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## What We Learned About Parenting At Starbucks

April 15, 2016



By Kathryn Streeter

When our son was 4, he fell in love. The object of his affection was voluptuous—far too old for him. He saw her constantly. She had long flowing hair and intense eyes. He called her his “little love.” The crown she wore lent an air of power while sleek fins encircling her projected steady but enticing mystery.

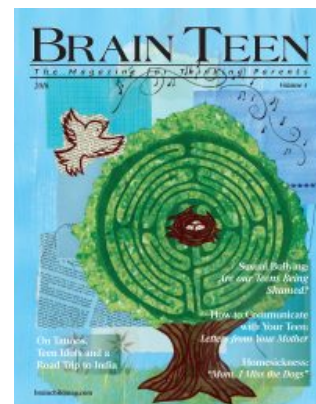
The fact that our son was smitten by the Starbucks Mermaid was our fault.

One of our oldest family traditions is spending Saturday mornings at the local coffee shop. Started long before kids came along, this easy-going tradition was a sweet opening to weekends. We didn’t have a lot of money and the coffee shop fit our wallet. Wherever we lived, we targeted the local, indie or chain, just as long as we could reach it by foot. Whether sunny and blistering hot, wintry and blowing icy winds, we’d wake up and sleepily trudge towards the coffee shop hand in hand.

When we started having kids, going out for coffee each Saturday morning was a tradition we were determined to continue. We selfishly coveted this entrée into the weekend as a young couple and didn’t want kids to change this beloved routine.

Looking back, it was inevitable that our son’s first love would be the Starbucks logo. At our Washington, DC neighborhood Starbucks, we’d wolf down our weekly dark-roast coffee and cinnamon scone with our baby son and his slightly older sister in tow. It was exhausting. No longer a peaceful, relaxing way to begin the weekend, our treasured tradition had been turned upside-down. It would have been easy to let this tradition die with the arrival of kids.

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Yet, we persisted, trying to roll with the times.

When the kids morphed into fidgety toddlers, we'd pull out toys. We started talking about what restaurant manners looked like because coffee shops offered a forgiving environment in which to begin these lessons

As they grew, we adapted, stashing coloring books and crayons, drawing paper for doodling, designing mazes or gradually, for hangman tournaments. We would pair up, one parent, one kid and go the distance, watching our little ones work with letters and spelling.

Once, R-E-C-Y-C-L-E was the word that stumped the boys' team, handing them a loss. I remember this hangman tournament well because by then, we had moved to Dubai on short-term assignment, where recycling was very much a cultural afterthought. After consulting with my daughter, we decided "recycle" was apropos for the championship round.

"Dad, think harder!" our 7-year-old son pleaded.

Time passed and the kids grew. Their tastes changed, resulting in them branching out, trying new items on the menu. Previously, they had faithfully ordered chocolate chip cookies because they knew that on Saturday mornings, we lifted parental law regarding what made for an appropriate breakfast.

"It's up to you. One thing. You decide."

As they grew older, they took to dabbling:

*A cinnamon roll, please.*

*Izze soda, please.*

*Pumpkin-bread, please.*

*A hot chocolate with lots of whipped cream, please.*

*A vanilla latte, please.*

*A yogurt parfait, please.*

*An egg-sausage breakfast sandwich, please.*

*A macchiato, please.*

*An Americano, please.*

Time sped by and one Saturday we suddenly realized that the day we had been pining for had arrived: we were having conversations with our kids. We realized we could actually finish our sentences without meltdowns, outbreaks, or an impatient, *is it time to go yet?* They answered in fully formed sentences with increasing thoughtfulness, making eye contact. In fact, we were experiencing intentional, meaningful time together regardless of the topic of conversation.

Sometimes we'd just chill and review the week. Sometimes we'd address what we needed to accomplish that day. Sometimes we'd talk current events and big ideas. Sometimes we'd have a rare moment when our blooming tweens needed to really talk, letting us into their world. Away from the distractions of the home, there was more space.

This basic tradition was mercifully adaptable, able to accommodate the various seasons of family life. As our family moved around from Dubai to London, Indianapolis to Austin, this tradition followed us, so easily transferable into new surroundings.

An old friend, this was a tradition we came to count on, a comfort during often painful adjustments.

Yet, from its infancy, the core point of this family tradition—to hang out, celebrate and support each other—remained unchanged. With amazement, I watched as we grew closer to our kids through our steady and persistent Saturday habit. We intentionally had built a routine which had serendipitously brought ease to our parent-child relationships. Additionally, our kids had grown close as siblings.

Now in high school, coffee on Saturday mornings starts much later, and sometimes it doesn't happen at all because teens need their sleep. And that is ok. There's no question good things are happening because the kids will often text us, asking to meet up after school for coffee. Or for family happy hour where dad orders a beer, mom orders a glass of red wine and kids suck down soda, another form of caffeine. By this we know that our kids are choosing to hang out. Talk. Laugh.

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There's an element of trust. They know we're not going to ask for deep conversation in exchange for buying them a coke. Our little inexpensive outings—whether coffee or happy hour—are going to be whatever they end up being, no strings attached. Together, just hanging out as a little family.

Could it be that this tradition is in part responsible for the young adults I now see sitting across from me at Starbucks discussing the current presidential campaign?

We all want close family relationships. We all hope for strong relationships with our teens. Yet, if not careful, we can find ourselves going from day to day, week to week, living under the same roof but in every way disconnected from one another. Is it possible that intentionally putting everything aside to walk to the coffee shop together is also a path toward stronger family relationships?

I realize now that this simple tradition of hitting the coffee shop each week started something in motion long ago. Though I'm still trying to appreciate its fullness, its richness, its direct contribution to building the relationships we have today with our young adults, I'm thankful. Starting with Starbucks, this coffee shop routine helped our kids want to be with us—their parents. And that's no small thing.

*Kathryn Streeter's writing has appeared in publications including Literary Mama, Story|Houston, Scary Mommy, Mamalode and The Briar Cliff Review. Her essay is included in the best selling anthology "Feisty After 45." Connect with Kathryn on her [website](#), Twitter [@streeterkathryn](#) and Instagram [@kathrynstreeter](#).*

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OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS **Alysa Salzberg** • 3 years ago

This was a wonderful read that gives me so much hope (my son is currently in the toddler phase, so I related most to the gobbling your food/drinking your coffee as fast as possible before the next meltdown!). Thank you for that!

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Love this Kathryn, thanks...underlines the importance of being ourselves around our children, rather than trying to fit an ideal of parenthood. Well done on your engaged youngsters too!

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Thanks Catriona! Something about taking my time to write this out helped--I can say that honestly, there were times I wasn't sure how things were turning out. But I'm happy to say that laying low and letting the tweens develop into their full teen selves proved that indeed, something was happening. It may be different for every family, every situation. And that's ok. Every story has its own plot! This is just one.

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