

II

Take It Outside!

You're Driving Me Nuts

Put the Gun Down and Come Eat Your Breakfast

I'm awakened by five young toughs carrying weapons. I'm groggy and confused, but unafraid—maybe because they're rubbing their eyes and wearing their jammies. Besides, there aren't enough weapons to go around, so one of them is carrying a clipboard.

It's the morning after a birthday sleepover and the toys and games remind me: boy play is goofy. Having been a girl myself, I can say without a doubt that girl play is also goofy—or at least it was when I was playing. It's just goofy in different ways.

Even boy toys are weird. While many toys marketed to girls are stupid and sappy, many toys marketed to boys are stupid and creepy, especially the dolls. And yes, boys have dolls; they just don't call them dolls. And if you know what's good for you, you won't call them dolls either. You'll call them “action figures.” But they're dolls nonetheless; they're just ugly dolls.

Girls' dolls talk. Boys' dolls make strange beeping noises. Girls' dolls wear gobs of makeup and have retractable hair. Boys' dolls wear shields and have retractable heads.

And then there's the weaponry. It's almost a cliché that if parents swear off toy weapons, their sons will shoot with bananas. Or tennis shoes. Or toothbrushes. After a while you hardly notice that cuddled up next to your son's Cookie Monster is a plastic

grenade and a triple action machine gun.

I don't know about girls, but boys are intensely competitive. As I often am, I was recently called to settle a serious argument between my son and his friend: can a sword block a bullet? I have no expertise in weaponry, but I do know a thing or two about diplomacy. And I knew that a definite answer would have one boy mad at me and both boys mad at each other. "It depends on the sword, the bullet and how far they are apart. But it's certainly possible." I said with a nod to one boy. "But not likely," I added with a nod to the other. They walked away from me, each saying, "I told you so."

Boys take up the entire house. If there's a war going on, as there often is, there will be collateral damage in every room. I've even found army men in my purse, which can be embarrassing at the checkout counter.

Boys have a great sense of fairness—especially when they think they're being treated unfairly. And they generally play by the rules, which is harder than it sounds when you consider how often the rules change.

During a recent spine-tingling playdate in our home, the list of items that could be destroyed by toxic waste grew faster than an oil spill. "You said toxic waste can't destroy a robot."

"It can when the robot is made of...titanium."

"Mine isn't! It's made of...aluminum...and plastic."

"Even worse!"

"But his protective shield is on."

"I turned it off with my...toxic laser beam."

"You can't do that. Only I can do that with my...protective shield switcher."

“I just did it.”

Of course, parenting experts would agree that intervening in such a debate is unwise. Children must be allowed to work out their own disagreements in order to become mature adults who can cooperatively settle disagreements about toxic laser beams and aluminum robots.

But sometimes even the best of parents is tempted to chime in with some great pearl of wisdom like, “Take it outside! You’re driving me nuts!”

Here Comes Santa Clause (Oh, Goodie)

My son may not agree, but I think he needs more toys like Bill Gates needs more money. I land on Legos when I fall into bed at night. I step on little green army men when I drag out of bed in the morning. I gave Mr. Potato Head away years ago and I still find his body parts all over my house.

All day long I shove aside, stumble over, pick up and swear at toys. It might not be good for my son to hear that.

The childless and parents of grown children will say naively, “Well, stop buying toys.” But modern parents don’t have to buy toys; toys find us. Often they’re given to us by the childless and parents of grown children.

Plus today’s children get toys as prizes every time they sell fundraising items, which is often. Of course, toys are an incentive for young salespeople. But they are a disincentive for parents, who are the encouragers, motivators, drivers. We’d prefer they received a commission. That way they could reimburse us for the gas used in their sales calls.

And of course, restaurants serve toys with their meals and are very popular because of it. I’ve tried this at home but to no effect, maybe because I was serving used toys.

Even dentists give small toys to their young patients. Why can’t they just pass out

candy like they used to?

Before we know it, toys have taken over our home like dandelions on our lawn. As parents we know that quality toys serve a purpose. They allow kids to play creatively and keep them occupied so we can read the newspaper. But we can't help but fear we're raising little materialists who think it's normal to get a new toy every other day.

That's why I'm unveiling my new six-step plan to decrease the number of toys in the home.

1. First of all, don't have children. If it's too late for that, skip to number 2.
2. Just before Christmas, instruct your children to give away an agreed-upon number of old toys. I'm thinking 50 to 100, though getting them to agree to that might be difficult. Try appealing to their higher motives by telling them that their beloved toys will be in the hands of less fortunate children who will love them as much as they did. If that doesn't work, appeal to their baser motives; remind them that Christmas is coming and they need to make room. If that doesn't work, do it yourself while they're sleeping.
3. Encourage friends and relatives to give functional gifts, such as money for the college fund or socks and underwear, which are always a hit with children.
4. Try re-gifting. During the frenzy of opening gifts, some toys are quickly shoved aside, still in their packaging, as the child reaches for the next gift. Snatch a few of these and set them aside for the next birthday party your child is invited to. Later they may ask where these toys are. This is a teachable moment, and that's why you should lie. Say in your sternest parent voice, "With as many toys as you have, it's no wonder you can't find them."

5. Refuse kid's meal toys at fast food restaurants. You could even order them an adult meal and eat their leftovers.

6. There are certain toys you must ban entirely from your home. These include toys that promote violence or disrespect and any that say anywhere on the packaging, "Collect all twelve!"

Changing Socks Barbie

Some would say it was the blight on an otherwise perfect childhood, but I never owned a Barbie doll. I had some Barbie wannabes (namely Midge and Penny, whom I still think of fondly), but no actual Barbie.

