

Alex McCord and Simon van Kempen

Parenting advice from the stars of 'The Real Housewives of New York City.'

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Last year the *Real Housewives* moved to New York and the inseparable, unflappable duo of Alex McCord and Simon van Kempen stole the show with their extravagant shopping sprees and French-speaking toddlers. Housewife Alex and husband Simon (sometimes referred to as "The Sixth Housewife") are back for Season Two — which airs February 17th on Bravo — along with precocious kiddos François and Johan. They are again at the center of the socialite storm as gossip column wars and trips to the Hamptons kick off the

explosive season. Currently the van Kempens are putting their unique take on parenting together in an upcoming book, *The Urban Parent: Family Adventures from a Real House in New York City*. Babble sat down with reality tv's conjoined couple and gleaned advice on potty training, keeping married love alive and circumcision. — April Peveteaux

Were you comfortable with how François and Johan were portrayed on the show?

Simon van Kempen: The footage that they're going to use is the footage that's going to be the most dramatic. The most dramatic isn't always the most flattering.

Alex McCord: Beautiful children, behaving beautifully doesn't necessarily make for good TV. We have to take that with a grain of salt. We're very aware in person of how our children behave, how they act on a day-to-day basis. You can't really blame the producers for wanting to include the over-the-top dramatic moments.

Simon: My real hope [for Season Two] is that they show us reading stories to the boys at bedtime. But who knows what they use. We hope we learned from some of the things we might have done in Season One. We don't control what you see; the producers do.

What can we expect to find in *The Urban Parent*?

Simon: It's an anecdotal book of things we've discovered while raising two toddlers in NYC. We don't profess or pretend to be child-rearing experts. Throughout the airing of Season One we received many emails asking about our parenting methods and for more information regarding the boys. This is our way, in our own words, to answer many of those questions.

Do you have any potty-training advice for my three-year-old?

Alex: Don't do it. Don't bother. Let her run around naked.

Simon: We have two boys and our boys are both trained. François gave me the best Father's Day present when he was two-and-a-half. He was sitting out in the backyard and he came running out with a potty full of urine. He said, "Daddy, I peed, I peed, I peed!" They always watched me. It's easier for a guy because you have . . . the obvious.

Is dinnertime adult time? Or do you recommend eating dinner together as a family?

Simon: Dinnertime and breakfast and lunch on weekends are wonderful times where, as a family, we discuss things without any distractions. The TV is off, no music is played, and all cell phones are banished. Alex and I try to limit our evenings out to no more than two each week, and never on consecutive nights.

How do you handle the boys at nice restaurants in New York City?

Simon: Johan went to the Mercer Kitchen with us at the ripe old age of two days old. We try to take them out at times when they are not overtired and have had a chance to run around beforehand. We also keep a couple of distractions in my bag, such as board books or small toys. Lately François has become addicted to flash cards and simple math problems. Keeping a deck of cards handy can be a lifesaver.

How do you find sitters for Johan and François?

Alex: We used to leave ads on Park Slope Parents when we lived in Park Slope. Now we're in Cobble Hill, so we belong to Bococa Parents. I still read it every day even if I'm not actually interviewing people. For many years, we had au pairs.

How does a nanny differ from an au pair?

Alex: [With an au pair] you have someone who lives with you and someone who is part of your family. On the down side, you have someone who is usually an eighteen-year-old and is fresh out of their parents' home.

Simon: We found that suddenly we had an eighteen-year-old daughter as well as a three-year-old son and a newborn. We learned from that mistake and for our subsequent au pairs, we got someone who had lived away from home for a couple years and reached some level of independence.

Alex: I would say to anyone who is considering an au pair, make whatever effort you can to meet them or meet their parents in advance. In fact, the only time we ever really had a problem was the time that we didn't meet her parents.

Co-sleeping or no?

Simon: No! Both boys slept in our bed for the first three or so months. As soon as their stomachs were big enough to last the night without more breast milk they were put to bed in their own room. Certainly with François Alex found it hard initially, as he would cry for her, but I was adamant that we had to adopt the tough love approach and allow them to adapt to their own environment without the 24/7 comfort of mother's skin.

Alex: We are really lucky to have two great sleepers, and the only time we are awakened during the night is if they are sick or somebody wets the bed. And that only happens if during the nighttime bathroom routine they don't "slay the dragon," an expression which somehow became family code for using the toilet.

How did you find breastfeeding?

Simon: Alex felt it was important to give child-led weaning a try, and as it turned out, Francois weaned himself at around ten months and Johan at about sixteen months. Both boys were delivered naturally with a midwife with no drugs administered, and so she wasn't about to start feeding them formula.

Our readers have been heatedly debating circumcision. What did you do?

Simon: Neither of the boys are, although I am. I personally find it an unnecessary act and had no qualms about having my sons different than their Daddy, which I think is one of the reasons a lot of boys are still circumcised. Just recently François realized that my penis was different than his, and asked,

"Why?" I answered that in the '60s, when I was born, a lot of boys in Australia and the U.S.A. had a little operation when they were born but that he and Johan didn't need it.

With your busy schedules and two children, how do you maintain your romantic relationship?

Alex: We never forget that we came first. You have to honor your relationship and maintain it and spend time on it and do whatever you have to do. If you are a happy parent you are a better parent.