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**Weekend
Getaways**

15 GREAT ESCAPES
PAGE 85

TORONTO LIFE

Baby Invasion

*They're taking over our bars,
restaurants and sidewalks*

THE STROLLER MAFIA vs. THE CITY

by KATRINA ONSTAD



\$4.95 MAY 2008
torontolife.com

05



Hipster parents are clogging
cafés with king-size strollers
and inflicting their unruly toddlers
on the childless masses.
Is grown-up space a thing of the past?

**A not entirely impartial report
on the battle for downtown**

Baby Wars

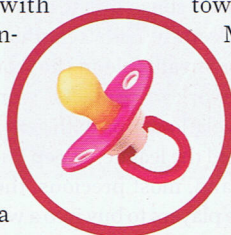
The Stroller Showdown

PULP KITCHEN is a small 24-seat vegetarian restaurant and juice bar in Leslieville, where strollers dot the sidewalks

like giant jelly beans. On a summer day in 2006, Julie Forrest entered the restaurant with her friend Karen Green and their two infant daughters to get some salads and juice to go. It was late in the morning, and no one else needed to be served.

Instead of a big welcome, the hipster behind the counter directed a frosty eye at the babies in their strollers. "It was a definite F-you look," recalls Forrest.

A few weeks later, when she walked by, Forrest saw a handwritten sign on the door: "Attn, parents with baby strollers. Our restaurant is tiny! We have parking for only one stroller inside (but not in the dining area). Thanks!"



Forrest's neighbourhood, south of Queen near Logan, is a place of class confusion: she can buy direct-trade organic coffee and drink it while watching a heavily armed police squad circling a house across her street to halt a drug-related kidnapping. These are the realities of modern downtown life that play out on her blog, Metro

Mama, and the blog is right where she headed after her salad snub. Without naming Pulp Kitchen, Forrest posted a picture of the sign and her take on it: "What pisses me off is that I think they have signs like this because they think kids (and parents) aren't cool. These too cool for school Queen Street joints don't want the babes spoiling their image."

The post became the talk of the 'hood, generating a flurry of like-minded responses. "It's pure discrimination if you ask me," said one. "And if they said the same thing about a wheelchair, they'd

BY KATRINA ONSTAD





be in pretty big doo-doo."

A sole post—from what appeared to be the only male weighing in—rose to Pulp's defence: "If the restaurant says it's tiny and has room for one stroller, how is that not a matter of fact [rather than] an indication of anti-mom attitude?" He got an emotional four-point response from Forrest's friend Green: "Completely reduced accessibility is a reality of life with a baby. Being turned away from a neighbourhood restaurant in the middle of the day because you have a baby should not be."

Two years later, while the restaurant has removed the sign, Leslieville parents continue to boycott Pulp Kitchen. "People still talk about it," a mom with a toddler told me. "It's one of those questions of entitlement. Are parents entitled to go wherever they want? Are some places entitled not to cater to them?"

All Toronto parents have stories about how their neighbourhoods fail to accommodate families, and the stories are traded like baseball cards in moms' groups, on parenting blogs, at the drop-ins and in the parks. Parents want Toronto: the question is, does Toronto want them?

The Birth of the Hipster Parent

THE CLASHES BETWEEN new parents and non-parents is a result, in part, of a mini-baby boom. In 2005, Canadians recorded the highest number of births in seven years. Women in the 30 to 34 age bracket are largely the responsible parties, accounting for 31.4 per cent of those 2005 births, with another 14.5 per cent attributed to mothers between 35

Richard Norman, 40
Activist and Web developer
Riel, 3

HIGH PARK

I'm a father with joint custody, but both Riel's mother and I work hard to make our ethics transparent to our son. We recently took him to the D8 Rally for Kyoto and, of course, to Earth Day. We ride my bike or the TTC everywhere, and sometimes people can give us looks if Riel acts out. A lot of people don't appreciate that a kid is a kid and has every right to be following the rules of what kids do.

and 39. For the first time, the over-30s outnumber younger mothers. This new generation of parents has money to spend, and many are electing to spend it in the downtown neighbourhoods where they lived in their 20s. They don't want to move to the suburbs, or even north of Dupont. They like the diversity, the vibrancy, the idea of downtown living. They want to make Toronto a city that fits them with kids like it fit them before kids.

