

# FREE-RANGE KIDS

BY KATE TVELIA ATHEARN



Family photos from the Packer's album show life on the farm with their "just like family" friends, who get right in there, plucking.

**T**HEY DRIVE TRACTORS. THEY SLAUGHTER CHICKENS. When you enter their domain and look at the Packer family photos, they surround you like a pack of charismatic puppies, clamoring to tell you all about what it's like to be a kid on Northern Pines Farm in Vineyard Haven. "That's us with the piglets!" exclaims 9-year-old Nathaniel.

"I'm driving the tractor!" squeals 7-year-old Charlotte.

"Well, we were pushing you," corrects David, her 11-year-old brother. They impress me with lessons in piglet-care and chicken-plucking.

Then someone sounds the alert. Their get-around-the-farm golf cart is stuck in a snow bank, and the kids are out the door in a flash of plaid flannel and rubber boots, leaving us grown-ups alone with our coffee. John and Janet Packer (the parents) entertain me with tales of farming misadventure: failed electric fences, freezers full of meat left ajar. Life on the farm with three kids (four, if you count family friend

PHOTOGRAPHS: Courtesy of the Packer Family





David Packer (age 11) and Shawn Trieshmann (age 10) learn mechanics under John Packer's guidance at Northern Pines Farm.

Shane Metters, now 13, who came to work at the farm at age 8, and “basically lives here”) has shown them that things rarely go the way you expect. You need to be a little laid back if you’re going to teach your offspring to operate farm machinery, or process chickens, or even feed and water the animals.

Watching from the window, I see the kids in the cow pasture, their now-unstuck

golf cart loaded up with hay bales. They hop out and feed the cows, though I don’t remember hearing anyone telling them to do so. Nor did I hear any whining about who did it last time. I get the sense that that kind of bickering, if it exists at all, is not the norm at the Packer house. Instead, there is a palpable sense of cooperation.

John and Janet don’t talk about what their kids can’t do. They show me what

they’ve done. They built this tree house, operated the crane to raise their MET tower, and nursed a sturdy boar when he was but a runty piglet. All without incident. Or so their parents tell it. Because what’s the point in dwelling on the small stuff, when there are bigger lessons to learn? Why step in when your kids are trying to move a trampoline, when you could watch them discover leverage on their own? Why

PHOTOGRAPH: Tora Katzman





Charlotte Packer (age almost 7 when photographed) likes her view from the front-end loader's bucket.

not let them take down that tree? Yes, they could get hurt. But there's always an adult nearby—prepared to intervene if disaster strikes, while confident the kids can figure it out on their own.

The Packers don't say it, maybe because it's just too obvious, but they are teaching their kids how to survive: how to feed themselves. How to house themselves. How to get themselves unstuck from snow

banks. How not to be squeamish. How to have one hell of a good time.

"We don't have a lot of... you know, inside stuff," Janet says, referring to the video games and hand-held electronic devices she has vowed never to buy. "But we have..." she searches for the right word as she looks out the window, at the land her husband cleared himself, at the fences they've built together, at the 4-wheeler

tracks in the snow, the kids working together to lift hay bales, petting the cows' noses through the fence. "We have fun."

It's not everyone's idea of fun, of course. But in this sanitized, safety-obsessed culture, where most kids come home from school and plop themselves in front of a computer screen, it's good to know there are kids who are playing outside. And parents who are out there with them. ©