

Better Than A Playdate

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Real Housewife of Don Mills meets Real Housewife of NYC

I had it all planned.

It was going to be a snark-down of epic proportions: the Don Mills Diva vs. A Real Housewife of New York City.

I mean, have you seen [the show?](#) Taking down **Alex McCord** was going to be my pleasure. When I heard that she was writing a parenting book and her publicist was seeking an interview I could barely contain my glee. She was vacuous! Status-obsessed! And, despite the fact that she is a mom to two young sons - Johan and Francois - completely clueless!

Oh, it was going to be sweet alright. I would write a landmark piece, eloquent and scathing. She would be exposed as foolish and presumptuous and I would be hailed for my rapier wit.



Too bad Alex McCord had to ruin my plans by being kinda cool.

I didn't think she would be.

I had quite a few back and forths with her publicist and finally settled on e-mailing her a list of questions though I was vocal about reserving the right to set up a follow-up phone interview if I sensed the answers had been buffed and polished by a publicist.

But I don't think they were. I've edited here for brevity and grammar but the rawness of the exchange and the number of personal asides and digressions convinced this former copy editor that the exchange, and maybe even the woman, was genuine. (Yes, her ever-present husband Simon van Kempen answered as well, but I probably should have expected that, considering their tendency to be joined at the hip was the source of some controversy on the show).

Check it out.

Your press release talks about providing positive outlook and education for families similar to yours. Doesn't your affluent lifestyle makes you dissimilar from most families?

A: My family always emphasized that your attitude and values in life shouldn't be affected by the amount of zeros in your bank account. If the amount of money you have affects your personality, I certainly wouldn't want to be your friend! I think most people share similar desires. They want to do a good job raising their children, to give them a good education, to set them up to be critical thinkers and capable of navigating life successfully on their own.

S: A positive outlook and education do not run hand in hand with an affluent lifestyle. As a young boy growing up in Australia we were anything but affluent but richer than almost everyone when it came to the important things in life. Almost 40 years later I find myself struggling to teach my children that money is NOT the be all and end all. It sure does help but it is not the most important of life's goals.

Can you talk about the challenges of parenting in New York City as opposed to somewhere else? Can you share with me some specific examples of parenting challenges you've faced that have changed your way of thinking or produced unique insights?

A: Well, our kids haven't had the chance yet to grow vegetables in a garden, milk a neighbor's cow, help pull snakes out of an oil drum in winter or (really) ride a horse, all of which I'd done by the time I was François' age. However, he has been to the Museum of Natural History, on the Ferris Wheel at Coney Island, to dinner at the 21 Club (ahem:)). We're luckier than some NYC parents as we do have a house and a backyard, where the kids can pitch a tent, swim in a pool and have a swing set. We still lived in a co-op when François was born, and it was much more of an effort to get him outside in fresh air every day as opposed to opening the back door and letting him run outside.

New York City is big, but it's not scary to a kid. Most neighborhoods are microcosms – little villages within the big city. In Cobble Hill, where we live, we know our neighbors and the kids have play dates together. All the shopkeepers know us and the boys, and tell us if something funny happened during the day when one of them was out with our nanny, etc. Since everything is so close together and everyone walks, you run across the same people every day. In many ways I feel more connected to people here than I ever did in other cities I've lived in, where the lay of the land is spread out and people drive everywhere.

S: When Alex and I first discussed having children the hardest thing for me to visualize was that they'd not grow up like I did; in small towns and provincial cities where a farm sometimes ran along your backyard and amazing flora and fauna would regularly buzz around your ears and crawl around your feet. We're lucky that we now have a fairly large backyard (by NYC standards anyway) and an incredible number of spectacular birds visit it. However because we live in a city we do strive to get out of it and let by the boys see nature naturally; whether it be snorkeling with squid as Francois, Alex and I did last summer or ogling iguanas which both Johan & Francois also did while we were on our summer vacation. The great thing about NYC is it's only a couple of hours from anywhere (apart from Australia) and as long as you make an effort to go other places living here can give children an incredibly broad range of experiences.

You say you got a lot of positive e-mails from viewers but show kinda set you up as villains. Can you talk about some of your favorite positive e-mails?

A: We had an overwhelming number of emails mentioning how clear it was, despite everything else, that we love our children and each other. Other parents of young children wrote to us and said how easy it is to ridicule reactions to young children when you don't have them. The most supportive emails we received specifically regarding our children's behavior were from people who either A) have children the same age as ours, or B) have an idea of what it's like to work with children on-camera.

Can you also identify the viewer responses that were the most unjustified and the most hurtful and explain why?

A: Some people assume that what they see on the screen is the sum-total of our lives. It isn't by a long shot; it's less than 2% of the time period we filmed. Also, the show contains a lot of visual commentary that is not created by us, which some viewers didn't understand. It was interesting that the lion's share of negative emails we received would give the ages of their children, and ALL of those children were teenagers. Hindsight is always 20/20. It's hard enough for me to remember what it was like to have an infant and those memories are viewed through rose-colored glasses. It's the same with toddlerhood. Once you're out of it, you forget most of the bad or hard stuff.

S: You certainly learn to establish a thick skin pretty quickly. Many people hiding by anonymous screen names seem to unleash their own inner demons. Alex and I honestly can take most things with a grain of salt but when there were posts wishing that Francois got cancer and died I got really upset. Eventually I rationalized that the problem lay with blog poster and not us.