My only child is a son. His doll collection consists of a fireman, a soldier, and some unattractive action figures that don't quite live up to the name "doll." I know nothing of Barbie.

So when the mother of a little girl on my Christmas list assured me that a Barbie would do nicely, I naively thanked her for making it easy for me. I began my search for a Barbie thinking it would be over faster than it would take the child to open my gift.

How could I have known there are more Barbies than Jell-O varieties? Should I choose the Barbie Royal Romance set or Barbie pushing Krissy in a baby carriage? Should I go with Bead Blast Barbie or Hula Hair Barbie? What about Olympic Skater Barbie, Soccer Barbie or Twirling Ballerina Barbie?

In a daze, I wandered out of the Barbie aisle into that of the less-well known dolls. I saw dolls that could talk, walk and laugh. I saw a doll whose hair could be pulled out and reeled back in to change the length. If I'd had a doll like that when I was a child, I might

not have cut the hair on my sister's doll. (She noticed immediately, despite—or maybe because of—my efforts to conceal my work with Scotch tape.)

I saw dollhouses as nice as any home I've lived in, and only slightly smaller. They brought back memories of my own dollhouse, a wooden box with a hinged lid, which, when open, became a magnificent split-level home. I had miniature dolls, but all from different sets. Consequently, the mother doll (Debbie) had a baby (Baby) as large as she was.

I saw beautiful baby doll carriages and was reminded of the time I pushed my own doll carriage off the bed in an effort to determine if the wheels would go around in mid-air. I can't remember now if they did or not, but I do know that, once they hit the ground, they stopped going around at all.

Back again in the Barbie aisle, I came across the Barbie clothing line. Barbie has more clothes than Midge, Penny and me put together. I designed their clothing using socks. I'd cut off the upper part of a sock and make two arm holes in it. The style didn't show off their Barbie-like figures well and the collar was never quite right, but I could make the dresses whatever length I wanted, from mini to evening gown. Imagine argyle evening wear. Unfortunately, I never learned to do sleeves, so no matter how cold the weather Midge and Penny always went sleeveless. Though most people would not have been so kind, my parents considered my design efforts creative—except when I used new socks.

In the end, I left the toy store with nothing but a few returning childhood memories and a renewed appreciation for gift certificates. Later I asked the mother of the little girl who is not getting a Barbie from me, “Why couldn't Spring in Tokyo Barbie just change clothes to become Birthday Wishes Barbie?”

“Blasphemy,” said my friend. “Could Glamour Barbie have any credibility at all if she doubled as Bowling Champ Barbie? And would you trust Pilot Barbie if, in her off-time, she was Tie-Dye Barbie? Barbie has had more than 80 careers, from astronaut to paleontologist. She’s quite an achiever.”

Where I work, we’d call her a job hopper. But I suppose I’m just jealous. Barbie and I are nearly the same age, and I haven’t done nearly as well for myself. She’s aged better too. Midge and Penny, on the other hand, still look marvelous. And, as I recall, they also had a number of exciting professions. And for them, it was as easy as changing socks.

Why It's Impossible to Clean a Child's Bedroom

In order to assist a child of any age to clean his/her room, a parent should have a great deal of patience, a dose of understanding—and a large trash bag placed just out of sight.

One encounters many challenges in undertaking this job, the main one being how attached children get to their toys, even the ones they forgot they had. You may think they're no longer interested in items they acquired when they were younger. They may think so too—until you suggest they part with them. Suddenly particular toys are not only special, they're heirlooms to be passed on to their own children one day.

The second problem is the sheer number of toys in the modern child's bedroom. Today's kids receive toys and trinkets for everything they do—eating out, selling popcorn and overpriced cookie dough, even going to the dentist. They have birthday parties with 12 guests who bring 12 useless items ... I mean, gifts. And they inherit hand-me-down toys from children whose parents are better at getting their kids to give them up.

The third issue is that many toys come in millions of pieces. We could build a room onto our home with all the Legos my son has. And if we ever do, we'll use it for toy storage.

Finally, even older children may not have a clear understanding of what “cleaning

their room” actually means. There may be smelly socks, rotten apple cores and heaps of toys in every corner, but many children believe that the room is clean as long as there’s a small space on the bed for them to sleep.

In order to deal with these challenges, you must have a strategy. First, put a trash bag and a box for giveaways out of sight in the hallway. Then label some large plastic containers or cardboard boxes with the categories of toys your child has: guns, trucks, jewelry, costumes, dolls, dishes, miscellaneous garbage. I’m kidding. Don’t write that. Your child may not even know what “miscellaneous” means yet.

Now clear off and make the bed. This will prevent any sharp objects or perishable food items from winding up under the covers during the next step. Place the labeled containers on the bed and shove everything that is not where it’s supposed to be, which is almost everything, into a giant heap in the center of the room. Then light a match. I’m joking. That would be dangerous.

Instead, both you and your child should begin putting each object into its correct container. Stop periodically to ask your child sweetly, “You don’t play with this anymore, do you, honey?”

Sometimes she’ll agree quickly. If this is the case, put the item in the trash or give-away container quickly without comment. This is very important. You must never say, “Grandma gave you that,” or “You used to play with that a lot,” or even “Good riddance!” Any of these may cause the child to change her mind.

Most times, the child will argue that yes, she does too play with it, even if the item in question is broken, covered in dust bunnies, and not missed since it first disappeared under the bed two years ago.

It's very tempting at this point to lose your temper and start dumping toys into the trash bag by the armload, but that wouldn't be fair. Always remember, these are not your belongings. Plus, you'll be caught.