I had my first baby at the end of 2003, at age 33, and my second less than two years later. When I ventured out of the second postnatal cocoon, I encountered a barely recognizable, loudly churning baby culture. Suddenly, my 2003 Peg-Pérego was a relic, the eight-track of strollers. In fact, strollers weren't called strollers anymore; the genericized trademark was Bugaboo (like Kleenex or Thermos), and they cost \$1,200. These Euro baskets drifted over Queen Street, smooth as hovercrafts, while I huffed, pushing my dino-stroller un-ergonomically through the snow. New inventions were everywhere. A mom on the playground asked me, "Have you tried the Ergo baby carrier?" What she meant was, "Why do you persist in wearing a Baby-Björn? How retro?"

My first baby and I had hung out in publicly funded Early Years Centres. These slightly worn drop-ins for parents and kids were functional and fine, usually housed in musty schools crammed with chewed toys and hippie-ish women leading bobble-headed babies in "Swim, Little Fishies." By kid number two, we had the option of a private, \$7 drop-in with Japanese lanterns on College Street. I could get childminding and a facial at a Queen Street organic spa. The baby yoga of my first maternity leave was passé; now it was all about baby salsa and baby massage. Storefronts in my Queen West neighbourhood were filled with educational bamboo toys from Sweden. The moms all had blogs.

Today babies blanket the downtown. Parenting coaches and eco-birthday parties are the latest frontier. On Sunday mornings, the Dakota Tavern on Ossington is packed with honky-tonking toddlers dancing through Bluegrass Brunch. After a nap, they head to the Gladstone Hotel for an afternoon family singalong. Around the corner from my house, across from Trinity Bellwoods Park, is Ella & Elliot, a kids' store carrying once hard-to-find European imports. There, a new parent can pick up an oval Stokke crib system (\$1,270) from Norway (ovals did not exist when I had my first child) and a new stroller that makes the Bugaboo look like a Gremlin. It's called the Xplory (\$1,150), and it is a cross between a spider and the robot from *Short Circuit*. "Not everyone is brave enough to try it," says Christian Imler, the young Roncesvalles father who runs Ella & Elliot with his wife, Suzanne O'Leary. "But once a few moms get into it, others will follow."

I am somewhere in the middle of the hipster parent spectrum, halfway between appalled and complicit. I don't put my kids in T-shirts that only

