing, or newest gymnastic trick? They just want us to be with them; they want to be welcomed into our world and for us to be interested in what they’re doing. Our tweens and teens might not be able to express it as easily as our toddlers, but the desire is the same: “Mom, Dad, be with me.”

Society tells you otherwise. Society tells you that your children will only draw farther and farther from you and that’s normal and necessary and needed. That’s a lie!

The fact is your kids need you more and more as they grow older. They need your time. They need your attention. They need a relationship with you! But relationships don’t just happen. You have to build them. You have to be intentional. You have to invest in them.

And so often we parents don’t do that. Then, when our kids don’t really want to be with us, we are hurt, angry, or surprised.

That’s when we tend to have these kinds of responses:

- **We freak out.** We backpedal and implement mandatory time together—which they resist because we haven’t built any foundation for this time together.

- **We back off.** When they resist, we don't push through the awkward stage. We forget that relationships take time and trust to build and, instead of keeping at it, we just let our time together gently fade away.
- **We give up.** We believe the lie that this is how parent-child relationships go, and we just let our kids choose their friends and their music and their phones and their rooms over spending time with us.

So what can we do differently?

- **We can invest in them.** We can invest our time, attention, and love into our children's lives.
- **We can choose them.** We can choose them over our phones, our busy schedules, our golf dates, or our Saturday morning 5Ks.
- **We can show up.** We can show up time and time again. Even when they're not excited or it's inconvenient or we're all busy or it's raining.
- **We can be thoughtful.** We can put thought into the activities we invite them into and make those activities meaningful to our children specifically.

And we can accomplish all of this by adventuring together with our kids!

Adventuring together simply means getting outside the confines of your regular routine. Whether that means you are literally stepping outside the walls of your house and

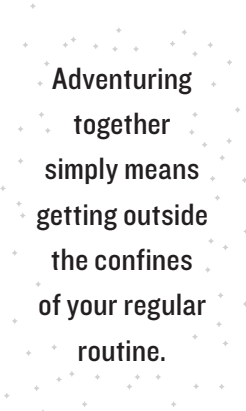
onto the hiking trail, like my family loves to do, or getting lost together in an adventure story, the key is that you are doing something different together. Those simple moments create lasting memories and connection.

That was my dad's gift to me, taking the humblest of moments and turning them into a grand adventure. Any trip, event, or even a moment held the potential for becoming a meaningful connection. By being faithful in the little things, he made a big impact on my heart.

We live in a day and age where there are so many things vying for our children's attention and, even more, for their hearts. There is an endless array of activities to take part in, texts to send, and the newest shows to binge-watch on Netflix. There are new apps to explore, and there's the societal need to keep up with the fun that friends, acquaintances, and even strangers are having. All these things can create distance between our hearts and the hearts of our kids.

Whether you are a parent of preschoolers or high schoolers, this book offers you the first steps to lessening that distance and connecting with your kids in a deep and meaningful way. I'll help you find ways to create, maintain, and grow lasting connections, all through adventure!

Remember, you don't have to fall prey to growing apart from your children. That doesn't have to be your story! But in order for that not to happen, you must be intentional



Adventuring
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and put in the work. Building relationships takes time and presence, not splash and flash. It takes space outside your normal every day to make it happen. Adventuring with your kids creates that space. Adventures provide a dedicated time together to talk, grow, laugh, and learn. Best of all, adventures make memories, which is the stuff lasting heart connections are made of.

So let's make a plan! Let's get out on the trail, take a cooking class, or start a book club. Let's adventure together!

Part 1

**HOW ADVENTURES
MAKE CONNECTIONS**

Chapter 1



Inside all of us is Adventure.

—MAURICE SENDAK

We took up much of the room on the waiting platform, repeatedly warning our excited, curious kids to stay behind the yellow line and not get whooshed away by a speeding train. Our big group of mamas and kids stood out from the crowd of regular metro riders. People looked. Some people stared. Others smiled at us. The kids didn't notice. Or care. For most, it was their first time riding public

transportation. They studied the map of the route, finding where we'd get on and asking where we'd get off. We were having an adventure, and they were so into it.