You have to be more subtle than that. Fortunately, you have an advantage. Children are easily distracted. One minute they're cleaning, the next they're playing hand ball against the wall or chewing on a pizza crust they found in the corner. This can be very frustrating, but don't despair. Just keep filling up the trash bag while they're not looking.

The Quality of the Costume Won't Affect the Quantity of the Take

Among my many failings as a mother, add to the list the fact that I've never made my son Isaac a Halloween costume. I've taken him trick-or-treating; I've checked his treats for dangerous tricks. And, I've kept him from overdoing it on sweets by helping myself to his treats when he's not looking.

But I've never made a costume. I'm just not the crafty sort. I can sew on a button and stitch up a hem if I absolutely must. But the last thing I sewed with an actual sewing machine was my thumb, and that has a way of inspiring you to look for other hobbies.

It doesn't help that I've never enjoyed wearing costumes myself. When I was growing up, my Halloween costumes consisted mostly of those hard plastic masks that stayed on my face only because the elastic string tangled up in my hair.

I dressed up as Charlie Chaplin at some point in my adulthood, but generally I have steadfastly avoided costume parties. Then I found myself in the midst of a bus full of people headed to one while I was visiting a gambling town. It was late October and my husband and I rode the shuttle from our hotel to the casinos downtown. We soon discovered that we were the only ones *not* on the way to a costume party. We looked painfully out of place, though we told everyone we met that we were a young, hip couple

dressed as a frumpy, middle-aged couple.

There were a dozen or so Oompa-Loompas, five or six Draculas, a few cowboys and a lot of loose-looking women. Most of the women's costumes would never work for me. It's cold in late October, and a dance hall girl wearing fleece and wool socks doesn't look right.

I have appeared in several theatre productions, but someone far more creative than I am always came up with my costumes. And I had some wardrobe malfunctions during my drama career that may have contributed to my costume phobia. There was the slip that "slipped" during one performance. I had to wiggle and squirm to keep it from landing around my ankles. Not only did this make it hard for me to remember my lines, the audience probably thought I had fleas.

During another play, my leading man was supposed to light the cigarette I held. Neither of us being smokers, we could not get the darn thing to light. I wound up "smoking" an unlit cigarette during an entire scene. Foolish as it looked, this is how I prefer my cigarettes.

I suppose you're thinking that this is a lengthy justification for why I've never had the ambition to create a costume for my only child. But the fact that I haven't made any doesn't mean he hasn't worn any homemade costumes. He once dressed as Inspector Jacques Clouseau from the Pink Panther movies. The idea was his; the trench coat was mine, and it dragged on the ground—a safety no-no and a drycleaner's nightmare.

Fortunately, you can buy costumes and I've bought many of them. My son has been any number of creatures, including Batman, a soldier and a Star Wars clone trooper. What's the big deal anyway? I give candy to anyone brave enough to knock on my door on Halloween night. I think most people do. Near as I can tell, the quality of the costume

never affects the quantity of the haul, and isn't that what we're after anyway?

Pink is Camouflage if You're Hiding in a Flowerbed

One of the people I despise most in the world, though we've never met, is the creator of zip-off pants. Zip-off pants, in case you haven't seen them, have zippers at the knees so you can convert them to shorts whenever the spirit moves you. Then you can forget the legs wherever you happened to be when you were so moved.

My six-year-old son owns four pairs of zip-off pants. Actually, that's not quite right. What he has is one pair of zip-off pants and three partial pairs of zip-off pants. One pair has one full leg and one half leg, and one pair is missing both legs. While both of these could be worn as shorts, that would not be very useful in the winter months. Of course, the pair that has two legs but no shorts would not be very useful any time of year.

A wise parent purchases several identical pairs of zip-off pants so they can always piece together one entire pair. I'm not a wise parent, so I didn't think of this when I purchased the much-coveted zip-off pants for Isaac. It had not occurred to me that a child who doesn't even like shorts would be so quick to make himself two pairs.

Friends with daughters tell me I'm lucky I have only a son to dress. It is a widely held belief that dressing a daughter is more difficult because girls care more about what they wear. I can't help but be offended by this stereotype, since I happen to be a daughter.

And I'm here to tell you boys are also very particular about their clothing. The fact that they will wear the same clothes every day of the week, even if they have to take them out of the dirty clothes hamper to do it, is only a sign that they are too picky to wear anything else.

My son's fashion preferences started to appear when he was still young enough to have what I thought were adorable little sets, like a T-shirt with a cute little truck appliqué and matching pants and a Winnie the Pooh shorts and top set. One day he announced to me that he didn't like what he called "partners." In other words, he didn't like adorable little sets.

Also, he doesn't like button up shirts because the collars annoy him. He prefers that his socks go all the way up to his knees. And he only wants to wear blue jeans or camouflage pants. I tell him camouflage is relative. Pink pants would be considered camouflage if he were hiding in the flowerbed. He remains unconvinced.

A major cause of our fashion battle is my son's physique. If pants fit him around his waist, they're too short. If he were a she, my argument about how short pants are in style might have worked. I told him short pants even have a name; they're called capris. He told me flatly that he does not now, and never will, want to wear capris. Picky, picky, picky.

Fish Hooks Boy

I could tell from the whoops and hollers down by the lake that my seven-year-old had either fallen in or he'd caught a fish. Based on his history of each, I figured he was in the lake.

But as I hurried back, I could see he was standing on the shore with a fish dangling from his pole. We danced, did high fives, took pictures, and promised to send copies to friends around the globe. Then we put the fish where all fish of its magnitude belong: back in the lake.

He almost kissed it before he tossed it back. It was his first fish, after all. Coincidentally, I'd also had a first that day. I put a worm on his hook. But not just any worm. The label on the container called it and its friends "Giant Canadian Night Crawlers." These were imported worms. Impressive.