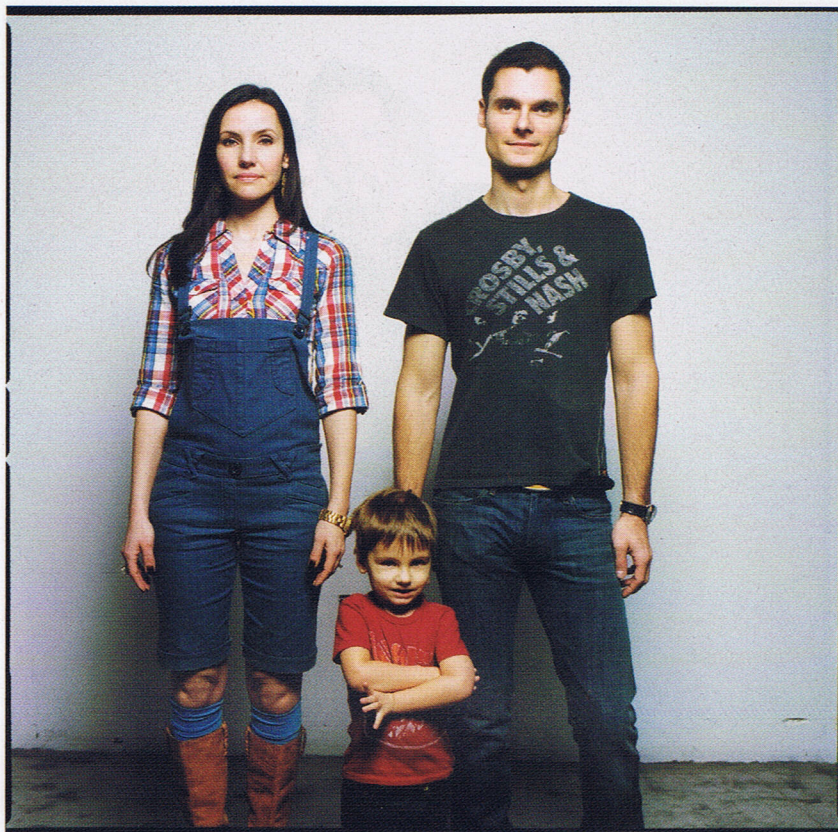
adults find funny, or worse, that turn them into junior culture jammers (one T-shirt I hate, from the anti-vaccine parents, declares "Mercury-free baby!"). Nor do I dress like a kid myself, though at the Saturday open gym in my local community centre, I've seen moms with little girl bangs in T-shirts bearing creatures from the hip-hop kids' hit *Yo Gabba Gabba!* I don't believe my children belong at Jamie Kennedy Wine Bar. We are not above driving to East Side Mario's in Mississauga because they give the kids crayons and colouring books, and we can park there easily. Yes, we bought a car. How uncool.

Still, my partner and I have—with mounting futility—tried to maintain some semblance of what we consider good taste in our child rearing. Hence, my son does have an extremely pretentious T-shirt with the Velvet Underground and Nico banana on it. Our house is filled with the multiculti roots stylings of Brooklyn children's music superhero Dan Zanes and not the simpering Wiggles, whom I worked very hard to vanquish. But sometimes, at the park, I'll see a dad BlackBerrying in his Vote for Pedro T-shirt—beer belly poking out—and I want to dissociate entirely. I shudder with shame at my generational indulgence.

Parents are a market, and marketing means lifestyle, an identity shaped by stuff. There's clearly something, well, immature about wanting a particular brand of stroller, or broadcasting your good taste through your kid's wardrobe. In his book *Rejuvenile*, L.A. writer Christopher Noxon suggests that in the uncertainty of life post-9/11, parents are reliving their adolescence through their children, clinging shamelessly to the pop culture detritus of their youth. He writes, "Some rejuveniles admit that their attraction to kid stuff is at least partially driven by a desire to stay young in a culture that equates being young with being cool and being old with being irrelevant." (I would add, as a shout-out to Freud, that not letting go of childhood is also kind of about not wanting to die. But maybe that's just me.)

For a particular type of middle-class, artsy, over-educated person, choosing to live downtown in your 20s is a rejection of what's perceived (fairly or unfairly) as the cookie-cutter suburban existence—a declaration that you haven't succumbed to the banality of life. But it's hard to reconcile the nonconformist coolio lifestyle with the reality of having children, which is, of course, the most biologically predictable, socially conformist act of all. A primal nesting instinct takes over—the shopping and renovating and joining of on-line neighbourhood groups. Hipster parents prefer to pretend that the big nest of the city, the one they landed in in their 20s, remains the same despite the addition of their kids.

