

Climbing with Kids

Does having kids equal the end of climbing as you know it? Or is it possible to maintain your climbing as a parent by introducing your children to climbing at an early age? **Katy Dartford** asks some leading British and American climbers for their views on one of the largest questions of all in the vertical world: can you still enjoy a successful climbing life once you've got kids?

Last October, Andy Kirkpatrick reached the top of El Capitan in Yosemite with his daughter, Ella, who was 13 years old at the time, making her the youngest girl to climb the big wall. Elsewhere, 11 year old American climber Brooke Raboutou became the youngest person in the world to climb 8c when she redpointed *Welcome To Tijuana* in Rodellar, Spain. With two former World Champion climbers for parents and coaches, Didier Raboutou and Robyn Erbesfeld, it's perhaps little surprise that she mastered this grade at such a young age, although still hugely impressive. But not all parents who climb want to push their children into the sport. And many children may not be interested in following in the footsteps of their parents, either. Having kids inevitably leads to changes in most people's perception of climbing, and it's a theme that many climbing parents have written about.

In his first book, *Psychovertical*, Andy Kirkpatrick talks about the guilt and remorse induced by leaving his wife and daughter to go climbing. He explains that when he's in the mountains he often feels that he should be home with his family; but when he's at home with his family, he wants to be in the mountains:

'I thought about talking to Ella, imagined her voice, what she would say. She would ask when I was coming home. I often wondered about writing her a letter, to tell her who I was, why I climbed, and why I left her, even though she was the greatest gift I had ever been given. But every time I started, my words sounded like the excuses they were.' Even though very few climbers with children have had the honesty to articulate this as clearly as Andy, many must have experienced similar feelings of guilt about being away from their children for long periods.

'Unless you're a total bastard,' continues Andy Kirkpatrick, 'having children changes everything. Anyone who just ignores the responsibility of having kids will probably suffer for it later on. When my kids were small it was easier, as they didn't miss me so much - and climbing was my job anyway... From [age] three upwards, things got much harder, and I think for a while

I did serious damage to my kids by being away, especially my son. Luckily I think I pulled back from climbing just in the nick of time, and for the last six years have really focused totally on trying to be a good dad.'

So how often now can he now take a big trip? 'I think for six years I had one trip away a year that I would view as being a proper climbing trip (3 weeks away from home), and all these bar one were to low-stress places like Yosemite, or Romsdal in Norway. This year I feel like I need to

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up my game, as I've probably let the best years go by, and never really made any gains as a climber (only as a human being).'

The significant gap between the requirements of being 'a good climber' and 'a good human being' that Andy illustrates must surely be considered by all climbing parents at some point - ideally early on - in their children's lives.

Climb columnist Steve McClure has climbed two 9a's and one 9a+, and in 2002 became the first British person ever to onsight more than 100 routes graded at F8a or harder within 12 months. When his daughter Amelie was born, it forced him to reconsider his view of climbing within life as a whole:

'One minute you are a climber, and your world is climbing. Then suddenly there is something way more important. You don't see it coming, and it's tricky to deal with. It's confusing. You want to go off on a climbing trip, but then you don't. Kids put things in perspective. At the end of the day, they are all you've got, and this makes you change what you want to achieve.'

Yet as McClure explains, this may not necessarily be a bad thing: 'Having kids really holds you back [as a climber] in lots of areas. If it's lots of climbing on long trips, then definitely, but then you achieve a lot of other stuff instead. From a purely rock climbing perspective I have potentially achieved more in terms of hard redpoints in the UK by having children, as they have kept me grounded in one place. But I've missed out on more travelling and being in the mountains. Now, in winter I'll probably climb 2 or 3 sessions indoors per week and in summer 2 or times a week outdoors. It's all down to mixing it up and having enough rest days. 1 on 1 off is enough or after many years the body will die. It's easy to want it all and try and climb or train every day. But no one can do that for 30 years. So ask yourself this question, punk: are you in it for now, or forever? It's likely that if I had not had Amelie I would not have climbed as hard as I have.'