The train pulled up, and we mamas nervously checked, rechecked, and then checked again that it was the right one. Even as we stepped aboard the metro, there was a little lingering fear: *What if it's the wrong train?* Then the doors slid shut, and the new worry became, *Do we have all the kids?* Swallowing my nerves, I counted. One in a stroller and two more holding the handles. Mine were accounted for. The metro lurched forward, and we lurched with it.

The metro cars were warm and crowded inside. The mamas looked at each other with dismay. It was a long ride to downtown Los Angeles, and none of us wanted to split up. We had no choice, though. Holding our little people near and ignoring their requests to sit with their friends, we all walked awkwardly through the train, looking for at least a few seats together. When I found a spot to park the stroller, I unbuckled Lilly and instructed my boys to share a seat by the window.

James was content to sit and gaze at the view, but Lilly and William already wanted snacks. The sign on the wall said clearly No Eating or Drinking. I didn't know how seriously those rules were to be followed. This was my first time riding the LA metro, and I figured I didn't need to make more of a scene than I already was, so I tried to distract my hungry kids with toys and watching the world speed by out the window. I had a feeling it was going to be a long ride.

Our group had been adventuring together for a couple of years. What began as simply a way to engage our kids in outdoor learning once a week quickly became a way of life. We called ourselves the Adventure Club. We had grown used to strapping babies on our backs, stuffing backpacks with snacks and diapers, and hiking dusty trails together. We'd gotten more confident with each hike. We found ourselves impressing fellow hikers on the trails. They couldn't believe this troop of mamas, babies, toddlers, preschoolers, and first graders was hiking the same trails they were. We couldn't either! But it sure felt good. We eventually expanded our adventures to include tide pool visits, trips to the beach, and even some museum tours. We had never, however, braved anything like the metro.

Taking public transit to downtown LA, leaving our cars behind, carrying everything we needed in our strollers or purses, and traveling through some gritty urban areas, all with a passel of small children, felt somehow more nerve-racking than hiking a trail with mountain-lion warnings ever had. It was new. New was good. But new was also a stretching experience. Being stretched isn't easy.

When our metro car entered a dark tunnel and we went underground, all the kids cheered. Most of our fellow passengers had their headphones on and took no notice. But some passengers smiled. They took pleasure in the delight of our kids. These were the makings of lasting memories. I knew our kids would not forget their first subway ride. It didn't matter that we weren't riding the famed subways of

New York City or the beautiful, tiled subways of Paris. They were perfectly happy where we were.

We raced along through the darkness, and the kids stared out the windows, mesmerized. All too soon the car came to the end of the line, and it was time to get out and change trains. We gathered our belongings and our kids and rushed to find the new metro line. After we found our platform, we all breathed a little easier. One more stop and we'd be done! We would have successfully navigated Los Angeles's public transportation with a bunch of kids in tow.

Our metro pulled up with a whoosh of cool air, the doors slid open, and the kids swarmed inside. They knew what to do now. The metro car was empty, except for a person in a wheelchair at the very end. We settled into our seats, the doors shut, and we were on our way. The lights from the tunnel began rushing by.

That's when we noticed it. A powerful odor coming from the body hunched in the wheelchair down at the end of the car. Before my kids could say anything out loud, I pulled them close and whispered, "Sometimes people can't take baths. I know it smells bad. Just pull your shirt over your nose if you have to and look out the window."


I looked around the car and saw many heads bent together. No doubt other mamas were having the same kind of conversation. This was a part of riding the metro that I hadn't anticipated. It wasn't easy. The man or woman in the wheelchair was completely covered with dirty blankets, save two thin, filthy legs clad in tattered socks and sandals.

There was no movement, and it was hard to think about the condition of the human being huddled under the blankets. The smell was awful. My kids were overwhelmed by it and wide-eyed at this new experience. I tried to help them, urging understanding and compassion while also trying to show compassion for their feelings and discomfort.

When the metro pulled into our stop, we exited, breathing in great gulps of stale underground air and wondering what would become of that person under the blankets. None of us knew exactly how to handle that situation. But at the very least, we knew it was going to be fodder for some good talks about things like compassion, understanding, and grace for people who are different than us. That adventure on the metro was going to help us grow.

