



Melissa Chapman's Parenting Blog

Melissa Chapman and her brood of three live in the urban concrete jungle of NYC. In addition to blogging for WCBSTV.com, she writes for the Staten Island Advance "Kids in the City Column," and contributes to TimeOut NY Kids, She Knows, iVillage and writes a blog called "This Mom Wouldn't Be Caught Dead Wearing Mom Jeans."

Got a question, comment, concern, or idea for Melissa? [Click here](#) to send her your thoughts.



When Did Planning A Birthday Party Get So Intense?

My poor second child Jackson; my husband and I have always said being the second child, he's always gotten the shaft. While my daughter had two sittings in a portrait studio to capture the essence of her

babyhood, poor Jackson got a quickie one shot picture at Babies R Us. No wallet sized, or 5x 7's just one 8x10 which we just recently framed and hung up next to the shrine of baby pictures erected for our eldest daughter. When it came to birth announcements, we failed to procure any for him, and while my daughter had a first birthday party fit for royal consumption, poor Jackson just had his father, sister and me huddled around a \$15 dollar cake singing happy birthday.

As for his successive birthdays- well they've either been at his school or huddled around a cake in the kitchen. My husband has rationalized this by saying, "Oh he's too young to even comprehend or care about having a party in his honor," and because I was either too tired or lazy I kind of went along. Then last year when he turned four, he set the wheels in motion that for his fifth birthday we'd promise to throw him a superhero bash. And this Sunday he's finally getting a "real party" (as he's termed it) that will actually be in a space that doesn't include our kitchen or his classroom.

He's getting the whole shebang and while I am pleased as punch, my husband has tried everything in his power to cut corners wherever possible, as the bill for this fete continues to mount. Between the party bags, renting the gym, pizza, ice cream cake, snacks, sodas and paper goods the fees we've accrued could likely feed a small country for several weeks. In the midst of signing credit card receipts I wonder; as a five year old does he even appreciate all this hoopla and undertaking? Will he even remember it in a WEEK FROM NOW? And really what's so wrong with pin the tail on the donkey and a cupcake with a candle in it anyhow?!

Then the company www.youcake.com shipped us his personalized cake topper, which we will have Carvel place on a standard ice cream cake, and seeing him look at his mug staring back at him, on this cake topper, beside a dinosaur (one of his favorite characters to date... his little five year old hands are always clutching some sort of dinosaur figure and his bedding and room are filled to brim with all things dinosaur) I could feel his excitement building. He looked at me and said,

"Oh mommy I love it, thank you," and my heart it just plain old melted and I realized , right here, right now he appreciates it and that is enough for me.



My eldest "child" is turning 11 and I am ferklemp

My history with the canine species is marked by both trauma and a kind of rebirth. My relationship with my 11-year-old Shih Tzu, "Mellie," is one of the reasons every day feels like a gift—even if that gift is a small piece of poop that my furbaby has gotten stuck under her tail and smears lovingly

across my comforter.

When I was 5, my grandmother's husband had a dog named "Gingi" who I immediately felt was my soulmate from another mother...and father. During each visit I sat next to this mutt stroking her head, just content to be next her, for what I remember to be hours on end. And then one evening, while

petting her head, I felt a hot, wet sensation dripping down the side of my face. Somehow, unbeknownst to me Gingi had decided to scratch the entire left side of my face- she missed my eye by half an inch and did a pretty good job of roughing me up. I got several stitches, wore bandages for a while- and if you look really closely at my face, under a magnifying glass, you can see several leftover scars. Still, I loved this dog, and begged my mother and grandmother to let me continue to play with her.

My grandmother kept Gingi and life resumed, as did our weekly visits to my grandparents house and my one-on-one time with her. Then several months later after a day long Sunday afternoon as my 2-and-a-half-year-old sister was saying goodbye to Gingi, the dog jumped up on her and bit her, literally chewing off the entire center portion of her top lip. I was only 6 at the time and vaguely remember the exact succession of events that followed only; the blood seeping from my sisters' face, my grandmother screaming, my mother pouring soda on Gingi my father racing to get my baby sister to a hospital and my older sister and I being whisked off to a relative's house.