"I didn't turn into a suburbanite who loves Winnie the Pooh just because I got knocked up," says one Parkdale mom. "My personality hasn't changed, my tastes haven't changed. Tension



Penelope Giaouris, 36
Owner of Smoochie Baby
Che Stipanovich, 33
Photographer
Max, 3

THE BEACH

E We went to Tomi-Kro one Friday night, and it was crowded so we sat at the bar. We drank wine, and Max had apple juice. Then Max had a bit of a tantrum—he kept asking for more ice. The bartender and all the staff were cool, but we got a mixed reaction from other people—a lot of really dirty looks in that passive-aggressive Toronto way, like they thought we were bad parents. We used to live in the East Village in New York, where most restaurants see a lot more kids, and children are just accommodated in general. They're a lot more accepted there.

emerges because parents see themselves as the same people, and other people see them as something totally different."

When Baby Boutiques Outnumber Bars

MARLA GOOD is a new-model Toronto parent: compact and pretty, with the groovy-yet-practical uniform of Converse runners and red lipstick, a plastic barrette in her dark auburn bob. Good was selling vintage jewellery and antiques at an auction house before she had her daughter, Josephine, a high-energy four-year-old who enjoys watching her graphic designer father practise the bass (his band sometimes plays Lee's Palace). Good and her husband bought their two-storey house in Leslieville six years ago for \$197,000. Now it would probably sell for at least \$400,000, but they have no desire to leave. Unlike elsewhere in the downtown, houses here are relatively affordable, the wait-lists at day-cares shorter than in the west end; there's space in the swimming classes at the community centres.

Other parents who dream of moving but can't afford to have themselves to blame. Families are driving up the prices. Let's call it the Mary-Joseph theory: there's a baby coming, we'll take the barn. Forced to make the most of the neighbourhood they bought into in their pre-child days, they're turning their neighbourhoods into child-friendly zones.

If Good sees graffiti, she calls the police immediately. With the help of other residents and her city councillor, she has forced a new condo development to fit into the streetscape. Parents like her are legion in this neighbourhood; many of them share



membership in the Leslieville Yahoo! group. As we walk, Good stops and rearranges a city planter covered in holiday pine boughs; one of the Yahoo! group's initiatives is seasonal beautifying.

When Good moved to the neighbourhood, it was filled with empty storefronts and bars for career drinkers. They've been replaced with cafés and such kid boutiques as Baby on the Hip. Inside the clean, sweet-smelling space (can they bottle the scent of baby?), \$100 crocheted monkeys and organic crib sheets await homes. A very pregnant woman is quizzing the salesperson about baby bottles: "I know these Born Free bottles are bisphenol A-free, but isn't glass better?"

On the north side of Queen, the front door of the women's clothing store Doll Factory by Damzels opens to a wall of kid stuff: black onesies, an AC/DC feeding set, T-shirts reading "Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner" and "My Daddy Drinks Because I Cry." The rest of the store is taken up by designer clothes, such as the brightly printed dresses made by store owners Kelly Freeman and Rory Lindo (Kate Hudson and Kirsten Dunst have worn their designs). Freeman and Lindo opened the store in late 2005, fully aware of the neighbourhood baby boom; they kept the aisles wide for better stroller accessibility. Since opening, they've tripled their quantity of kids' merchandise, which now occupies a quarter of the space. Freeman says that some days, the store is wall-to-wall moms, babies crawling everywhere. Their market, says Freeman, is aging hipsters.

"We know that just because you're over 30 and have a kid, doesn't mean you don't want to rock," says Lindo.

Adina Goldman, 35
Web producer

Chris Stevenson, 40
Furniture designer
and builder

Gabriel, 1

WEST QUEEN WEST

When I was hugely pregnant, few people would give me their seat on the Queen streetcar—like they were practising selective blindness. These days I have a big, honkin' all-weather stroller that only just fits onto the streetcar; the driver or another passenger has to help me on and off. So when people have to squeeze by or when Gabriel starts screaming, I view it as payback.

Over time, when neighbourhoods are infiltrated by families like Good's, they become homogenized; the Beach wasn't always the land of golden retrievers and Subaru Outbacks. All across the south end of the city, houses that had been divided into apartments are being sold and converted back into single-family homes. What emerges in these family-driven downtown neighbourhoods, over a long period of time, is effectively the kind of monoculture that happens instantly in the suburbs when a group of economically similar people buy into a development while it's being built.