I've often been criticized for featuring my son in my parenting blog (which is awesome by the way, you should totally check it out - www.donmillsdiva.blogspot.com) I imagine you've been similarly criticized for exposing your sons on the show. Can you respond to that criticism? Do you worry that Johan and Francois will one day be angry with you for doing the show?

A: Johan and Graham are the same age! *(Note: Alex went on to comment on a lot of my recent postings here which did absolutely nothing to endear her to me, swear!)* We did notice that often, when the cameras were on, the boys would act up. This is partially due to the fact that we were often distracted when on-camera because other things were going on. A memorable quote from our older son was his spontaneous announcement to the crew "When the camera rolls, François rolls." We learned a lot from the logistical experience of doing the first season, and during filming for series 2 would resist pressure and usually say no when asked to bring the boys out late at night, or to an event we wouldn't normally take children to. As far as them being upset later on, while I don't expect that will happen, it may. There are risks to anything you do in life, and if our boys were older, say tweens, we probably wouldn't have involved them. What we've done is try to keep things as normal as possible for them, and if hurt feelings happen down the road, we'll deal with them. It would only be an issue for us if the boys themselves decided they had a problem — who cares what anyone who isn't directly involved thinks?

S: As they get older that does become more of a concern but at least at this stage they're oblivious to the comments on the Internet. They do love it however when fans stop us all on the street to talk about us and the show and Francois particularly



loves to say that he's on it too!

Do you and Simon ever just order a big greasy pizza for the kids, turn on cartoons and lounge on the couch? Do you do this sort of thing very often? Why or why not?

A: Pizza night is Sunday night, and I make it myself. Not to brag (too much ;) but both boys and husband swear that my pizza is the best anywhere. And, yes, whether it's with the pizza or with ordered in Mexican on some other night, we do curl up on the couch and watch TV. Johan's favorite show is *Wow Wow Wubbzy*, and François likes movies, like *The Incredibles*.

S: I know what side my 'pizza is baked on', so let me just say I agree with everything Alex wrote above about her pizza! ;-)

What would your reaction be if Francois or Johan decided they wanted to find themselves by running away and selling falafel at a Phish concert? I'm being serious here. You and Simon enjoy a posh lifestyle: what if your sons rebel against it?

A: Actually, when I was about 22 I remember being at a Phish concert and ending up with a rather weird contact high. :) There are different phases in everyone's life, and I'd be pretty horrified if the kids didn't go through different periods and rebellions: that would mean that they just accepted what they saw us doing without questioning it, which is a recipe for a boring life. If you don't change, you don't learn, and I look forward to seeing their exploits over the years - hopefully they will take risks and learn from them (preferably without getting themselves arrested or badly hurt.)

S: My hope is that by giving them a well rounded outlook and exposing them to all and sundry they will have nothing to rebel against. I look back at my own childhood and see instances where I 'rebelled' in a major way against my upbringing on two occasions but after a few years both times I moved back in line with it. Certainly the experiences I gained whilst rebelling where very important in making me who I am and I wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

Were you as horrified as I was by how Ramona carried on in front of her young daughter? That time at the pool with her girlfriends when her poor wee daughter fled in embarrassment? Truthfully, what was your reaction when you saw that?

A: Ha! You're going to have to hang on until Season 2 for both Simon's and my direct address of that situation — can't spoil it!

S: It's hard to look at any one particular scene of any television and draw major conclusions. Unless you know that back story to their relationship no one knows whether that event was played up for the cameras or not.

Can you give some details about the book you're working on?

A: We're writing a book about urban parenting, which ranges from silly anecdotes of our children's shenanigans to advice based on our experiences that we think would be useful to others. (Example: how to get a passport for an infant when you don't have a birth certificate yet.)

S: As was seen once or twice on the show during season one Alex and I are very close and after almost 10 years often finish each other's sentences. What you'll see in our book is a point/counter point exchange between us when we write about the joys and vagaries of bringing up two young toddlers in NYC – a pretty major urban environment.

Here's the thing: It would have been easy - too easy really - to snark on every damn thing they had to say and I'm sure I would have got some laughs out of it and ended up feeling really smug and superior about the whole endeavor. But I got to thinking about Alex's situation. She's a small town girl who grew did not grow up wealthy. She's ambitious and she's absolutely working her involvement on the show for all it's worth.

But isn't it just a little hypocritical to feign disgust when the truth is I'm running [my own little reality show over here](#). (Aren't you?) It's easy for me to say I wouldn't take it to prime time for any amount of money because no one has asked me.

Don Mills Diva in every household would bring a multitude of problems, no doubt, not least among them snarky bloggers who would gleefully point out that my voice is annoying and I think I'm way funnier, prettier and smarter than I actually am. But [days like this are hard](#). Really hard. And Alex has managed to find a way to remove herself from the daily grind and enjoy financial security and ample time with her children.

I have no doubt the readers of this column *would* declare the Don Mills Diva a winner in a snark-down with Alex McCord, but shooting fish in a barrel just doesn't seem all that sporting to me. And besides, pissing off a producer might ruin my chances to star in a future version of the Real Housewives of Don Mills:-))