For years after that event, the mere mention of a dog literally sent me into a traumatic reliving of my sister's horrific experience. I had recurring nightmares about having my face mauled by dogs, chased by them and unable to save myself or my sister. For me, dogs had become the enemy: a species that could not be reasoned with or understood. And yet somewhere deep within me, I still longed for that initial companionship I had so briefly shared with Gingi, who immediately following the biting incident with my sister was whisked away to a "farm," which I now know was code word for "euthanization."

When I got married, I decided I was ready to face my fears- to stop crossing the street when a dog was coming toward me- and end this phobia. So my husband and I got a 3-month-old Shih Tzu, and my life has never been the same. Over the past 11 years she's not only helped me wrestle with my demons but has taught me about living in the present moment, soaking up happiness and well just being than any other experience, college course or book I've read.

It is inconceivable to me that she's been a part of the fabric of my life for a mere 11 years. Like with my human kids, I brush her teeth, need to stand on my head to get her to eat and, yes, need to watch her poop...really I do! And although she's never spoken to me, I feel as though we communicate in many ways, better than I do with humans. She's my constant companion, each morning so happy and eager to see me and lavish me with wet kisses. (My kids could learn a thing or two from her and so could my husband) and I'd do anything to have another 11 years with her.

I can't even fathom a time when she will not be with me, sitting beside me as I type on the computer, (and when I'm gone jumping in my chair waiting for me to return) she's helped me to be a more patient person, a better mother and her presence reminds me on a daily basis to appreciate the sweet here and now. I guess the greatest gift she's given me is that of time, understanding how fleeting and precious it is, and being mindful not to waste it on any of it...especially when it's negative. I just want more time, more vigorous tail wagging, more kisses, more snuggle time, more unconditional love, more of everything.

Because really isn't that all any of us really want anyway?

All I want for Valentine's Day is anything but another #1 mom mug

These past few weeks have been tough, to say the very least. With my father-in-law's passing, the foundation of my marriage has taken an awful beating and the resulting fall-out with my in-laws is a sad consequence.

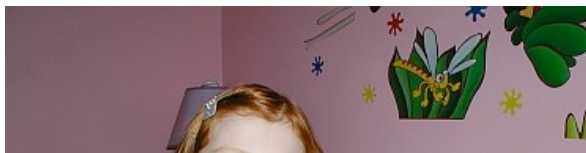
While my husband and I are trying to get through this strange period in our marriage, what I know for sure (thank you Oprah) is that above all else we are committed to raising our kids as a team. Once you have kids with someone, I think the whole marriage game and your investment in it completely changes. And when I get a letter from my 8-year-old daughter, in which she writes, "Mommy when you and daddy fight it makes me think you don't love me and Jackson (her brother)," well it kind of puts things into perspective... real fast.

I realize that marriage is nothing like the Hollywood style version I'd envisioned. It's far more than roses, holding hands and having a permanent Saturday night date. It's about compromising, sometimes swallowing your feelings and fighting fair all so much easier to type than to actually put into practice.

And just when I feel like maybe having to work so hard at something just isn't what I signed up for I see my kids and this little family unit that my husband and I worked so hard to bring to fruition. I watch my husband, as he does homework with my daughter and lets my son climb all over him, karate chop him and sit on his head and doesn't so much as wince. He is such a hands-on dad, fully entrenched in all aspects of our kids' lives, giving them every bit of his heart on an intensely visceral level.

So this Valentine's Day, in addition to the hearts, flowers, candies and the baubles I hope I get (c'mon I'm a girl and I've been spoon-fed these Valentine's Day must-gets for almost 37 years), what I'm most interested in is luxuriating in the familial love my husband and I have managed to negotiate, in spite of our recent bout of problems.

And the very best part—he promised this Valentine's Day that he wouldn't have my kids; (aka him) buy me yet another #1 mom mug to add to my very extensive collection.



The 2010 American Girl Doll is one that even dads will



get behind!