As one father in Seaton Village told me, area residents have watched their formerly age-diversified street grow younger and wealthier. The elderly move out, and the families move in, with renovation teams in tow. "There's a joke," he says. "The for sale sign goes up one week, the sold sign the next week, and the next week comes the Dumpster."

Inside the Mommy Bubble

JEN LAWRENCE, a blonde with a large, available laugh, is a former banker and one of Toronto's pioneer mommy bloggers. She started her blogs T.O. Mama and MUBAR (Mothered Up Beyond All Recognition) after the birth of her first child, back in the dark ages of 2004, when there were very few on-line destinations for mothers seeking tips on navigating the city with kids, or wanting to share intimate accounts of breast-feeding struggles and postpartum depression. She's recently pulled back from the mom blogging, in part because she was inundated with requests to advertise baby goods in her posts. "The mommy blogs used to be about talking honestly with other moms who are having similar experiences," she says. "But now so many of them are just billboards. You never know if what you're reading is an ad."

These days, Lawrence is concentrating on writing a book and tending a more hobby-ish site about shopping called Dwell on These Things. In January, she put up a casual post about going into an upmarket furniture store (without her kids) and being impressed when the sales clerk didn't come down hard on a roaming toddler who broke a cheap vase. The next day, she woke up to a lengthy rant in her in-box: "I will let you know, as a manager of a high-end retail store in Toronto, that your 'mommy bubble' attitude is ruining the independent retail sector in this city. Maybe you should spend some of your money on parenting classes to train you and your children so you won't have to question whether or not to take them into high-end establishments. Letting them run around in a store full of breakable expensive items is not acceptable behaviour. Popping out one or two brats did not give you a free womb pass to the world."

Lawrence laughed it off, but she's familiar with the "mommy bubble" epithet. Toronto isn't Stockholm, where restaurants and stores often provide babysitters to look after your kids while you

browse. When Lawrence takes her kids, aged two and four, into a store, she expects a hard time. "If you walk in pregnant, they get dollar signs in their eyes. Walk in with a child, and it's a very different story." She recalls being escorted out of a flower and gift shop because her baby was eating a rice cracker in her stroller. "She was strapped in, and it wasn't a chili dog, but it didn't matter. They made me feel awful," says Lawrence. "What are you supposed to do when you have a little baby—stay locked in your house all day? These stores make you feel like you can't be part of the world."

For years, I'd walk by a home decorating store on Queen West called Bullet—the kind of place with a lot of chrome lamps and giant leather cubes—and read a sign in the window: "No SUV-type strollers, please" (the store has since moved to the Danforth, but the sign remains). Every time I saw that sign, I thought about the descriptor "SUV" and how it connotes something specific: space sucking, aggressive and, above all, entitled.

I get it. The casual entitlement of some parents is pervasive and nauseating: I've watched a little girl lick books in a store as Dad talked on his cellphone, and I've seen a child run around a restaurant pulling napkins off people's laps while her parents shrugged. Sheryl Kirby, the editor of foodie Web site Taste T.O., has kids herself, but even she's posted about "self-involved" parents in restaurants: "I was at a brunch place recently where a toddler made it out the door and onto the front sidewalk because his parents and their dining companions were too busy comparing tattoos to keep an eye on him."

This is a parent-zilla: the kind of parent who conducts him- or herself like a bride expecting everyone else's servitude simply for the great accomplishment of being a bride. "Parents today get really wrapped up in their own consciousness," says Marla Good. "You have this kid, and it's a huge deal. You kind of expect the world to accommodate you."

