

Planning a fun afternoon with your children. It's not rocket science. But it could be.

For years John has been wanting to launch model rockets with our children. He has many memories of building and launching them with friends and family, and he was excited to share that with our boys.

So when John announced that he and the boys were going to build an Estes rocket together, I wasn't sure our children were ready, but I had the sense to stay out of their way.



They are, after all, 7 and 5. And we weren't launching a space shuttle. We have also launched hundreds of stomp rockets and a baking soda and vinegar rocket.

So John picked a park and I read the sign carefully at the entrance. There was nothing about model rockets. We were good to go.



As John set up the launch site, the boys took their roles seriously, not touching anything that was off limits and quivering with excitement.



"Maybe it will go all the way to Venus!" said Daniel, always an optimist.

When everything was set, we started the countdown.

Launch Number One

The first rocket, a U.S. Army rocket, went soaring into the sky. It went so high that I lost track of it in the sunlight. Then it came floating down. We had to cover some ground to retrieve it,

but we met some great people along the way who chatted with us about the rocket. We were a bit of a spectacle.

Launch Number Two

It was exquisite. The Metalizer, which John and the boys had just built, soared into the sky, but not too high. We could follow it all the way up and all the way down. The parachute should have opened more, but it looked great to me. See what you think.

Launch Number Three

The U.S. Army rocket shot straight into the air. But then we had a mechanical failure. It separated and the nosecone and parachute floated away from the rest of the rocket, which came tumbling back to earth.

Daniel and I ran to follow the parachute, but it fell into a tree, far out of reach. A crowd of children gathered, all offering to climb the tree or throw their bicycle helmets up to knock it down. Suddenly we had this wonderful group of helpful friends.

"That's OK," I said. "It's really high up there, and it would be dangerous to climb those skinny limbs. They aren't strong enough."

We went back to tell Leo and John that the nosecone was gone. Some of us may have been disappointed—it was a really cool rocket—but scientists don't cry over lost equipment or failed experiments. We had had a good run. We packed up and got ready to go.



As we were walking out, I glanced over at the tree where the parachute was. A man had found an incredibly long stick and was shaking the tree branch. The parachute fell, and some of our new friends scooped it up and ran proudly to give it to us.

We went over to thank the man, who was wearing a Washington Nationals cap and enjoying a day at the park with his family.

"I haven't launched a rocket since high school," he told us. I marveled at how helpful everyone was, and how our rocket launching seemed to have united everyone in the park that day. Then

we were on our way.

So, no, our rocket did not go all the way to Venus. But you wouldn't know that if you talked to our sons. They are so very proud.

Almost as proud as their Baba. He's already talking about their next launch.

