

Natalie's Triumph

By TOM ROSTON

FATHERHOOD is filled with moments of self-revelation, some magical (sitting in a sandbox, sharing my daughter's fascination with a bright green shovel) and others depressing (hearing the sound of my own reprimanding voice). But no event in my life as a father better proved my transformation from a sane, balanced person into a deluded, ambitious parent than when, a year ago, my daughter, Natalie, had her first pre-nursery school interview. As the thousands of parents facing the same soul-churning experience this winter will discover, there's a fine line between good parenting and aggressive pimping, especially in brownstone Brooklyn, where competition for those tiny seats is soaring.

Many New York private schools use the system of assembling applicants in a room and observing them at play, which helps them decide whom to accept. It is as hard-fought an event as can be, given that the combatants are soft as kittens, walk like drunk Hobbits, and can be entranced by butterflies.

On the morning of Natalie's interview, I start to think of her as a gladiator. But as I push her down our bumpy street toward the arena, the Brooklyn Heights Montessori School, she leans over the side of the stroller with her hand gliding above the wheel, as if she were on a languid riverboat ride. I look at her striped tights and her orange-tasseled boots and wonder if we have overdressed her, making my wife and me overachieving parents. We may be her biggest liability.

I know that parents willing to subject their children to such a process must seem shallow. I myself have always snickered at Texas moms who drag their daughters to beauty pageants. And now I feel you quietly judging me. But go ahead, because this is the only game in town. And my kid is going to win it.

Near the school, my pulse quickens when I notice that her toy stroller, with its purple wheels and polka-dotted dog design, is still attached to the back of the Maclaren. Natalie has few obsessive attachments; but the stroller, or her "lollalollaloola" as she calls

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it, is one of them. If she sees it, she won't be able to function without it. She won't be able to play in the classroom. All will be lost. As my breathing turns shallow, I know I must shift the toy, and hope she won't notice.

As we enter the building, I repress the thought that I could sabotage other children in subtle ways. I could loom — ever so slightly — over a sensitive child. Or I could covertly flash a bag of Veggie Booty, that mainstay snack of the 21st-century child, and scramble the marbles of the most well-balanced tot.

We're three minutes early, but we're still the last to arrive. A boy is violently pushing a coat rack on wheels, which is encouraging. But my heart sinks as I see that we've horribly miscalculated the clothing. Everyone is wearing utilitarian long-sleeved shirts and pants.

In the hallway I let Natalie climb out of the stroller, and despite my deft motions to keep her from seeing the lollalollaloola, she immediately burrows toward it. I pick her up in a playful, sweeping motion, hoping that the near-death thrill of practically being flung across a room will distract her. Thankfully, it does.

The sweet-faced admissions officer introduces herself to the eight parents and six children. She asks me to put a name tag on Natalie's back, which reads "Natalie 1.10." I see that every child has a number — "Sophie 1.7," say, or "Oliver 1.9." I scan for Microsoft signage to see if the company is a school

sponsor. No. The tags just indicate the children's ages, the decimals denoting months.

We walk into the airy classroom, where my Natalie 1.10 makes a beeline for a white rabbit in a cage. In a shameless softball pitch, I ask her what color it is. "White," she says, as she has a hundred times before when I ask her the color of snow. Bingo. But no one else seems to hear, and when a teacher does walk by, I am tempted to make the exact same pitch.

THREE teachers, women with sensible, short haircuts, are placed at different stations in the room. "Would you like to play with the ball?" one asks with a smile. Natalie is game, and she takes the ball and puts it down the right hole of a multilevered contraption. Two points.

Then Natalie wanders over to a teacher who is putting letter magnets on a board and immediately joins her. She even says, "Yellow" when she grabs a yellow B. Another two points.

The biggest test comes when the admis-

sions officer asks Natalie to sit next to her. She is holding a diner sugar shaker with holes on top. In a plastic basket are a dozen long, blunt screws. It's a toy the Marquis de Sade might dream up. The admissions officer starts putting the screws in (literally!).

Natalie pushes the screws around for a bit, but she's digging the concept and she begins putting them in one after another. I brazenly try to chat the woman up, and our conversation brings Natalie out of her reverie, so that she looks up at her and lets loose with a brilliant "Hi!" and a wave.

But soon, a boy appears and grabs the contraption away from Natalie. She says "Mine!" angrily, but she doesn't lose her cool. The boy tries to put in some screws, but he gets flustered. Natalie watches him and grabs the thing back. He grabs it again. She acts as if she doesn't care, and takes two screws and beats on the table as if they are drumsticks. I am giddy with delight.

Most of the time, Natalie toggles between the rabbit and a tea set. She is engrossed with the teapot, pouring it into a teacher's cup, looking for takers. Several times she calls out in her strong, clear voice, "Come,

Daddy!" waving me over to her side. Every time, I see her score diminish. Each time she calls, I respond, but I stand back a few feet. I fear that this sign of dependence is the biggest mark against her. This is why Mommy didn't come.

But as the half-hour winds down, I have a longing to stay. I see this as a good sign. The admissions person gives each child a farewell box of raisins and says to Natalie, "Thank you for coming, Natalie, and being such a good sharer."

We walk out with our raisins, and I watch Natalie push her lollalollaloola most of the way home. I feel victorious.

The happy postscript to this tale is that some months later, Natalie is accepted at this and another wonderful school. (We opt for the latter, through no fault of Brooklyn Heights Montessori.) I know it is warped — and conclusive evidence that my Daddy devotion has crossed into full-blown Daddy delusion — but I am unsurprised. I expected it, just as I fully believe that Natalie will one day play tennis professionally as well as win a MacArthur grant. All I need to do is keep out of her way.



Rob Shepperson

It was the pre-nursery school interview, and Dad had plenty of ideas for helping his daughter. She got in anyway.