

Mary Jo Hartle, with her husband, Jesse, who is also blind, and their kids, Kayla, J.J., and Brayden



## What Blind Parents Want You to See

These moms and dads approach life with a creative, can-do spirit and are endlessly resourceful. They're not looking for more attention, but they do deserve respect.

by **DIANE DEBROVNER**

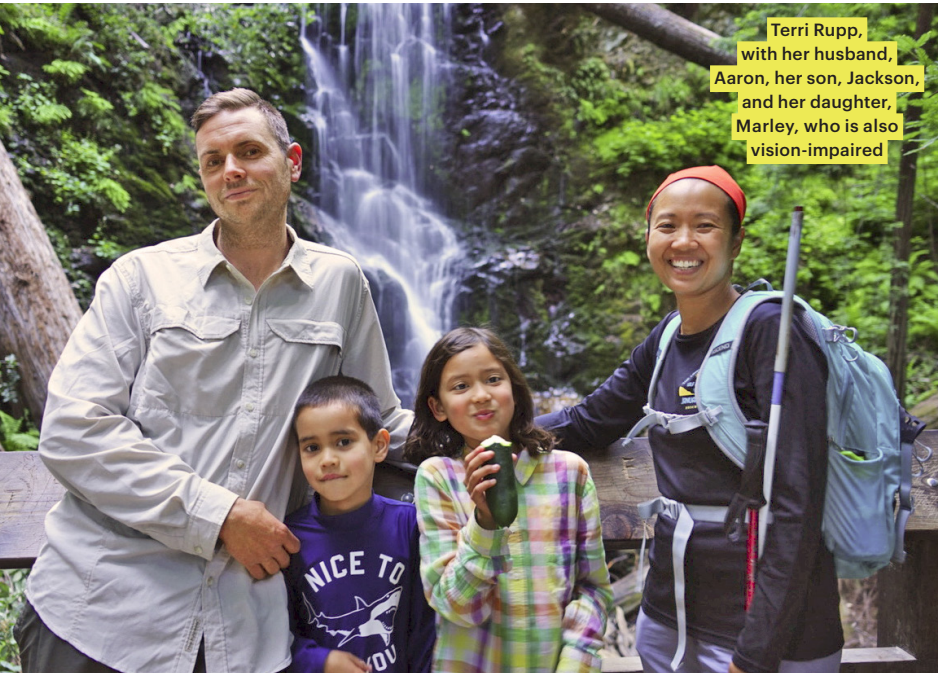
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**FOR THE MILLIONS** of people who watched the Netflix movie *Bird Box*, it was hard to decide what was more terrifying: the apocalyptic nightmare in which seeing a nebulous monster forces you to commit suicide, or the prospect of protecting your children from imminent danger while blindfolded. Sandra Bullock's badass character proved two things blind moms and dads know: When you love your kids, there is no obstacle that you can't overcome—and parenting without sight is undoubtedly doable.

Blind parents aren't action-adventure heroes in real life, but they do find smart solutions to the relentless challenges that come their way. That means keeping their kids safe on the playground as well as dealing with everyday tasks like cooking dinner and measuring medicine. They are not flying blind—they're thinking strategically.

However, they constantly confront other people's skepticism about their abilities—often from the day their baby is born. It's common for social workers and other hospital staff to question whether a blind parent is capable of being a good parent. We all talk about being authentic and embracing our imperfections, but that can be tougher for

ADRIENNE REES.



Terri Rupp, with her husband, Aaron, her son, Jackson, and her daughter, Marley, who is also vision-impaired

blind parents who feel they need to look like they've got everything under control all the time. If they could tell other moms and dads what's really on their mind, here's what they'd share.

**We're not "amazing."**

It may be unfathomable for some of us to imagine how one could juggle all the responsibilities of parenthood without being able to see. "People say it's amazing that I can walk down the sidewalk or take out the garbage or cook a meal for my family," says Debbie Kent Stein, a mom of one in Chicago. But even when someone intends those comments as compliments, they're insulting.

Blindness isn't the same experience that we have when we close our eyes. Although there is a range of blindness (you can have some degree of sight yet still be legally blind), most blind parents have been that way for many years or their entire life. "We do everything else blind, so parenting as a blind person is perfectly natural for us," says Stein.

Having a positive attitude is crucial. "Every day, I make a choice," says Holly Bonner, a mom of two from Staten Island, New York, who lost most of her sight as a result of breast-cancer treatment before her kids were born. "Do I let the stresses of parenthood get to me, or do I search for the bright side?"

Refocusing my attention on what really matters in life is my motherhood-coping mechanism," says Bonner, who blogs at BlindMotherhood.com.