THE GIFT OF DISCOMFORT

Adventures change us. They take us out of our routines, our homes, our neighborhoods, our people—and make us grow. Adventures are so much fun. And we want that! But it's when the adventures go beyond just being fun and push us into uncomfortable places that we are offering a great gift to our children. Because out of that discomfort comes all kinds of valuable learning about



It's when the adventures go beyond just being fun and push us into uncomfortable places that we are offering a great gift to our children.

themselves and the world around them. Best of all, when we walk with our kids through the discomfort, it pushes us together, growing our relationships even stronger.

That ride on the metro reminded me of my first few days in India as a wide-eyed teen. There was beauty everywhere. Jasmine flowers hanging from the beautiful braids of little girls, bright-colored saris, and sassy monkeys jumping from rooftop to rooftop. But there was also poverty and need like nothing I had ever seen. I knew what it was to have need but had never known hunger or homelessness. In my world back home, shopping at the thrift store for “new” clothes, struggling to pay bills, or having only one car to drive meant we weren’t well-off. In India, being poor meant living under a roof made of cardboard and torn pieces of plastic. It meant begging for food and sending your child to sift through piles of trash for bits of metal or glass that could be sold for a pittance.

Those first few days of walking to the market, past trash piled on the side of the road, I pulled my shirt to my nose and tried not to gag. I glimpsed mice and rats darting through the trash piles. And one time, I saw a baby sitting alone on one of those piles; her mother was nearby digging for anything worth selling. I was heartbroken and shaken to my very core. Within days of being there, my perspective on what it meant to be truly in need changed utterly. My perspective on almost everything that mattered changed utterly. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

That growth I experienced in India was often uncomfortable. Oh sure, many parts were fun, exciting, and absolutely wonderful. But there were parts that broke my heart. Much of the trip brought up lots of questions and conversation between my dad and me.

On a much smaller scale, my kids experienced this when we rode the metro to LA. They loved that moment when the subway went underground. But other parts, like walls covered with graffiti and views that were gritty and urban, brought lots of questions. Even more, the person on our train hunched over in a wheelchair, covered with blankets, and reeking of urine was cause for concern, sympathy, and learning to be bigger than our feelings. All of it brought growth for us as we walked through it together.

GETTING OFF AUTOPILOT

The thing that makes adventures such powerful change agents is that they get us outside our normal routine. When adventure shakes up our regular routines, every part of us feels the impact. Change engages all of our senses: we see new things, smell new aromas, taste new foods, hear new sounds, and feel new things physically and emotionally.

One of my favorite things about going on an adventure with my kids is that we're not walking through the day on autopilot. We're more fully engaged with the world around us and with one another. This is incredibly important to

me, because we are living in a time where all of us are becoming less and less engaged with things like nature, books, and face-to-face relationships. I want my kids to smile and say hello to the strangers we pass on the hiking trail, instead of never seeing them because they're looking at a phone screen. I want them to look up and see a hawk soaring overhead or the way thunderheads are forming over the mountains. I want them to get lost in a story we're reading together instead of getting lost scrolling through pictures on Instagram. I want my kids to be changed by the world they live in and the people and ideas they encounter. But that will never happen if they don't go out and experience the world.

We can't simply blame the disconnection and lack of engagement we feel with our kids on technology and busy schedules. Instead we must be fully honest with ourselves and ask:

- Are we spending thoughtful, quality time with our kids? When we do, are we present, engaged, and welcoming?
- Are we willing to walk through discomfort with our kids in order to better connect with them?

If we can't answer yes to those things, then we have to make a change. We have to begin making investments of our time, energy, and attention into the lives of our children. And then we can begin to create the kind of connection both we and they are looking for.

THE HARD WORK OF RELATIONSHIP

Of course, getting out and experiencing the world is not always easy. It takes commitment to start and then commitment to stay the course when things get uncomfortable or even truly difficult.