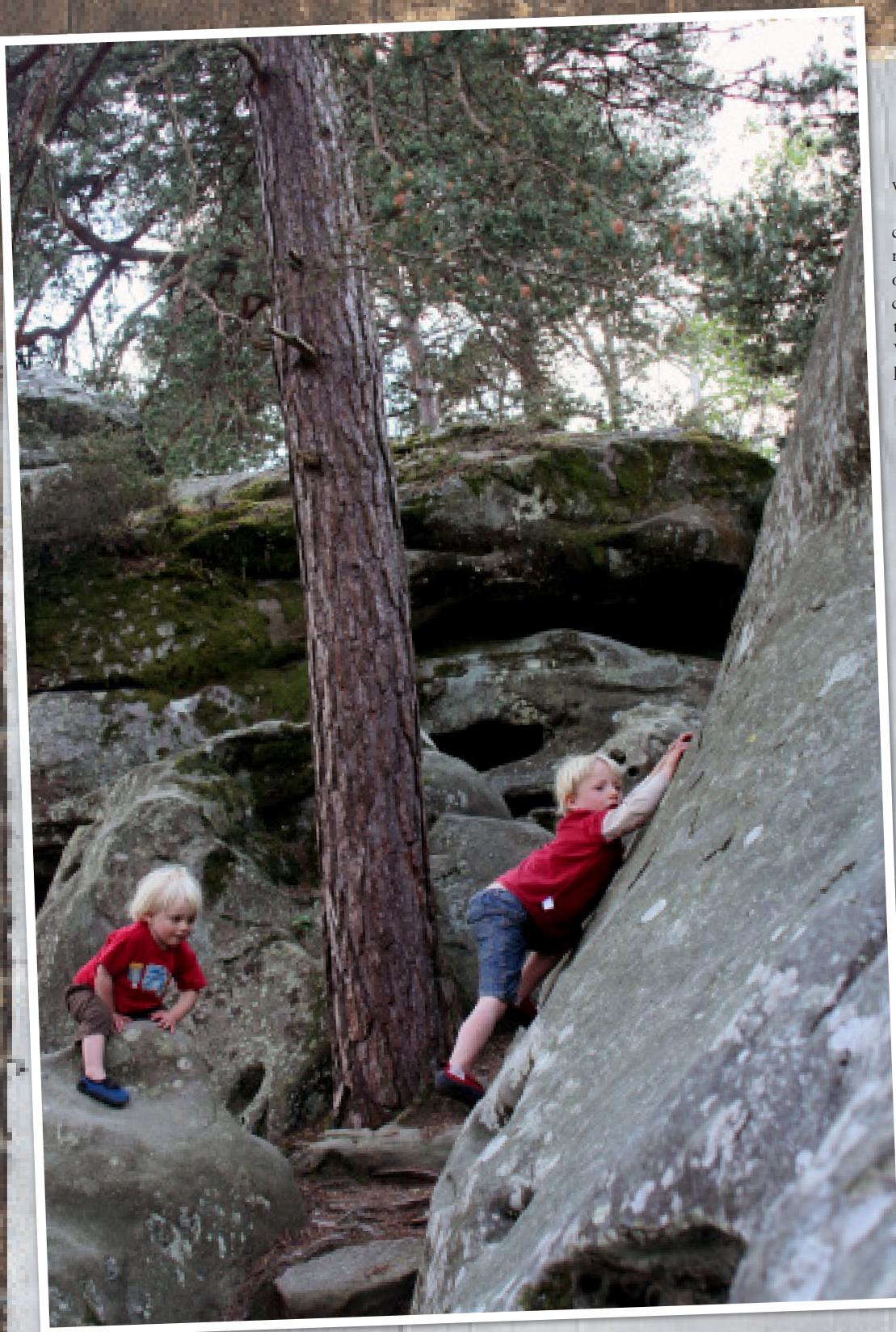
Lynn Hill is world famous for her exploits on El Capitan, where she made the first ascent without aid of *The Nose* and later the first free ascent of the route in 24 hours, became a mother in her 40s. She explains that 'my goal in life is to be a balanced, happy person and having a kid or kids is an amazing experience that changes one's perspective in life and forces us to grow in ways we never could have imagined. Having a child has certainly impacted my climbing. I'm more careful about the type of climbing I do. I try to eliminate climbs with high objective risks such as rock fall, poor protection or avalanche danger.'