But for many parents, getting a kid through a meal in a restaurant is a source of both immense pride—I made it! I am not different from who I was!—and immense stress. Nowhere does a parent feel more self-conscious than in a restaurant, where one's parenting skills are displayed for judgment. When a one-year-old is practising her newfound *Psycho* shrieking skills in the middle of lunch at the Drake, your identity as a parent is inescapable: Hello, all. I traded the mimosas and lingering coffees you are currently enjoying for this, and I suck at it. Now that such reality shows as *Supernanny* and *Wife Swap* have made everyone a child-rearing expert, the out-of-control kid is an even greater offence—and a mark of failure.

Three years ago, I tried to enjoy an early dinner at Terroni on Queen West with my first baby strapped into a high chair. He was wriggling to get out, making bleating go-for-freedom sounds. In one miraculous moment, he wrenched free, letting out a whoop just as he hurled a piece of slimy bread at the wall of the booth, where it stuck like goopy toilet paper.



Alex Lalonde, 36
Awards director, *Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television*
Luca, 3½

PARKDALE

While I was on maternity leave, I got kicked out of one of the upscale furniture stores on Queen West. The salesperson asked me to take my 'SUV stroller outside where it belongs.' I said, 'I was interested in those lamps but I guess I'll leave now.' I haven't shopped there since. It's true my stroller was a large three-wheeler, but they could have just asked me to leave it at the front. In the end, it was their loss. I found basically the same lamp for way less at HomeSense.

Mortified, I rushed to remove him and get outside. A trim young woman in her early 20s waiting nearby for a seat smiled—sarcastically, I think—and name-checked the favoured strategy from *Supernanny*: "Time for the naughty step!"

In the right kind of mid-level Toronto restaurant (parent favourites are Kubo Radio and Bonjour Brioché on Queen East, Mitzi's Sister on Queen West), customers and staff are relaxed about kids, particularly if parents follow the unwritten rules: come before the rush, get down on your hands and knees to pick up the mess, and leave a big tip. The alternative? Banish your family to the land of triptych menus, extreme fajitas, tableside magic tricks and diminished hipster credibility.

Who Owns the Park?

NOWHERE IS the uneasy coexistence of parents and nons clearer than in the hotly contested public sphere of the park. Withrow, Greenwood and Trinity Bellwoods have all had high-profile faceoffs between dog and baby owners.

David Mills took his irritation to the next level. Mills is a self-described "information architect" with two kids under six; his wife runs an independent downtown bookstore. For years, he says he's seen dogs running free during on-leash hours at Jean Sibelius park in the west Annex. Once, while playing soccer with his toddler, a boxer ran up and nearly knocked her down. His daughter screamed and burst into tears. Mills yelled to the owner to leash his dog. The guy smiled—this detail infuriates Mills—and casually said, "Don't worry about it."



"She was definitely afraid," he says. "And the owners just laugh. They think those dogs are their children, but I tell them, 'Your dog doesn't grow up to be a taxpayer. My daughter will, and who do you think will be looking after you when you're old? My daughter and her taxes.'"

As is the tendency of most 30-somethings, Mills took his anger on-line and helped start a community group called Play at the Park, which advocates better dog control in green spaces. Many dog owners, according to Mills, are oblivious to their pets' tearing up grass and taking over public space. After two years of consultation between dog owners, the dog-less, and parks and recreation officials, the dogs of Jean Sibelius lost their off-leash hours in January. An appeal is under way.

For Gillian Morton, a dog walker and member of the Annex Dog Owners Association who uses Sibelius regularly, the decision was disastrous. She believes city councillors and judges favour parents, and notes, like a police officer talking about a gang, that parents are "highly organized." Interestingly, Mills complains that the dog owners are "highly organized," because they have no kids and far more time to lobby for dog rights; Mills uses the word "entitled" to describe dog owners, and Morton uses it to describe parents.