I'll admit it- in our family we have succumbed to the intoxicating lure of the [American Girl Doll](#) culture. While the marketplace is brimming with dolls, what makes these stand-apart is that -- unlike the standard box with a doll in it that, once little fingers

take out of its package and admire, the playtime with said doll pretty much wanes -- with an American Girl doll the experience is just unfolding.

What I absolutely ADORE, yes you heard me right, ADORE, despite the slightly higher-than-I'd-like price tag, is that getting my daughter an American Girl doll is about providing her with a play experience and a rich history of the doll, whose accompanying book brings to life the doll's interests and a world that my daughter can "virtually" immerse herself in and feel an instant kinship with.

With so many media outlets urging and beckoning our daughters to grow fast beyond their years: belly shirts, lip-gloss cleverly disguised in a piece of costume jewelry -- even the whole trend of baby high heels -- it can be overwhelming and just plain confusing for our girls who at six, seven, eight, nine and even 10 years old, should still be dressing their dolls, setting up tea parties for them and feeling safely ensconced in being a kid. And not feeling this push-pull to grow up unnaturally faster than their bodies are.

Sure, stepping into the flagship Fifth Avenue store my husband's pallor turns a pale ghost-like white, his shoulders sunken, and then he does the usual wallet hand-over to my daughter -- merely a gesture on his part as his way of symbolically acquiescing to the purchases she's about to make -- of course within reason. Believe me, if we let my daughter actually take his wallet, we'd need a U-Haul van to get all the clothes, furniture, dolls, videos and books back to our home.

But I must admit- even my husband was less apathetic about this year's American Girl doll, Lanie, precisely because of her message and the company's partnership with the [National Wildlife Federation \(NWF\)](#).

So just who is 10-year-old Lanie Holland, dressed in a preppy outdoorsy outfit (oh I wish I had a closet full of these American Girl doll clothes for myself)? Her accompanying books depict a thoughtful, energetic girl who loves wildlife and the outdoors, but her family prefers to do things at home—and inside. When Lanie's adventurous and outdoorsy aunt comes to stay with them, through everyday experiences — growing a garden, bird-watching, camping in her backyard, and creating a butterfly habitat — Lanie discovers how everything in nature is connected and learns there's a wide, wonderful world right outside her door. And to further engage readers, (my daughter LOVES reading about real-life girls and their experiences) a section at the back of each book includes letters from real girls who, like Lanie, are looking for ways to enjoy the outdoors. Essentially her message is about encouraging girls to connect with nature through outdoor play.

My husband, always one to get the kids hiking, biking and off the couch was actually kind of "excited" (I know, weird to use that adjective to describe him) when I apprised him of the fact that Lanie and American Girl are supporting the NWF's Be Out There [campaign designed to re-connect families](#) to the outdoors and inspire a life-long appreciation of nature. And he appreciates (and of course I do too although they had me at the preppy outfit) the fact that American Girl is tackling and attempting to reverse the recent trend of children spending less time playing outdoors than any previous generation, which is leading to a host of problems such as obesity, ADD, and even depression, head on with initiatives like a Backyard Photo Contest, free classroom materials, and of course their partnership with National Wildlife Federation.

Hmm might be time to pick up an American Girl catalog or take a little trip to their 5th Avenue Store!



J.D. Salinger, You Will Be Sorely Missed

Growing up in a strict, orthodox household, I'd say I was pretty good at going through the motions and routines handed down to me by my elders. I never questioned why I couldn't drive or talk watch television on the Sabbath, or partake in the all-American pursuits of pouring cheese doodles or Lucky

Charms cereal down my gullet.

Until about the age of 12, while living in Brooklyn, although my adolescent experiences were certainly influenced by the fabric of the '80s pop culture—I wore shoulder pads, wished upon Madonna's lucky star and was enamored with Michael Jackson's Thriller—I certainly never felt truly understood in my desire to straddle both my religious upbringing with the seductive allure of secular America culture. In a sense I guess I felt trapped in a world that I was born into, where (in my personal experience) one's façade seemed to be more valued than one's character.