When I began having regular weekly adventures with my kids, it was a lot of hard work. I had a five-year-old, a three-year-old, and a one-year-old. I had a nervous husband who worried about me adventuring all alone with our three young children. And, every time we went out, I had to haul a backpack full of water bottles, enough snacks to feed a small army, and plenty of diapers and wipes for trail potty stops. To complicate things, before too much longer, I was pregnant again. But I didn't want to give up our adventures. It was often sweaty and exhausting work, but I found that, time and time again, it was worth it. These adventures were changing us. My kids began to grow their own adventurous spirits, and, even more exciting to me, their hearts were becoming more and more connected to mine.

It's always been my prayer that my relationships with my kids will last past childhood. I want to reach the teen years and have the same kind of close bond with my kids that I had with my parents when I was a teen. I want to reach the college years and even the adult years with kids who still want to be with me. I want them to feel safe coming to me with the hard questions, with their fears, their discouragements, and with their dreams. However, I know that if I want to create these lasting relationships with my kids, I have to prove to

them that they can trust me. And what I have seen is that this kind of trust is being built every time we adventure together.

When we get lost on a hiking trail, or on a freeway while driving into the city, they learn that together we can work through that hard thing. They see me stop to pray—and remind me not to close my eyes if I'm driving—and ask God for peace, safety, and help. Then I ask them for their help and ideas. If one of us is nervous or scared, we comfort each other and remind one another to stay calm. And when we figure our way out, we all celebrate together. We grow a little bit with each struggle.

When we adventure, my kids realize that the world is much bigger than the suburban neighborhood we live in or even the wilderness parks we visit.

We also grow more prepared to handle the next challenge that will inevitably come our way.

I truly love the fun and excitement of adventuring with my kids. But even more than the fun, I value our adventures, because through them we can grow together. When we adventure, my kids realize that

the world is much bigger than the suburban neighborhood we live in or even the wilderness parks we visit. They learn that different and hard don't have to be scary. Instead, they see that different and hard can lead to beauty and strength.

If I can walk through all this alongside them, answering their questions and helping them if they feel uncomfortable or nervous, then I am parenting with connection in mind. Adventuring together gives us the opportunity to open up our hearts to one another and to the world around us.

Chapter 2



I don't like to doze by the fire. I like adventures,
and I'm going to find some.
—LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

We have all seen those pictures of adventurous families climbing glaciers together, ice crampons on their feet, backpacks full of gear on their backs, and brightly colored helmets on their heads. We've watched videos of families

with two toddlers, three preschoolers, and twin newborns embarking on yearlong RV trips from the northern tip of North America to the southern tip of South America. In response, maybe you've thought, *I'm just struggling to get through a grocery-store trip with my kids. That's all the adventure I can handle right now.*

Well, guess what, mama? This book is for you!

Because it's not the location or the altitude, the ruggedness or the heat, the number of kids you have trailing behind you or the number of days that it's been since you showered, whether you're sleeping in a tent or in that fancy RV that make the adventure count. It doesn't matter if you've never hiked or never dared to take your preschoolers to a museum. What matters is that you are with your children, that you are spending time together face-to-face or shoulder to shoulder. And that, during the time you are adventuring, you are making memories and building connections between their hearts and yours.

As I set out to write this book, I wondered more than once if I was qualified to write on adventure. After all, I've never climbed a mountain. I took my first backpacking trip at the age of forty-two. My kids haven't been to Iceland. They haven't even hiked the depths of the Grand Canyon. Two of them have never been on an airplane. I don't do open ocean swims or train for triathlons. I ran a half marathon once. It was the peak of my fitness accomplishments. I don't own ice crampons or snowshoes. I'm actually afraid to even drive in the snow. When I

waded in a creek a few years ago and caught my first frog, I acted like I had wrestled a full-grown alligator. I've only visited a few of America's national parks. I despise vault toilets and loathe camping trips where I can't get a shower after a few days.

The truth is, my adventure credentials aren't that amazing.