But it wasn't my worm that caught the fish. I don't know if it was the agility of the night crawler, the power of the cast or my own ineptitude, but the worm fell off during casting and provided some fish with a safe, imported lunch. (Actually, I do know which it was.) My husband put on the effective worm.

I have fished very little and I've always managed to con someone less squeamish into

baiting my hook. I'm uncomfortable causing pain to anything, even a night crawler. Isaac must have inherited a bit of my soft heart. He put the smallest of the worms back into the container because, as he put it, "He's special to me." Apparently the worm that caught the fish was not so special—or so lucky.

You may be thinking that if I'm not comfortable putting a worm on a hook or taking a fish off a hook, I probably wouldn't make much of a big game hunter either. And you would be right. My idea of hunting is checking the grocery store ads for deals on ground beef.

I may not be a fisherman myself, but I see only benefits to my son's interest. Fishing brings out a patient side in my child I've never seen before. And he is, pardon the pun, hooked. The day after we threw that first fish back, we were at the grocery store. I thought we should have something in our refrigerator besides the remaining night crawlers.

My son, ever the helpful shopper, suggested we buy fish. Why not? I headed for the fish sticks. But he led me back to the cooler where the salmon and the halibut and the rest of the real fish are kept. He picked out a trout wrapped in plastic, eyes and all, as he happily pointed out.

What could I do? He wasn't begging for Pop Tarts or potato chips. He held the fish all the way home from the grocery store.

I prepared it as well as I could; admittedly, it may not have been that great. "What do you think?" I asked him during dinner. "It's okay," he said. But then he added that the fish we threw back would probably have tasted better.

Oh yeah. The one that got away. He's going to be a fisherman, all right.

The Ones That Didn't Get Away

I eat fish, but I don't catch fish. Just like I eat cookies, but I don't bake them. Instinctively fish know this about me—that I don't catch them, not that I don't bake cookies.

Isaac knows both. He also knows that I can be worn down by constant pleading and negotiating in the same way a mountain can be worn down by wind and rain—only faster. That's how he finally persuaded me to take him and his friend fishing. He assured me he would never ask for another thing. He told me I could spend the time reading and walking around the lake. He said they would throw back any fish smaller than six inches. I should have noticed they didn't bring a ruler.

I should tell you that I don't know how to clean fish and, as it turns out, neither did they. The real fishermen in their lives have never seen fit to bring home any of the fish they've caught. But there were no real fishermen available—only me, the one in the family who believes fishing is what you do only if you forgot to bring a book to the lake.

I did remember a book, so I spent two glorious hours reading and walking—the calm before the storm. I could see the boys across the lake. I didn't hear any whooping and hollering, which I assumed meant the fish weren't biting. To someone who eats fish but

doesn't catch them, two hours seems like a long time to fish without any luck. I didn't care; I was enjoying myself. I honked when it was time to leave, and they started back around the lake without argument. It was all going so well that I decided I might even take them fishing again. I've since changed my mind.

Eventually, they made it back to the car, but what was that? They had three fish on a stringer. The irony was hard to miss: they never bring fish home when they go with real fishermen, but I take them once and they bring home three. They were small and they were dead, but they were fish.

We drove the more than twenty minutes into town with the dead fish wrapped in plastic bags—maybe to show them to real fisherman before we disposed of them. Isaac's friend said he thought he felt them move. I thought that was just wishful thinking—until I saw it myself in my kitchen moments later. In case you're wondering, that's when I changed my mind about taking the boys fishing again.

We had two choices: Put the fish in a bucket and drive them back to the lake to grow up, or learn to clean fish fast. Driving them back seemed like a waste, but so did cleaning them. Let's just say it would give a whole new meaning to the term "petit filet."

While I was pondering these options, the fishermen came up with a third: they put the fish in the bathtub. The fish were happy. The boys were ecstatic. I was not. They thought the fish would make good pets and could live in our bathroom indefinitely. I was concerned about bath time. Besides, while my bathtub may be good habitat for any number of species, fish probably isn't one of them. I repeated my call for options one or two.

We didn't think of Google which, nowadays, is how you learn to do everything from bake brownies to deliver babies. Instead the boys started making phone calls, leaving me to

wonder: with all the real fishermen they apparently knew, how did I get stuck taking them fishing? They did get a few tips by phone, but not what I was hoping for—a house call by an actual fisherperson.

My mother finally came to the rescue. She gave the boys some pointers and the crisis was averted. I was saved a trip to the lake. The boys learned to clean fish. And there are three small ones in my freezer and none in my bathtub.

Pets Teach Responsibility—to Parents

There are two kinds of parents in the world: those who've succumbed to their children's incessant pleading for a pet and those who are still putting up with it.

Maybe you're one of those parents who thought caring for a pet would teach responsibility. But after a few months with a new puppy, you're thinking, "Hey, wait! I already was responsible." The children who begged, pleaded and promised to walk the dog daily, now have softball practice, summer camp and a case of amnesia. And instead of learning about responsibility, they're learning they can always count on you.

Or maybe, like me, you're looking for a way to teach your children about responsibility, give them the joy animals provide and stop the begging, all without actually getting a pet. This is a tall order, but I have three suggestions for you. And, speaking from experience, I can tell you that none of them work.

First, have plenty of friends and relatives who own pets your children can play with. If your friends and relatives don't have pets, give them some. You may be thinking that playing with other people's animals would only make your kids want their own pet more. And you would be right.

You may also be thinking that, if you give a friend a pet just so your children can play

with it when you visit, you may not be invited to visit again. You would be right about that too. I told you these don't work.

Second, you can encourage your kids to pet sit. There are two kinds of pets a child will care for without being reminded: one that belongs to someone else who is paying them to take care of it and one they've owned for less than a month. You choose.

