

Cookies for breakfast and sloths for everyone (or what we do on a beach vacation)

It's 7:30 a.m. on a morning of our beach vacation. I haven't even poured my first cup of coffee. And I'm pretty sure I could have used another three hours of sleep.

One of my children passes me holding onto a big, chocolatey Berger cookie. I pretend to gasp, and he and I share a laugh. We're at the beach, after all.

Then I hear the refrigerator door click shut.

"Do you let them drink Cokes right out of the fridge?" my father asks.

I glance over and see our other son, tilting back his head of uncombed hair as he guzzles a can of Coke.

"Well..." I say. "Maybe just one."

Berger cookies and Coke for breakfast. We're clearly not winning any awards for nutrition. But we're busy making memories.

When I was growing up, the beach was a magical place—not just because of the seashells you could find and the hugeness of the ocean, but because of the special moments together. My grandmother always came with us on vacation, which made the whole trip seem like a bigger deal. There were little boxes of sugary cereal for breakfast and sometimes even a trip to McDonald's for breakfast. My father was off from work the whole week, and bedtimes and everything else seemed more relaxed.

That's what I remember best, the feeling that life had slowed down, the sense that we were together enjoying this time away from home.

I can't give my children the sun and the moon and the stars. I can't give them a peaceful world or many guarantees about the future. I can give them love and faith and hope and a few memories to hold onto for years to come.

That's why I bring our sons to the beach year after year to spend time with the cousins and grandparents and uncles and aunts. The week is always exhausting. It isn't always easy to share a house packed with people. But I want our children to be able to look back on those special moments with people they love and who love them. And I want them to remember their beach vacation as a time when mom even let them have Coke for breakfast.

Besides, with memories, it's the small things that add up to the big ones.

John and I started going to Rehoboth Beach with my sister Maureen and her family the first summer after we became parents.



Every year when we went to the Boardwalk, my brother-in-law Eric would line up the children at one of the games and pay for everyone to play the game until every child had a good-sized stuffed prize. Eric died last fall, so he wasn't with us this year. And, even though I thought I was emotionally prepared, I missed him even more on this trip than I

expected to.

As the week went on, the children talked on and on about how much they wanted to win one of those pastel stuffed sloths. And—even though I may never have said it out loud—I knew we had no choice. Eric would have made sure his children and mine didn't come home empty-handed.

So on the last full day at the beach, we headed to the Boardwalk. We lined up our six children and Maureen and I jumped in, too, and we played and played until everyone who wanted a sloth had a sloth.

So we brought home a few sloths, lots of memories, and children who think they can eat cookies for breakfast. That's what I call a successful vacation.