"My needs are the same as those of parents. I need green space, too," says Morton. "I believe that dog-child interaction is a very positive thing, but some people don't want their children to play where a blade of grass has been touched by dog poop." This may be a dig at a section of the Play at the Park Web site on the waste issue, which states, somewhat

Catherine Lash, 41
Wedding company owner

Stephen Bulger, 44
Gallery owner

Adelaide, 3½

WEST QUEEN WEST

We take Adelaide to the Gladstone regularly. Sometimes on Sunday nights at around five we'll go to hang out and hear The Backstabbers play. We once took her there for New Year's Eve and discovered at least eight other families with young kids. The parents were drinking beer and the kids were all up front dancing on the stage. The key is that you don't stay too long. Finish the nachos, dance a little and you're out of there. If you have kids, you can easily out-stay your welcome.

hyperbolically, "There is always a residue that gets left behind. When people play ball or come into contact with it and put their fingers in their mouth, it is like having feces for a snack."

The entitled parent easily becomes the militant parent, lashing out at the restaurant that doesn't serve organic milk or the singleton who doesn't help get the stroller up the streetcar steps. Parental fear is born of love—Please, world, take care of my child—but the city can't contain all this anxiety. The result is tall, righteous walls rising between us.

When Toddlers Go Clubbing

IT'S TWO O'CLOCK on a grey winter afternoon when we hit the nightclub. In the entrance of Circa, in the Entertainment District, my partner and I are trying to keep track of the two kids we know in a sea of kids we don't. We crane as our two- and four-year-old bob toward the giant escalators and the twinkly lights upstairs, the pulse of "Tainted Love" luring them—a song that has been irritating me for three decades now. Swarms of nannies from a local baby-sitting company offer to take our jackets. Rows of tiny pink and black snow boots and strollers line the coat check; a massive bar is fully stocked with bottles of Jack Daniel's and tequila.

This Sunday afternoon Andy Warhol Factory Party is the brainchild of Rebecca Brown, a former theatre director and a very pregnant mother of one. For two years, she's been partnering with bars and clubs downtown and throwing parties for families, charging \$10 per adult, \$5 per kid. Brown calls her company Bunch, a name she chose because it evokes family, but in a new way. Plus, she thinks it's a sweet little word.

When Brown had Sam, who's now three, she was desperate to do fun things with him that didn't involve trademarked cartoon characters. In the afternoons, when her engineer husband got home from work, they would put on music and dance around the house with the baby. This gave Brown the idea of throwing a big party where parents and kids could rock out together. With a friend, she reserved the main-floor bar at the Drake in February 2006. They sent out a notice via e-mail to about 100 people—parents they knew, parents the parents they knew knew. Brown was shocked when 800 people showed up; the line curled around the corner onto Beaconsfield. Inside, disco balls spun and kids were ripping around the main floor in satin and silver. Recalls one mom, who had a great time, "It was like a nightclub, but with midgets."

Since then, Bunch has thrown family parties in various venues across the city, each one a kind of ironic variation of historical-trendy touchstones that defined urban parents in their pre-child years: the disco party, the punk party, the Warhol party. Bunch also hosts a mellower "salon" at the Arts & Letters Club on Elm Street, billed as an event for the "kiddelligentsia." Members of Broken Social Scene have led a songwriting workshop with Bunch kids.

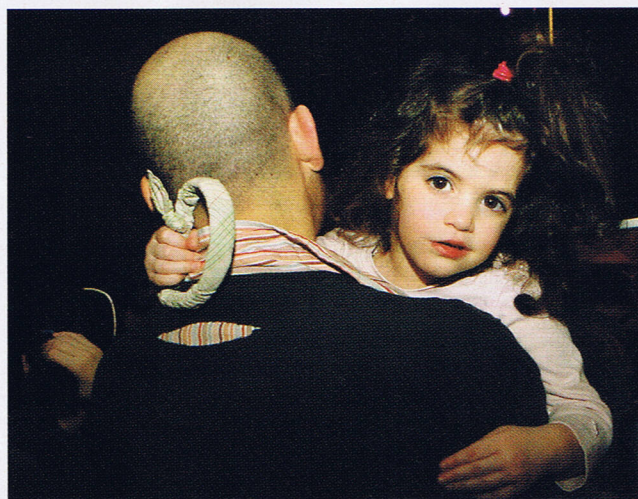
Little boys and girls write stories and do readings.