Pet sitting allows children to learn about responsibility without their parents having to learn any more about it. At least it works for some kids. My one and only pet sitting experience ended badly after an unfortunate incident with a beta. You're probably thinking, "How hard can it be to take care of a fish?" Well, that's what I thought too.

My son has been much more successful. He started his pet sitting career with some hermit crabs, graduated to a chinchilla and then "went to the dogs." And I had high hopes. I thought he'd change his mind about wanting a dog of his own after going to a friend's house several times a day, feeding and playing with her dogs, then waiting for them to "do their business." What an odd way to put it. Whoever came up with that term wasn't very pro-business. But I digress. The point is, business or no business, it didn't change Isaac's mind about wanting a pet.

Finally, you could compromise and get a small, low maintenance pet. A friend told me that if a child wants a dog, he or she would be wise to start by asking for a horse, then negotiating from there. My son made the mistake of asking for a dog first, so he got a hamster. And yes, I'm aware that many a family has started with a fish or bird and wound up with three rabbits, two cats and a St. Bernard to keep it company.

I think that's what my son is hoping for. He knows that I grew up with cats, dogs, rabbits, chickens and even a few pigs and sheep. And he knows I loved them all. I'm not

sure how much they taught me about responsibility, but I did learn to count on my mother.

Three Goldfish, Two Hamsters and a Canary

My son was six when he asked me the question every parent dreads. Not that one. The other question every parent dreads. “Mom, can I have a dog?”

“Maybe someday,” I hedged.

“How about a cat?”

“Maybe someday.”

“What about a bird?”

“Maybe someday! Now goodnight!”

Moments passed. I thought he was asleep until he whispered, “Mommy?”

“Yes.”

“Can you pet a fish?”

I was starting to think the child wanted a pet. His lobbying got worse after one of his cousins got a golden retriever puppy. Then an aunt got a Springer spaniel. The relatives weren’t helping.

It’s not that I don’t like dogs. It’s that I don’t like work. To me, dogs are like Christmas lights; I love them at other people’s homes. I’d love Christmas lights on my house too, but I don’t want to climb up on the roof and put them there.

I know what you're saying. "You shouldn't put a dog on the roof anyway." Yes, I realize that. The point is, someone else does the work and I don't even have to remind them to do it.

I remained strong but Isaac started keeping all manner of bugs, worms and crawly things in shoeboxes in his bedroom. Somehow they always managed to escape mysteriously into the night, thanks to contacts they had on the outside. (Me.)

When I tried to kill a moth that had landed too high on our vaulted ceiling to reach, Isaac named it "Lonesome" and called out words of encouragement to it. "You're safe, Lonesome! She'll never get you up there!"

I was tempted to relent. Puppies are cuter than moths, plus they can help clean up under the dinner table. On the other hand, moths are quieter and they don't need shots.

To be fair, I had many pets while I was growing up and I loved them all. There was Buster the bulldog. Buster couldn't bark because of the surgery he'd had during his life with the carnival from which my father had rescued him. There was Laddie the collie, who was eventually given away because she started to bite the hand that fed her—as well as other body parts.

There were the cats: Tiny, who crawled into a dresser drawer and was accidentally imprisoned there for several days before my mother heard her pitiful mewling. And Froto, who ate the houseplants, including the cactus.

And there was my favorite pet of all: Bernie, part Chihuahua and part who-knew-what, who had a run-in with a car and lived to bark about it.

I suppose I learned something from all of them—not to chase cars or eat houseplants. I learned all about unconditional love from the dogs and unconditional contempt from the

cats. But maybe the main lesson I learned was that my dear mother would never let an animal starve.

I was afraid my son would learn that too. Children can and do learn responsibility from having pets. But so do parents. No parent can stand by while a pet goes hungry. Plus homes start to smell funny when pets aren't cared for properly.

And that's exactly what I was worried about. Not that my house would smell funny; it already does. I was afraid that if we ever got a pet, my son wouldn't be the only one taking on new responsibilities. I would be too, and I wasn't handling the ones I had very well. No, if we were ever going to have a pet, it would have to be very low maintenance. I was leaning toward a Chia pet.

The next time my son asked if he could have a pet, which, of course, he did, I said, "Yes. Absolutely you can have a pet, when you're old enough to be responsible for it. Old enough to feed it and care for it. Old enough to know how it does and doesn't like to be held and petted." "And," I added under my breath, "old enough to have a home of your own."

Lucky for Isaac, he didn't have to wait that long. And I blame the nice people who, because of their sincere love for children and blatant disregard for parents, give away free fish at children's events. I took my son to a school carnival, naively thinking the only danger would be cotton candy on the car upholstery. But he soon discovered that if he tossed the ring onto the right bottle or caught a certain item with a plastic hook, he could win a fish. Actually, I think he could have won one just by saying, "*Me! ME!*" at the end of the evening when the carnival coordinator started begging people to take the fish.

At any rate, he left the carnival rejoicing, swinging a sandwich bag full of water and

fish. And I left annoyed, praying the bag would stay closed during the drive home.

There are two things to remember about free fish. Number one, free fish are traumatized fish. They have endured long hours in small plastic bags with large faces—or rather small faces that look large to them—gawking like sharks just inches away. And they have suffered through the shaking of their little plastic homes by children who ache to cuddle and pet them, which most fish don't enjoy.