Then, one afternoon sitting in my basement browsing through books which didn't make the living room bookshelf cut; whose pages were mostly yellowed, dog-eared and ripped, I found a copy of [J.D. Salinger's](#) Catcher in the Rye. To say that reading it had a profound effect on me, would probably be an understatement. It was more that I felt like Holden Caulfield was me; besieged by adults and practices he found unbearable and phony, wishing he could escape but being a kid, and was pretty much powerless to do so.

Never had I felt such a kinship with a character, who seemed to articulate all that my immature 12-year-old vocabulary couldn't. More so, the fact that the author J.D. Salinger, as an adult, was the one writing about this character, filled me with a sense that eventually I would be okay and find a soft

place where I could land; nervous breakdown and all.

I'm sure I'm just one of millions of readers who felt an almost spiritual connection with Mr. Salinger and his books (yes after reading *Catcher in the Rye*, I devoured *Franny and Zooey*, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* and *Seymour: an introduction* (1963)) and for that I am eternally grateful.



Bonding With My Boy Is Easier Than I Thought

I grew up with a mother who was the paradigm of femininity with her perfectly coiffed hair and manicured nails, a woman who wouldn't dare leave the house without her stockings and pair of high heel pumps. In a house where delicate ivory curtains adorned every window and

Cosmopolitan and *Seventeen* magazines were a permanent fixture on the coffee table, my sisters and I were completely clueless about the likes and dislikes of the male persuasion.

In fact, until I started dating, I barely knew the difference between a baseball and basketball, and had never even been to a sporting event (my poor dad was simply outnumbered). When I got married I realized I had a pretty tough learning curve ahead of me, and while I thought marriage would ultimately given me a bird's eye view into the evolution of men, mothering a son has provided me with my greatest insight into the secret early beginnings of boys, who ultimately become these men.

I absolutely believe in nature versus nurture. As soon as they pulled my son from my womb I'm sure he must've been clutching a matchbox car, action figure or dinosaur! At four years old, he's firmly made clear his likes and dislikes: princess movies are out and *Power Rangers* are in. Although I never imagined I'd be remotely interested in these things I am because I desperately want to share his passion, despite how mind-numbing I personally think they are.

Yet this past Thursday while my daughter took her hip hop class, my son and I sat in the waiting room of her dance studio for what I foresaw would be an interminable hour. I forgot the crayons, books, Nintendo DS (a.k.a. the bag of beat the boredom tricks. And of course he refused to eat the chicken nuggets I brought along with us. Seriously, my boy is so pin thin, you'd probably call children's welfare services if you saw him in his birthday suit...hence my need to be prepared with chicken nuggets at all times in the unlikely event that he might just eat a morsel).

Then we heard the music, Britney Spears, "Peter, Paul and Mary," and well he decided it was time to wow me with his cha-cha moves and reminded me that he was crowned best dancer in summer camp (all true—although not quite sure of the talent pool's quality). And I must admit: just being with him and watching him do his completely off beat moves -- which looked a bit more like karate to me, well it just made me fall that much more in love with him and immediately filled me with anxiety about the days when dancing with his mama in public will be strictly prohibited.

For some great NYC-based activities mom and son activities check out my [Kids in the City](#) column. And here are things to do with your boy from Janet L. Hall's upcoming book, [Sober From Clutter: 12 Steps to Clutter Freedom](#). What I love about them is they're just simple and.. FREE!

1. Play in the sandbox with them and build castles!
2. Play Hide and Seek
3. Play dress up
4. Take them to the playground, it's fun and great exercise if you actually join in the fun with them of sliding, swinging, twirling, and climbing.
5. Take a walk with them, and talk or just be still.
6. Teach them some life skills: cooking, laundry, cleaning, writing a check, balance a checkbook, planting a garden, fishing, etc.
7. Ride bikes together.
8. Play some board games with them.
9. Sit down and EAT with them.
10. Give them a hug, your love, your approval - these things will mean much more to them than "stuff." These things will not only feed their Spirit, but yours as well.