Rebecca Brown has an eyes-narrowed intensity when she talks, rubbing her pregnant belly. She is well aware of the rejuvenile theory, and how her bubbly parties can be interpreted as the worst kind of modern parenting, an obscene projection of adult interests onto unknowing children. She doesn't buy it.

"I think this generation of parents has made a serious investment in the more soulful aspects of life, in quality of life," she says. "Parents want to have amazing experiences with their kids. They want to be part of a community. It's about sharing your interests with your kids just as you share theirs."

Up the escalator, the club is divided into sections: in one area, kids and their parents are dancing, mostly to '80s music. There's no Wiggles, but there is some Michael Jackson, some hip hop. Shirley Temples are free; Blue Hawaiian slushies cost \$3.50. Along the periphery of one dance floor, kids are paint-screening images of the word "love" and the Warhol banana onto big pieces of newsprint. My kids are eager to do this, but the lines are too long, just as they are at the giant chalkboard sculpture. Finally, they find two white plastic rabbits on the floor—part of the regular club decor—and seem content to sit there with their \$1 cookies, oblivious to the cigarettes hanging from the rabbits' mouths, which probably seem funny after several Jägermeisters but are just creepy in the daytime.

I admire Brown's idealistic take on this kind of gathering. I have never met a parent—no matter how goateed or Bugabooed—who wasn't trying, in all sincerity, to create a childhood of invention and grace for his or her kid. But the Warhol party is grating, filled with screaming children and an ungodly stench of old beer and, possibly, vomit. I realize, through my headache, that as much as we might try to shoehorn our kids into the pop interests of our pasts, they don't really fit. Kids don't care if they're at a Dora Live show or a Broken Social Scene concert; they bring their chaos and curiosity and joy everywhere they go. My toddler has managed to make a



CLUB KIDS

A Warhol-themed party for families at Circa

party out of a passport office.

The thing is, it's more fun to do adult things without kids. I know I will continue to take my kids to brunch as a kind of training exercise for when they're older, but it's not really fun to corral a two-year-old before you've had your coffee. It's work. Parenting is work, no matter how hiply it's dressed up. Kids don't really fit into the kind of narrow, *High Fidelity* framework that we cultivated so carefully in our 20s. They fit into the most profound places in our lives, burrowing down deep where it matters, leading us toward selflessness, love, meaning. But they are not so great at processing the superficial. Kids will wear "iPooped" T-shirts, and they won't mind, but they don't really fit them.

My four-year-old son loves Spider-Man though he has never seen the movie, an obsession born entirely of schoolyard gossip. He doesn't care about the KolKid retro-'50s alphabet cards I strung up in his bedroom. He wants to glue a picture of Spider-Man to his shabby chic vintage dresser. After those initial hazy months when they're babies—essentially luggage you can dress up and place around the room—they start to sprawl. Quickly, they develop their own passions that may or may not have anything to do with their parents, or with the Andy Warhol impersonator who just wandered past my daughter.

My partner hates it at Circa.

"Why do we want to expose them to the shallowest, worst aspects of ourselves?" he says. "I had kids so I'd never have to go to a nightclub again."

Our daughter is holding up her hands under a strobe light, laughing at the patterns. Our son is weeping because he can't get a moon balloon off the ceiling.

I try to temper my partner's irritation. I tell him to look at the parents, holding their kids under silver balloons, dancing their sweetly self-conscious dances. Many of them—most of them—look tired. Man, they look tired. Dads look as if they were dragged out of foxholes minutes before. Moms peer out from tight faces, eyes darting everywhere, making sure no one has fallen over a railing or crawled onto the DJ table. "Look at them," I say. "They're just parents." **END**