The second thing to remember about free fish is that they are not free. A fish can only live so long in a sandwich bag and, it turns out, only slightly longer in the \$17 aquarium you buy to house it in. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Along with the aquarium, we bought some lovely blue rocks (\$7.59) to make the aquarium more attractive for the fish, a net (\$2.39) to gently move them when it was time to clean the aquarium (which my son promised to do often), fish food (\$4.59) with omega-3 fatty acids and select vitamins to keep them healthy, and water conditioner (\$2.99) to replace the natural slime coating they apparently need in times of stress—unlike the rest of us who find slime coating quite stressful.

Maybe there weren't quite enough omega-3 fatty acids in the food, because our first two free fish lasted only three days—one day for each omega. I know the water conditioner wasn't to blame, because the dead fish still looked plenty slimy to me.

After a suitable mourning period and a proper burial in the flowerbed, we washed the rocks and the aquarium and put the \$35 worth of fish supplies in the closet. My son was thinking we'd keep it for the next free fish. I was thinking we'd keep it for the next garage sale.

Alas, a year went by. The annual carnival where we'd gotten the fish rolled around and

again they were giving away fish. Amazingly, I resisted my son's pleas. I comforted him as best I could while silently congratulating myself on remaining fish free for another year.

And then there was another children's event just a few weeks later. And as luck would have it, they were giving away fish. My resistance had been lowered at the carnival, and after all we did have \$35 worth of fish provisions in our closet. We brought home free fish number three.

We decided to wait to name this one so that we wouldn't be too attached if it died, which it did three days later. Apparently three days is the life span of a free fish.

We were pet-free again, but children have an instinct for choosing the exact moment to ask for what they want. One day when I wasn't home, my son asked my husband, "If I keep my room clean for a month, can I please, please, *please* have a hamster?" And knowing him as I do, I'm sure he didn't just ask once. In my husband's defense, I have to say, he was distracted at the moment. Besides he was in a weakened state, having already said no to a dog, a cat, a rabbit and a bird. Mostly, in his wildest dreams, he never thought it would happen.

But dang if it didn't. And suddenly, as my son put it so eloquently, we finally had a pet with hair: Monsieur Hamstie Doodle Pie Rosby.

A hamster isn't bad as pets go. Hamstie didn't purr when we petted him or come running to greet us when we came home after a long day at work. There was very little tail to wag. But he didn't shed either. Or beg for table scraps. Or bite the mailman.

And he didn't cost much. The cage was a hand-me-down from another set of parents who I'm sure were happy to be out of the hamster business.

Monsieur Hamstie didn't need to be taken out for a walk. He was quiet other than the

constant whirl of the hamster wheel. And if we could have figured out how to hook up the wheel to a generator, we would have saved enough on electricity to pay for his food and bedding.

He was a good eater. He liked nuts, fruit and whole wheat bread, and he loved cruciferous vegetables. In fact, thanks to Monsieur Hamstie, we all ate more of them. He certainly couldn't eat a head of cabbage by himself.

And hamsters are apparently hardier than free goldfish are. We had Hamstie for a couple of years before he went to that Great Hamster Wheel in the sky. He was replaced quickly by Bo-Bo, and I'd almost say it was worth the trouble, except that having a hamster did not keep my son from asking for a dog.

Long after the fish and both our hamsters had died, we compromised again. Some friends were giving away a canary and my son wanted it desperately, even though it's no larger than a hamster and it doesn't have hair. I finally agreed because the pleading was relentless and also because it was still not a dog.

Mr. Tweeters didn't warm to us right away. I was concerned he might be unhappy about his cage. As I'm sure you know, birds are uniquely designed to fly, but the cage he came in was approximately the size of two shoe boxes put together—if your feet are big. So we bought him a bigger, more expensive cage, proving once again that there is no such thing as a free pet. It's beautiful; a mansion of a cage, if your mansion has bars for walls and water troughs instead of faucets.

And it's worth it. Mr. Tweeters seems much happier; at least he's singing to us more. Well maybe not to us. According to my research, he's probably singing to claim his territory and attract a girlfriend. He can have the territory, but there will be no girlfriend,

not if I have my way. Of course, I don't always get my way. Witness the fact that we've had three goldfish, two hamsters and a canary. On the other hand, we've still never had a dog.

Break Bread over Their Heads

Mexican children eat Mexican food. Japanese children eat Japanese food. Australian children eat Australian food. They don't eat it because of genetics. They eat it because their parents eat it. They eat it because they're hungry and it's there.

This sums up my philosophy for convincing children to eat a variety of healthful foods: serve them. And it has led me to put an assortment of not particularly kid-friendly foods on the table in the hopes that Isaac will learn to eat them. Sometimes it works. He has been known to eat grapefruit, avocados, Brussels sprouts and broccoli. Of course, he has also been known not to eat them.

But the most difficult part of putting my philosophy into practice is having other kids join us for meals. I know their parents cook nutritious foods—just different nutritious foods. Maybe better tasting too. And I'm starting to worry that my son will grow up with healthy eating habits but no friends.

One night we invited "Scott" to stay for dinner. Having experienced dinner at our house, Scott knew enough to ask what we were having before he agreed to stay. He seemed relieved, even pleased, when I told him we were having steak. I didn't tell him it was Swiss steak. Moments later as he sat down to dinner, Scott looked downright betrayed. "I wonder

what my mom is cooking for dinner.”

Spinach-mashed potatoes happened to be on the menu the evening “Brian” was over. Low-fat creamed spinach mashed into potatoes is one of my son’s favorites—really. We have two mealtime rules at our house: try everything and keep your mouth shut, and not just while you chew. Of course, if you like it, you’re free to talk about it all you want. But our normally well-mannered guest was so stunned by the green heap on his plate that he couldn’t help himself. He compared the potatoes to something I cannot say in print. He went home hungry and I vowed to serve guacamole the next time he comes over—if he ever does.