**We just have different ways of doing things.**

Many blind parents attach jingle bells to their babies' and toddlers' shoes so they can hear where their kids are. They put braille labels on foods in their cabinets, bumpy stickers on microwave buttons, and puffy-paint markings or notches on their kids' medicine syringes. Their children's books and board games have both type and braille, and they pull their stroller instead of pushing it to make it easier to walk with their cane in front of them. They buy talking thermometers and triangular crayons that won't roll off the table. To spoon-feed their baby, they first touch the baby's cheek or chin with their pinky to help locate his mouth. "It's not that our other senses are heightened, but we have learned to pay attention to them more," says Melissa Riccobono, a mom of three in Baltimore, whose husband is also blind.

**We usually don't need help, but we appreciate the offer.**

When blind parents are walking in the street with their kids, they may stop at a

**A High-Five to Herbal Essences**

When blind people take a shower, it's hard for them to know which bottle is shampoo and which is conditioner; sometimes they put a rubber band around one to distinguish it. So earlier this year, Herbal Essences introduced a bottle design for visually impaired people that helps identify what's inside by touch. There are four raised lines on the back of the shampoos and eight circles on the back of the conditioners. The project was spearheaded by Sumaira Latif, company accessibility leader and a blind mom of three who has been with parent company Procter & Gamble for 18 years. "It's just a little thing, but there are hundreds of these little things that we have to spend time looking for every day," she says. "As a blind mom, it makes me feel more like a normal mom—and my kids will come to expect that companies will include people like me in their design process."



Sumaira Latif



SHAMPOO

CONDITIONER

corner and seem lost. “Chances are, we’re just taking our time to listen to the traffic and decide whether it’s time to cross,” says Ashley Nemeth, a mom of three in Regina, Saskatchewan, who blogs at BlindMovingOn.com. “The scariest thing is when a stranger just grabs my arm and starts taking me somewhere—it’s very disorienting.”

It’s always thoughtful to ask if there’s any way you can be of assistance. “I’ll usually respond, ‘Thanks so much—I’m good,’” says YouTuber Joy Ross, a mom of two in Camas, Washington. “But there have been times when I’ve been at the mall with my guide dog and simply wanted to locate a seat to rest and collect myself, and I wished someone had stopped and asked if I needed help or offered me a chair.” (As cute as a guide dog is, don’t talk to it or pet it while it’s working. You’d be amazed how many people do, says Nemeth.) If you have a neighbor who’s visually impaired, give her your phone number and let her know that she’s welcome to call if she’s ever in need.

### We can help too.

Blind parents want to be treated like every other person who has something valuable to contribute. For example, they may want to volunteer in their child’s



classroom, but the teacher might not invite them. “One mom I know signed up to help with a back-to-school party and brought snacks and drinks and cups, but when she got there, the other moms plunked her down in a chair and left her alone,” says Stacy Cervenka, a mom of two in Lincoln, Nebraska, who leads the Blind Parenting Group of the National Federation of the Blind. Instead, they could have taken a few minutes to describe the room to her, tell her what

still needed to be done, and ask how she’d like to help. “When it came time for the Halloween bake sale at my daughter’s preschool, one of the moms told me that they didn’t want me to bake anything because they were afraid to have the children eat it,” says Bonner. “They didn’t think I could cook, even though I cook for my family six nights a week.”

### Transportation is our biggest challenge, so feel free to offer us a ride.

The most significant thing that blind parents can’t do is drive. They use public transportation and paratransit services, or walk everywhere with their kids. The availability of Uber and Lyft has been a major game changer, but it’s expensive. If they sign their kid up for gymnastics class across town, they may have to build in the cost of a \$15 Uber ride both ways. And they have to bring their own car seat—and carry it with them when they get to their destination.

They may hesitate to ask other people for a ride but always appreciate one. Terri Rupp, a mom of two in Las Vegas, who recently ran her first marathon, started a moms group after her first baby was born. “Many of these women have become like family,” says Rupp, who blogs at BlindMomintheBurbs.com. “Whenever one of them has room in her car, she’ll call me and say, ‘Hey, we’re going to this new play space, do you want to come along?’”

### We take care of our kids. They don’t take care of us.

When Stein’s daughter was 3, people would say, “Are you taking your mommy out for a walk?” or “You must be such a big help to your mommy at home!” Stein had to come up with polite responses, such as “Yes, she picked up her toys this morning.” If strangers would try to give her daughter directions, Stein would say, “She’s only 3, so I think it would work out better if you explained them to me.”