Lynn, who is no longer with the father of her son, Owen, says her time is also even more restricted. 'I climb mostly at the gym (a couple times per week, depending on my obligations for work or child). When the weather is nice and I have the time, I go to the local crags around Boulder. On occasion, I go on weekend climbing trips, but I haven't gone on a climbing vacation without my son for years.'

Katherine Schirrmacher is a climbing coach who has competed for Great Britain on numerous occasions. With a young daughter, she's had to perfect her all-important skills of time management, and agrees with Steve McClure's point that having children makes you concentrate intensively on goals close to home.

'It has made me 100 times more focused' Katherine explains. 'Before [becoming a parent] I would climb whatever took my fancy that season, month, day. Now I am a sport climber and really focused on training. When I go to the wall or crag I am much more productive than I used to be.'

But is it harder for mothers who climb than for fathers? In the athlete-versus-parent debate, the mainstream media is generally much tougher



on women than men because it's perceived that women who climb are acting outside their natural gender role. This was demonstrated by the absurd reaction by largely ill-informed pundits to the death of Alison Hargreaves on K2 in 1997, in which no reference was made to the many male climbers with young children who have died climbing in the Himalaya. More recently, Menna Pritchard was ridiculed by the Daily Mail for climbing with her two-year-old daughter on her back at Three Cliffs Bay, on the Gower peninsula, despite studying outdoor education and arguing that she was very conscious of safety.

'Gender roles and expectations on women are

even more demanding today than ever before,' Lynn Hill believes.

And can the relationship between parents become strained if one climbs but the other does not? Can conflict arise? Andy Kirkpatrick thinks so, and says that Ella agrees that her mother 'wasn't fond of the idea [of us climbing El Cap] so took lots of persuading.'

Steve McClure says his success is down to 'having a solid partner who puts up with me. Kids eat time. Fortunately, my partner is very chilled out, and I get away with a lot. Though my kids are important, I still need to climb or I will fail to be me, so I have to find a compromise'.

So having a partner who climbs - or at least who has climbed - seems to help.

'We understand each other's need to go climbing,' says Katherine Schirmacher of her relationship with her husband, Nic Sellars, one of Britain's most accomplished sport and trad climbers. 'It's all just a juggling act and a shame that we don't really climb together anymore. We've tried various holiday configurations, and having Vanessa at the crag just seems really complicated and I can't concentrate on my climbing. Maybe when she's older it will be easier - certainly for bouldering - but we're not at that stage yet.'

On the other hand, it could be easy to fall into the trap, perhaps, of pushing your children into climbing too much. 'It would be great if Vanessa climbs,' says Katherine, 'but we are not pushing her; you have to be very careful, as kids can reject things they've been exposed to too much, too young.'

'I am happy to get my kids into climbing,' says Steve McClure, 'but keen for them to enjoy life. If it's climbing then I will be encouraging if that's what they want. Actually, I'd be surprised if they do. At home climbing is very low key as my partner does not climb now and neither do most of our mutual friends. My kids don't know about my hard climbing activities.' Lynn Hill is also cautious: 'I find it hard to teach any sport to my son. Children often learn better from other people rather than their own parents. My son does not want to climb [right now], but he did admit that he will probably discover for himself when he is much older.'

Andy Kirkpatrick agrees that children often don't want to follow in their parents' footsteps:

'My son says he doesn't like climbing, but he's very strong for his age and has a lot of ability. I've never been a pushy parent, and always wanted to leave it up to them to decide how to explore the boundaries of themselves, exposing them to wilderness and danger the way my dad did with me, giving the impression of both. I'm sure I put my dad through hell, and I hope my kids don't do the same to me. But when you have kids being worried about them for the rest of your life is part of the deal. Whatever they choose to do I need to support them. Kids tend to not listen

to their parents, but when you're 15 pitches up they seem to have more focus. I've always brought them up to search out the knowledge they need, and so when they want to do something they know how to ask and learn.'

Overall, climbing with children seems to be a positive, enriching experience for both parents and kids. 'When my son does agree to climb,' says Lynn, 'I enjoy seeing him have fun and playing outside with friends.' Steve McClure adds that 'watching my six year old daughter accept a challenge and achieve it on a bouldering wall is great - I like that fire! I am looking forward to doing some long routes with her in North Wales or the Verdon. That would be awesome.'