“Michael” was polite but cautious as he tasted my split pea soup. He took tiny bites and chewed them as long as you’d chew a piece of bubble gum. (This isn’t normally necessary with split pea soup—not even mine.) But at least he was eating—until the ladybug found its way from the great outdoors to the middle of his whole-wheat toast. Michael’s eyes widened, his spoon clattered to the table, and he ate no more. The ladybug never did try the soup—as far as we know.

One evening I succumbed to macaroni (whole wheat) and cheese for my son and his overnight guest, “Tim.” But I topped it off with homemade chicken strips—white meat coated in wheat germ. Tim was polite, but, oddly enough, not very hungry. The next day when he joined us for lunch, I served the remainder of the chicken. He sat down at the table, raised his eyebrows, and said, “Do you always eat your leftovers?”

I’m sure he told his parents about lunch later while foraging through their refrigerator. My son tells me what he eats at other people’s homes, and it’s almost always better. He went on and on once about the cold cut sandwiches he’d had at “Brian’s” house. They were

made with white bread—a delicacy.

I know what you're thinking; the food might not be the problem. It may be the skill of the chef that led to the above incidents. And you may be right. I once served spaghetti to my son and his buddy "David." I didn't feel good about this. For one thing, it was leftover spaghetti. And while the sauce was the kid-friendly canned variety, it was supplemented with extra green peppers, onions and mushrooms. But I'm thrifty—and lazy—so that's what we were having for lunch. Unbelievably, our seven-year-old guest ate three helpings and then said five little words that endeared him to me forever: "Can I have your recipe?"

Wouldn't you know it? My husband had made the spaghetti.

Winning the Birthday Party Competition

If you ask me, children's birthday parties have gotten out of hand. I don't even recall having a birthday party when I was a child, let alone renting a swimming pool for one. Of course, we didn't have a swimming pool to rent in my hometown. We had a lake. And you didn't have to rent it, but you did have to chase the cows off the beach.

Also, my mother was a busy woman. There were ten children in my family. One does not plan ten birthday parties per year unless one is a professional party planner.

Of course, I did attend birthday parties as a child. And I was once hurt deeply when, as I handed my gift to the birthday girl, she said with feeling, "I hope it's not another paint-by-number." I grew up in a very small town. The local hardware and drug stores had the only toy departments in town and I happen to know they both had fine selections of paint-by-number sets.

I was invited to a few other parties as a child, but far fewer than my son has attended in his short life. (Maybe because I had a reputation for giving paint-by-number sets.) Isaac has been to parties at arcades, hotels and fast food restaurants. He's been to swimming parties, skating parties, paintball parties and even a disco party. As a result, he always expects his mother to come up with something equally exciting. Poor thing; he has the

wrong mother.

My birthday party-deprived childhood left me completely unprepared to plan birthday parties that can compete with the modern variety. I've never even made what you could call a real birthday cake, and I see no reason to start now. That's why there are bakeries. I did put five candles in the peanut butter sandwich I made for Isaac's fifth birthday breakfast. He loves peanut butter sandwiches. And I don't make waffles either.

It doesn't mean I love him less. Here's what I tell people who make their children cakes in the shape of cartoon characters or choo-choo trains: "After work every day, I have just a few hours to spend with my son. I could spend that time making a birthday cake in the shape of a train, or I could get down on my hands and knees and actually play train with him. I choose the latter." I don't mention that I couldn't make a train cake if I tried.

Unfortunately, homemade theme cakes and matching party paraphernalia are an important part of birthday parties for the elementary school set. While I distributed store-bought birthday cake at one of my lackluster parties, a young guest told me that his mother actually makes his birthday cakes. I told him I love my son too much to do that to him.

The child persisted. "Usually," he said, "homemade tastes better."

I said, "That depends on whose home it was made in. Now eat your cake or I will."

Along with my lack of experience, birthday party horror stories add to my anxiety. At a birthday party thrown by some friends, a blindfolded guest missed the piñata and whacked another partygoer. A friend's daughter broke her arm at a birthday party. And a little boy brought unwanted guests to one of my nephew's parties: head lice.

Another issue for me is the gifts. Ten guests equal ten gifts and, while I'm sure he would disagree, I think my son needs more toys like I need more dirty dishes in my sink.

And then there's that small matter of being responsible for other people's children when I'm not sure I'm qualified to care for my own.

But above all, I'm intimidated by stories of sensational children's parties, where the parents rent a limousine, hire a celebrity entertainer or take all the guests to Disneyland. My idea of a good party is plenty of guacamole, which many children don't seem to appreciate.

How can I compete? I can't. Nevertheless, I've managed some semblance of a birthday party every year since my son was old enough to care. Here's how I did it:

The Fast Food Restaurant Option

On the advice of a friend, I called a fast food restaurant to plan Isaac's fifth birthday party. I was ecstatic to learn that the restaurant would provide not only kids meals but a birthday cake as well. Their play area would provide the entertainment for the kids. That left me responsible only for sending invitations and picking out the birthday gift—or using the toy in the kid's meal, which I'm ashamed to admit I actually considered.

Sounded easy enough but it was exhausting. Being in charge of eight five-year-olds is like supervising a roomful of grasshoppers. Still, it was a success by my criteria: no body parts were broken. Nobody wanted his gift back. And nobody wanted his mother before the party was over. At least no one mentioned it if he did, and members of this particular demographic group are not known for keeping their thoughts to themselves.

Even the birthday cake was a hit. It may not have looked like a choo-choo train or a cartoon character, but it was decorated magnificently ... with the logo of a certain popular fast food restaurant.

The Rent-An-Activity Option

Another year, I booked the party at a bowling alley. I did have some concerns—many small feet and many large bowling balls in the same room, to name one. But what could be more fun for a group of first graders than dropping large balls onto a shiny, hardwood floor?