### We can keep kids safe.

There’s no research or even anecdotal evidence showing that kids of blind parents are more prone to injuries or accidents than anyone else. At home,



Holly Bonner, with her husband, Joe, their daughters, Aoife and Nuala, and her guide dog, Frances



Joy Ross, with her husband, George, and their daughters, Georgianna and Isabella. The girls both have juvenile arthritis, the condition that caused Joy's vision loss.

## Technology has changed our lives.

Every iPhone has settings that can read texts and email out loud, and blind parents wear wireless headphones so they can listen inconspicuously. Screen-reading software and apps let them read anything digital and hear descriptions of photos, and it's helpful that need-to-know info from school is increasingly being shared

when blind parents cook dinner, they put their child in a play yard or high chair—just like the rest of us. They lock up their poisons, keep choking hazards off the floor, and make sure the sharp corners on the coffee table are covered.

“We hold hands outside, set up meeting places, establish boundaries for where our kids can go, and use a ‘Marco Polo’ style of communication if they’re not right next to us,” says Mary Jo Hartle, a mom of three from Lutherville, Maryland, who blogs at [MakingItOnThePlayground.com](http://MakingItOnThePlayground.com), and whose husband is also blind.

When Ross's girls were young, they wore a life jacket at all times around the pool, and in other situations she dressed them alike so that they were easily identifiable to others if they got separated from her. To prevent her kids from getting sunburned, Nemeth uses sunscreen lotion, which is easier and safer to control than spray, and she makes sure that they always wear UV shirts and hats.

“In some ways, we’re even better at monitoring our children because we are used to using our ears and our other senses,” says Riccobono. But it hurts when other parents aren’t comfortable sending their kids over for playdates.

via email or school websites. With their kids, blind parents can watch movies and TV shows that have audio descriptions, which narrate what’s happening on-screen. They use Facebook and Instagram to stay in touch with family and friends (it’s helpful when others include photo descriptions) and offer support and advice to each other online.

With a subscription service called Aira, blind people can make video calls on their phone or use smart glasses to get help from trained agents for simple things like reading instructions or an expiration date on a product. Similarly, the free app Be My Eyes connects users with millions of sighted volunteers. Bonner, a social worker who teaches graduate school, relies on a small new device called OrCam, which attaches to a pair of glasses, takes a photograph of any text (a sign, a paper, a screen), and then reads it aloud. There are also older devices that can identify colors, dollar bills, and supermarket items by their bar codes.

## Don't feel sorry for our kids.

Blind parents have been accused of being irresponsible for having children

and bringing them into a difficult setup, when in reality their children are thriving. In fact, because their parents talk to them constantly, kids often have particularly advanced verbal skills. Nicole Fincham-Sheehan, of Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, was a 19-year-old single mom when her first child was born. (She's now married and just had her third child.) While working two jobs, Fincham-Sheehan finished college and got her daughter into private school. "My daughter always did a lot of extracurriculars—you name it, she did it—tennis, soccer, dance, karate, cheerleading," she says.

Young kids don't see their parents' blindness as a big deal. "Our 4-year-old just understands that in order for Daddy to see something, Daddy needs to put his hands on it," says Cervenka. "He'll say, some people are blind and some are sighted, just like some people are boys and others are girls, and some have tattoos."

**Our kids don't get away with a lot just because we can't see them.**

"Every parent knows that when it's too quiet, you'd better go check on your child because she's probably doing something she's not supposed to be doing, like coloring on the wall with markers," says Riccobono. Her kids sometimes try to sneak candy, but then she'll

find the wrappers on the floor. "I can tell from the way my kids talk whether they're telling me the truth," says Hai Nguyen Ly, a blind dad of two in Florence, Massachusetts.

When it comes to discipline, rules are nonnegotiable. If a parent calls out to his children at the playground, they must respond immediately; if not, they have to go home. "We like to say that we are free-range parents," says Greg DeWall, Cervenka's husband, who runs a training center for the blind in Lincoln, Nebraska. "We trust our kids and have established that level of trust because we set boundaries from the beginning."

**We wish you'd step beyond your comfort zone.**

If you've never met a blind parent before, you might feel awkward or be unsure if you should look her in the eyes. "Nowadays we're all scared that we might offend people, so it can seem easier to just avoid interacting with a blind person," says Nemeth. "But I always encourage people to ask me questions." In other words, just treat her the same way you'd treat anyone else. Adds Hartle, "It would be great if other parents would approach me and see me as a regular mom, and not as 'the blind mom.' My husband and I always try to show people that we're comfortable with our blindness because that helps put them at ease." 🗣️



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 Hover your phone's camera over the smart code to find a digital version of this article that's accessible to visually impaired people—and a video of Joy Ross at home with her girls and her guide dog.