

Climbing with a 2-Year-Old

Check the list: ropes, GPS, diapers, sippy cups...

Brian Irwin

LOST LEDGE. IT'S PERFECT. THAT'S WHERE YOU SHOULD TAKE HIM," Joe Cote told me when I asked him for a good place to take a two-year-old climbing. The charismatic, old-school first ascensionist of New Hampshire ultra-classic rock climbs like Cannon Mountain's Moby Grape took a sip of beer. His captivating smile quivered. My son Andy dashed around the party wearing his new, four-inch-long rock climbing shoes. "Rock climbing—yeah!" he squealed as he darted between my legs, lassoing Joe's and my feet with a length of yellow climbing rope. Joe is a master of teaching kids to climb. He's not a guide, nor is he a renowned instructor. Rather, he's an inspiration, a mentor. Kids may learn how to climb from Joe, but more important, they learn climbing is fun.

Lost Ledge is no place to let your guard down. It's over 200 feet of the gnarliest 40-degree, bolted, low fifth-class¹ slab climbing in the east. And it's committing and alpine. A full 20 minutes from the road, for my son this monstrous approach hike calculates to an age-adjusted time of more than ten hours. We were going to do it in a single push, and I was confident he was ready. An expedition like this would require us to pack at least the ten essentials: two sippy cups of juice, three diapers, baby wipes, water, a security blanket, and my wife and breastfeeding two-month-old as porters.

Andy had free soloed² the stairs more than a year earlier and had all the moves wired. Having top-roped a full pitch on Whitehorse Ledge the week before, he was clearly hungry for a bigger challenge. The night before the

¹ Rock climbs in the United States are rated using the Yosemite Decimal System. Fourth-class climbs may not require a rope. Fifth-class climbs require a rope and are rated from 5.0 (easiest) to 5.15 (hardest).

² *Free soloing a climb* refers to climbing alone, without the use of bolts, protective climbing equipment, or ropes. It is the most pure, risky form of climbing.



Brian Irwin with his boy climbing "Four Holes, 5.5" on Lost Ledge. CAROLYN IRWIN

climb, he hardly slept. He screamed to have his pants changed, for more milk, and for a stuffed Beluga whale I bought him in Talkeetna, Alaska. Granted, he never sleeps well, but that night was different. I could see in his face he was thinking of the climb, imagining his assault of the harrowing granite face. He was like a horse waiting for the gates to open.

We got a familial alpine start. Breakfast in town first, followed by two breaks to breastfeed got us to the trailhead by 11 A.M. Lost Ledge is not a misnomer. After the expected 20 minutes of hiking, we found ourselves bushwhacking up a streambed. We were lost, and there wasn't a ledge in sight. An hour later my wife, with our other son, now two months old, strapped to her belly, shouted directions to me as I thrashed up a steep slope, monkeying from tree to tree to pull myself through the dense vegetation. She navigated by GPS and only when the screen read "twelve feet to waypoint" did we eject from the thicket and first see rock.

A few quiet grunts squeaked out from under his tiny helmet as he made the last few moves to the chains.

When we arrived, Andy's face was striped with brushburn from bristly branches. He was in a good mood; somehow he'd napped most of the hike in. Sitting on a boulder, he eyed the obvious, aesthetic line above us. As his little mouth worked a bite of Clif Bar I could see him thinking, reciting the climbing techniques in *How to Rock Climb* I'd read him as a bedtime story a few days earlier: "Tension off that flake, stem the corner, and pull up into that pocket. Rest, then mantle into that dish." He was anxious to send.

Carolyn belayed off a tree as Andy and I cast off. We freed the first 40 feet and pulled into a basketball-sized pothole. Andy dropped his butt into the hole and took a rest. "Oooh. That was hard, Daddy." We shook out and headed up the last stretch, a committing wall of improbable 5.1 jugs. Andy was getting pumped. I reminded him of the classic alpine tale all climbers recite in their head when they're on the verge of failure or collapse, "The Little Engine That Could." A few quiet grunts squeaked out from under his tiny helmet as he made the last few moves to the chains.

We start to climb because it's fun, but over time, we keep climbing because it offers something more. It offers something intangible, a connection with mortality and risk that makes us feel alive. It offers introspection, honesty, and challenge. It's not always fun. There's nothing fun about suffering in a snow cave at the base of a wall, awaiting stability of the snowpack above or dying winds in a hope to launch an ascent of what could be the best climb of your life, or your last. But suffering is sometimes a requisite part of climbing.

We cope with the suffering by talking to ourselves. We tell ourselves things like "It'll all be worthwhile" or "You've wanted this for your entire life and now you're here." These phrases scream in our minds as we limp up runout faces, settle for questionable bivouacs or plod up the last few hundred feet to the true summit. These hollering voices keep us alive as we drip sweat onto the tattered cables of old cams or pins as we drive the cold steel into granite. And sometimes, tragically, these words resonate in some climber's ears as they slip into the last sleep of their lives.

Climbing rocks is a wonderfully simple and primitive act. It's one of the first things kids do after they learn how to walk. Climbing kids aren't born with the ability to understand the work or the suffering that may, for them someday, become part of their passion; that years later they'll spend a lot of money to climb a mountain that leaves them empty handed and frostbitten and come back reporting it was the best trip of their lives. They don't understand that with a bad bushwhack they just experienced their first epic. They haven't learned how to talk themselves down. But they have already learned the most important lesson of climbing.

That night I lay in bed when Andy shouted out. I went into his room and found him sitting bolt-upright.

"Daddy," he said as he flipped his security blanket over his shoulder, "I want to go rock climbing again."

I laid him down and tucked him in.

"You liked it?" I replied.

"Yeah. Rock climbing is fun. Really fun."

BRIAN IRWIN is a family physician from the Mount Washington Valley who has written for *Alpinist*, *Rock and Ice*, *Couloir*, *Powder*, and other publications. He is a ski patroller on Mount Washington and Cranmore Mountain and works on search and rescue missions. He and his wife live with their two sons and black lab in Madison, New Hampshire.