This party might have been a success except for one thing. Four parents who had not bothered to RSVP brought their kids anyway—and then left. Suddenly we had nine children but only one bowling lane. This did allow the kids plenty of time for activities between bowling. Unfortunately, we hadn't planned any.

The Sleepover Option

A sleepover is one of the least expensive children's birthday parties you can have—unless you count pain and suffering. And thus far this has been my son's favorite kind of party. I do not share his enthusiasm. For reasons I don't recall from my own childhood, when you're young it's a luxury to stay up late and feel miserable the next day.

Everyone knows a sleepover is not a sleepover. It could more accurately be called a layover, a brief layover. The only ones sleeping during a sleepover are the parents of the guests—not that they don't deserve it.

Even knowing the truth, many parents, beaten down by their child's pleading, consent to sleepovers. If you find yourself in this situation, I have some tips to help your party stand up to the competition.

First of all, keep it small. At his most recent sleepover, my son had four boys stay the night. This is a good number. Still, for some reason, it seemed like many more.

Remain calm. It can be upsetting to have a child who is not your own run into your house screaming, "I am bleeding to death!" It's upsetting to hear your own child scream

that too, but you're better able to interpret his or her cries for the theatrics they are.

Use the television for the purpose for which it was intended: sedation. I'm not generally a fan of television, but a child's sleepover party is one time when it can be useful. Television is the opiate of the elementary school masses and it is a legal opiate. Use it.

Don't bother picking up until your guests have all gone home. Certainly nag the children to pick up after themselves but do it from your place on the couch. Picking up in a house full of children is like shoveling snow during a blizzard or drying off while you're still in the shower.

Play games at bedtime, but not board games, head games. Tell the children that certainly they may wake up as early as they wish, but if they are the first to wake up, they must lie perfectly still with their eyes closed tightly until everyone else is awake. Hopefully it will be at least 6 a.m. before they begin to wonder how they will know that everyone else is awake if they are all lying perfectly still with their eyes closed.

Finally, remember that, unlike other parties, a sleepover is not over when the guests go home. Plan on devoting a great deal of time and energy to putting your home back in order. Be prepared to spend the next few weeks returning miscellaneous items such as toys, sleeping bags, jackets and dirty socks to their owners. Expect the birthday person to be cranky, disagreeable and not the least bit appreciative in the days following the sleepover. And finally, count on him or her to ask for another one next year.

If This Is so Fun, Why Is Everyone Screaming?

An amusement park is, by definition, many people standing in line, waiting their turn to become nauseated and paying a lot of money for the privilege. Against my better judgment I have agreed to accompany my six-year old son to the spine-tingling, hair-raising world that is Snoopy Land, the amusement park at the Mall of America.

I'm not worried though. I've invited our 16-year-old Japanese exchange student to come along. Yukari, being young and adventurous, will go on the rides with Isaac and save me the trouble. I'll pay for their fun and look very generous while I relax on a bench and eat snow cones. It will be grand. That's my plan anyway.

Then Yukari informs me that while she's willing to try some rides, she doesn't really like that sort of thing. It's clear she's assuming I'll ride with Isaac. Uh-oh. I guess I didn't make it clear why I brought her along.

Isaac gets excited riding the glass elevator on our way to Snoopy Land. In a last ditch effort to save myself, I say, "Hey, we can ride this as much as we want—and it's *free*." He thinks I'm kidding.

Moments later we're standing in line and I'm listening to the screaming and watching in horror as people are tossed willy-nilly by one machine or another. And I realize it goes

against every instinct in me to fall from high places or spin out of control. People who enjoy roller coasters, bungee jumping and the like clearly have underdeveloped survival instincts and should be closely supervised. My son falls into this category—no pun intended. And apparently I’m the one who’s going to have to supervise him.

Right off he wants to try a ride that turns an entire audience upside down and swings them around like a toy in the hands of a toddler. I try to reason with him. “If it’s so fun, why is everyone screaming?”

I feel queasy just watching. I get the same effect if I ride too long in the back seat of a moving car. I see no reason to pay for it.

Thankfully Isaac doesn’t quite measure up to the height mark, the line that one must surpass in order to get on the ride. “Aw, that’s too bad,” I say, feeling hopeful. Maybe there’ll be others he can’t ride. Then we discover he’s plenty tall for the roller coaster. And he squeals with excitement for the duration.

I weep.

At the bottom we’re offered the opportunity to buy a candid snap shot of our adventure in return for the rest of our vacation money. My son looks like he just saw Santa Claus. I look like I just saw something unrecognizable on my dinner plate. I don’t buy the photo.

Next we head for the Log Chute, an “unforgettable four-minute, water-borne expedition, traveling up, around and through a 70-foot mountain,” or so the promotional material says.

Log riders survive (one hopes) two dramatic plunges, the last one being forty feet down, directly into a lake. It’s hard for me to muster much enthusiasm; I had whiplash once, and it wasn’t that great.

Then Yukari points out quite accurately, but too late for us to change our minds, that our logs don't have seat belts. I put on my seat belt every time I get in a car, and I've never plunged even close to forty feet while driving. Isaac tells us that if we crash on the log chute we're probably better off falling out. Neither one of us is reassured.

We're at the top of the last forty-foot drop and Yukari says with feeling, "I don't want to do this!" I don't either, but at this point, I don't see many options. I wonder if my insurance is up to date.

We survive the plunges and the roller coaster and an assortment of other costly contraptions. My son skips off the last one. I stagger off—wet, wobbly and broke. My head hurts. I have a stomachache and I feel like lying down.

He wants a chili dog and curly fries.