Denial: Parents, No It Aint A River

Does every family have that uncle/sibling who is just so completely wayward, always has a story to tell and never ceases to be on the prowl for money to borrow? When is that said "relative" finally held liable for the mistakes he's made, of his own volition, as an adult? Can you really blame a parent for the transgressions of their adult son or are parents never truly absolved of their parental responsibilities?

Yes a family member of mine — who shall remain nameless — is up to his old tricks yet again, fudging details of a "supposed robbery," being very non-specific about the whereabouts of a family dog that has gone missing, which he claims was a consequence of said robbery, essentially just being his usual cryptic self. Why do I care and why bother writing a blog about it? Because this man is in his mid-forties and has been on this kind of downward spiral probably since graduating from college. I guess my first thought is who's to blame? Can you possibly place the blame on his parents; were they not instrumental enough in his earlier years of picking up cues and behaviors that may have foreshadowed his incredibly problematic adulthood?

To be honest, whenever I hear yet another convoluted scenario, which could only be concocted by this man; I feel a sudden chill creep down my spine and fear that my kids who share this person's genes and I wonder; is his behavior a result of genetics or bad parenting? I worry about my own kids and whether or not I will be privy to the signs that either one of them is headed down a path of self destruction. Were this man's parents in complete denial about the character of their son? Did they intervene enough when teachers complained about his school work and just how instrumental were they in helping him find his mission in life?

This situation, yet again, has me mulling the question...how much parenting is too little or too much and once a child reaches a certain age can a parent be absolved of their responsibility for this child? Yes moms and dads these are the thoughts racing through my head as this "relative" of mine sinks deeper into the depths of an unimaginable ditch of despair wittingly-or not pulling down so many of those teetering all too close to the edge just around him.

Need A Few New Year's Resolutions? Feel Free To Borrow Some Of Mine

Let's get real here for a second—is there any single one of us who has actually followed through with our life altering, "I'm really going to do this in the new year" resolutions past January 30th?

Well I'll be honest—I haven't...it's not that I'm not capable of committing and following through. Heck, when I got that gift basket of chocolate for the holidays I was determined to finish every last confection, and by George I can proudly say that I completed that task. I left no wrapper unwrapped, no ribbon untied and no box unopened.

So you see I really can follow through with resolutions.

It's just the truly significant-life-altering ones that somehow always manage to throw me for a loop...like [my husband deciding to hang up his stethoscope for good](#), trying not to [stir the pot with my in-laws too much](#) (fail) getting back to my wedding gown weight (BIG FAT FAIL) and of course [languishing in moments of sweet reflection](#) and...[finally a check](#) (I hope).

So where does that leave me as I look to cooking up my resolutions for 2010? I think finally, as I head into my 37th year on this glorious planet of ours I am learning that plans and goals are just that...they're not set in stone; they're ephemeral and simply fabricated to keep every single one of us from laying in bed all day watching marathon episodes of Bravo's Millionaire Matchmaker and therefore if you break them, life will undoubtedly continue and give you another shot at achieving them (unless say you've forked over a few grand for plane tickets and even though you've got the flu and 105 fever by G-d you will be getting on that plane and headed to Disney world because well, your kids will NEVER forgive you if you squash their plans to get up close and personal with Cinderella, and take a spin on Magic Mountain).

Still if this post is leaving you unsatisfied and clamoring for those much touted resolutions I've enlisted the big guns to help me gather up resolutions for your and your kiddies over at my [Staten Island Advance Kids in the City Column](#) and here are mine in a nutshell- care of the brilliant musician who just so happened to live in Staten Island for a brief period; [Ingrid Michaelson](#)... "our lives are brief. tell someone you love them. cry. eat good food. make something that you are proud of. live your life with big joy."

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[Mike Latella](#) is the chief meteorologist and executive weather producer for CBS 2 HD. Latella rejoined WCBS-TV in 2007 after beginning his career here in 1991. The behind-the-scenes leader of the CBS 2 HD Weather Team, Latella has a true passion for all things weather-related, especially hurricanes, and he'll use his blog to keep you up to date on all the weather developments and phenomena around the tri-state area. [View his blog here.](#)



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