But here's the thing I keep coming back to: I love adventure. I love it so much! And I love adventuring with my kids. I love connecting to their hearts through all the pretty tame adventures we have together. I know they're tame because there are no shortage of incredibly adventurous Instagram accounts to compare to my own. So it's easy for me to wonder, *Am I really qualified to write this book? Will anyone take me seriously? Aren't there a hundred other mamas who are far more adventurous than me who should be writing this book?*

Maybe.

And that's okay.

I'm writing this book for the rest of us mamas. For the one who's never taken her kids on a hike. And who wonders if she can. For the one who can't afford to take her kids on exotic adventures. The one who hates camping and can't fathom peeing in the woods. The one who doesn't like driving in traffic and is too nervous to take a road trip without her spouse. I'm writing for the mama who is terrified she'll see a snake on the trail. Or that she'll get lost on a city subway or a country road. The one who

isn't in the best shape. And the one who doesn't even own a backpack.

I'm here to say, "Mama, I am just like you. My little adventures with my kids are still making big connections, and you can have that too!"

Remember, to adventure with your children you don't have to:

- Be a CrossFit mama.
- Be exceptionally brave.
- Have an extensive knowledge of flora and fauna.
- Love the ballet.
- Be a backpacker.
- Not be afraid of snakes.
- Be a nature lover.
- Travel the world.
- Love camping.
- Be a crunchy mama.
- Sleep under the stars.
- Be a mama who makes playthings out of sticks and moss.
- Have taken martial arts or cake-decorating classes.
- Be an outdoors woman.
- Know all about fine art.
- Be a hiker.

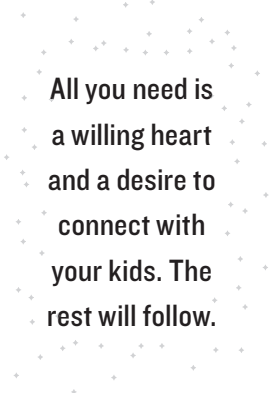
All you need is a willing heart and a desire to connect with your kids. The rest will follow.

JUST GET OUT THERE AND DO IT

It was going to be our longest, hardest hike yet for the Adventure Club. A waterfall hike with creek crossings, a distance of more than four miles, and a lot of elevation gain for the little legs that would be walking it. Some of us moms would be carrying newborns on our chests and nursing on the trail. Others would be hauling heavy toddlers on our backs. All of us would be carrying extra snacks and water, because we'd learned long ago that it was never good to run out of either.

The air was cool, and our legs were fresh as we started down the trail. We took in views of the pine tree-filled mountains stretching down to the suburban sprawl of the valley below. The creek, full from winter rains, rushed past us. The kids were laughing and running. The mamas were exclaiming joyfully over the green hills and beautiful, blooming California lilacs. We were off to a great start!

While we walked, other hikers passed us. They were often wearing hiking boots and carrying hiking poles. Many of them had cool gear, like backpacks with water bladders inside of them. (Imagine a big hot-water bottle with a straw attached to it, except filled with cool water and so much more easily accessible than the water bottles we'd have to dig out of our backpacks every time the kids were thirsty.) Meanwhile, our kids were hiking in Crocs clogs,



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Converse sneakers, or whatever shoes we could find for them as we rushed out of the house that morning. None of us had a legit hiking backpack and certainly no hiking poles. Our group stuck out like a sore thumb amid those serious hikers.

We were quite the spectacle, five or six moms and what felt like fifty small children on a narrow dirt trail. Not one of us was a truly experienced hiker. We didn't have wilderness first aid training. Or a list of famous trails we'd conquered. What we did have was a passion to get our kids outside and to help them develop a love for nature and hiking. Even though our kids were still young, we wanted to use our time with them wisely, to make the most of it. And what we were quickly discovering was that connections of all kinds flourished when we adventured together.

Hiking was one of our favorite adventures. We loved to see our kids connect with the outdoors. As they became comfortable and familiar with nature, they began to love it. They learned the names of plants and trees and butterflies. They thrilled at the sight of a tarantula or a snake. They delighted in the excitement of new trails and the familiarity of old ones. Nature became a friend.

They also connected with one another. They formed and cemented friendships as they walked side by side along the trails. It was a common sight to see our kids, hand in hand, skipping, giggling, and just enjoying the magic of spending time together. Weekly adventures grew such strong bonds among all the kids in the group. The relationships were not

forced but grew as organically as the wildflowers blooming along the trail.

And, of course, just as we hoped would happen, our kids connected with us too. Sometimes a little one would need our hand to hold while climbing the steep parts of the trail or over big rocks. Then the hand would stay in ours as we walked, talking about the birds we saw or wondering what was ahead. Or one of our older kids would wait for us to catch up, excited to show us a crop of wild cucumber or a lizard. Every week we made new memories together, and those memories knitted our hearts together in such lasting ways. It was never the magnitude of the adventure or the mileage of the hike that made the memories count. It was just the fact that we were out there together, making it happen over and over again.

When we got to the first creek crossing, we found the water was moving a lot faster than we were used to. In Southern California, our creeks are often a trickle. But it had been a wet winter, and the snow melting far up in the mountains made for full creeks. There were rocks for stepping across and keeping feet dry, but many were completely covered and others were wet and slippery. We didn't want any of our kids falling in that cold water. But it was going to be hard to get them across while also keeping ourselves dry. I was seven months pregnant, and my balance wasn't so great. My friend Jana was carrying her six-week-old daughter. Tricky.

As we stood there assessing the situation, unwilling to

turn back but not sure how to move forward, some of those other hikers on the trail came to our rescue. A few of them asked to take our kids' hands and then waded into the water to help them across the slick stones. Then they helped us mamas with babies on our backs, our fronts, or in our bellies. After I crossed, I looked back and watched the scene before me.

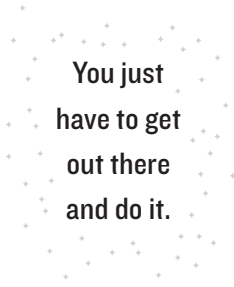
There were kids on one side of the creek and kids on the other, with people standing in the water helping everyone cross safely. The kids were cheering. Our new friends encouraged them to keep going when they were scared. It was really one of the most beautiful sights, those friendly hikers caring for and helping us all. Our adventure that day created connections even among strangers.

We all felt pretty awesome after making it past that obstacle. It would have been so easy to turn back. After all, we were just a bunch of mamas with a whole bunch of little kids. We'd already hiked a fair amount, and no one expected more from us. Except for our kids. And we expected it from ourselves. So we went on.

We came to another creek crossing. It was easier this time. We had a confidence boost from that first treacherous crossing. We climbed uphill, crossed the creek again, and then heard the roar of the waterfall ahead. We couldn't see it yet, but hearing it thrilled us. We pressed on, rounding a corner of the trail. Then there it was! Loud, flowing full, and sending out a cool mist as it thundered into the pool below. It was what we came to see.

The only problem was that between us and the falls lay the biggest creek crossing yet! Much bigger than that first one. And this time there was no one around to help us. The water was moving fast. There were lots of rocks to maneuver over or around. We stared at the falls longingly and decided. We weren't turning back.

I hiked up my maternity pants, grabbed my two-year-old by the hand, and waded in. My boys, four and six years old, moved ahead of us with another mama who had a free hand to offer to them if they needed it. We'd all be hiking back to the car with wet shoes, but it just didn't matter anymore. None of the kids seemed scared at this creek crossing. Their confidence had grown, and the falls were luring them forward. I slipped a few times but didn't topple in, and then we made it. It was the greatest feeling to walk up to the base of that waterfall, to hear the roar of the water and feel the mist on our faces. Every bit of the hard work and effort we exerted to get there was worth it.



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I'm so grateful for the past ten years of adventures just like that one. Our list of adventures, and all the stories that go with them, make it easy to answer when asked, "How do you hike and adventure with babies and toddlers? It just seems so hard."

My response is always the same: "You just do it."

The truth is, there is no magic formula or any special tricks to adventuring with your kids. You just have to get out there and do it.

You carry babies on your front and backpacks loaded with lunches and snacks on your back. And then, when the babies get too big for the front, you carry them on your back and the backpack goes in front. It's hard work. You get sweaty and dirty and sometimes cranky (or maybe that's just me). You don't look cute or fashionable (or maybe that's just me). You train the toddlers and preschoolers to carry a backpack with their own water and snacks. And sometimes you carry all the backpacks and the baby when the hike gets too long. You bring candy as a bribe for the desperate moments that sometimes come when it's so hot and you're all so tired and there is still a mile left of the hike.

You dole out the candy one piece at a time to keep them quiet when the ballet is too long. You teach them to not touch priceless pieces of art and what the line in front of all the paintings means in an art museum. You read them books that are above their reading level because you know the good story will draw them in. You take road trips without any other grown-ups and trust that they'll help you stay awake on the long stretches. You go camping without your husband and hope the kids will be able to help you get the tent up. You drive to the city, even though traffic and crowds make you nervous. You walk to the donut shop on Saturday mornings, because traditions build memories.

You start with short hikes and simple adventures, and then you just build on them. And before you know it, your kids will amaze you with their tenacity and enthusiasm to push through challenges and try new things with you.

DON'T GIVE UP!

I'll have the picture of us standing in front of those falls forever tattooed on my heart. Us proud mamas with arms around one another, wind blowing our hair, and the biggest, proudest grins on our faces. Our kids lined up in front of us in a wobbly line, so little and so fierce. We made it! Without hiking poles, waterproof boots, or even fully knowing what we were getting ourselves into, we made it. And even though we had only hiked a couple of miles, and now, looking back, those creek crossings seem utterly tame, at that moment, we felt like we'd climbed Mount Everest. A small adventure for others and a big one for us. It's all about perspective, isn't it?

Of course, after that triumphal moment in front of the falls, we still had over two miles to hike back to the car—with wet shoes, wet shorts, and tired kids. It wasn't going to be easy. We waded back through the rushing creek. We stopped to exclaim over a California newt and a bright blue dragonfly discovered near the water. We took more frequent water breaks, rested in shady spots along the trail, and dug in our backpacks for leftover snacks. The kids weren't the only ones who were tired. My legs ached from hauling my big baby belly along the trail. I was worn out.

Finally, we neared the end of the trail. Unfortunately, it was the worst part. This was one of those terrible hikes that ends with a long, steep, uphill climb. It was afternoon, and the sun was hot. There was no shade, no cool creek to cross, and no respite from the relentless incline. All the kids were

complaining. Some refused to walk anymore. Mamas gave piggyback rides. We encouraged the kids who were far too big to carry to keep going by handing out jelly beans and M&M's one at a time.

My little Lilly, only two and a half years old, was utterly worn out. I couldn't carry her in a backpack because my pregnant body couldn't take the extra weight. So she had hiked the whole trail, and she had not complained once. But as we climbed that hill, she was done. Lilly sat down right in the middle of the trail. "Mommy, can't you carry me?" she begged. I looked at her with so much love and genuine sadness.

"Baby girl," I told her, "Mama can't carry you. I have this big baby in my belly, and there is no room for me to carry you too. You have to walk the rest of the way by yourself."

She looked at me and said sadly, "But Mommy, I'm just a little girl."

I wanted to scoop her into my arms right at that moment and run to the top of the hill. I didn't want her to have to do it anymore. The thing is, she had to. There was no way out but up. And with a lot of coaxing and a lot of time, my adventurous little warrior made it to the top. I didn't go into early labor, and she didn't give up. We had worked our way up to that moment. By showing up every week to hike with me and her small friends, little Lilly had been training for this day. No, we didn't summit a mountain, but we did take a step in that direction. Nine years later, when she is struggling with something hard, I remind her of this day. I

tell her she was strong and brave and tenacious when she was two, and she still is today.

“You just did it, Lilly. You climbed that hill.”

So, if you’ve been wondering if you can do it, if you can adventure with your kids, now you know. You can. You just pick up your backpack, strap on your kid or snap on your seat belt, don’t forget the snacks, and go. Even when it is hard and scary and overwhelming and new and you are underprepared, you still try. You show up over and over again, and you make those adventures happen. Because you know the connections that come out of the adventures are worth it every time.