

Mompreneurs of the Month: Alison Qualter Berna and Allison Schlanger of apple seeds: Interview by Stephanie Ila Silver-Silberstein

Raising kids in NYC is amazing for so many reasons but it's not without its challenges. Whether you're trying to escape some crazy weather outside or you just need a change of scenery from your cramped apartment, **apple seeds** is the perfect destination.



Photo credit: apple seeds

apple seeds operates all-in-one play spaces for families with children newborn to five. They are located in New York City (Chelsea and the UWS) as well as Mumbai, India and Dubai, UAE with a location opening in Mexico City, Mexico. Their incredibly unique indoor playgrounds are designed by well-known children's museum designers, and they offer over 100 classes a week – from music classes to art, cooking, science, construction, ballet, tap, movement, gym, soccer and language. **apple seeds** is also the perfect place for a weekday or weekend birthday party, playdate or corporate event. And if that wasn't enough, they also have an award winning day camp, a kids' hair salon, a toy and bookstore and a healthy snack bar. Ready to move in yet?

The masterminds behind this safe, clean, fun place for Manhattan families to gather, socialize and play are Alison, Allison and their respective husbands Bobby & Craig. Read on for BNNYC's exclusive interview with Alison Qualter Berna and Allison Schlanger and find out how a neighborhood mommy and me music class planted a little (apple) seed that would change their lives forever.

BN: Write your bio in 5 sentences or less (i.e. where'd you grow up?, where'd you go to school?, job before kids?, how many kids?, where do you live now? Hobbies? etc.)

Allison Schlanger: Allison was born in New York City and raised in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. After college, she moved back to New York and has lived in the city since 1993.

Allison is an Emmy-nominated television producer who worked at MTV Networks for over ten years. In 1996, Allison began volunteer teaching at a West Harlem elementary school. Over the course of eight years, she taught 3rd-5th graders current events and conflict resolution. Allison and her husband Craig live in the Chelsea neighborhood of NYC with their twin sons, Sam and Ari, and younger son, Dov. Allison met Alison Berna and her beautiful daughters in a parent/child music class and then, along with their husbands, decided to partner and create apple seeds.

Alison Qualter Berna: Alison grew up in Short Hills, New Jersey and has lived in New York City since 1994. After working in production at NBC News, she changed careers and received her Masters degree in Public and International Affairs from Princeton University, focusing on children. Alison then spent years working and traveling for the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) where she managed a global program using sports as a vehicle to protect children and foster their development in countries around the world. Alison met Allison Schlanger and her adorable sons in music class and instantly connected with her.



Photo credit: apple seeds

BN: What inspired you to start your own business? How did it all begin?

AS & AQB: We all lived in the Chelsea/Flatiron neighborhood of NYC. Around the time our twins (Maddie and Sydney and Sam and Ari) were born, our neighborhood shifted from a traditionally commercial area to a residential one. Families moved in quickly, but resources for kids were still not readily available. We all wanted a kid friendly space to take our kids to on a regular basis. The spaces where we took classes did not allow for us to play, socialize, eat or spend time after our class was over. Our dream was to create a space for families in our neighborhood where they all wanted to come (both children and adults) and stay for a while. We wanted a safe, clean, fun space that had multiple uses. So we built apple seeds. We included an incredible indoor playground fabricated by top children's museum designers, 7 classrooms so that we could offer over 100 classes a week to kids newborn to 5, a space for diverse birthday

parties, camp, a children's toy/bookstore, a kids' hair salon and a snack bar/eating area where you could take a break and feed the kids.

BN: What challenges did you face when starting Apple seeds?

AS & AQB: Working so much while wanting to be with our kids all of the time – apple seeds made that easier but it is still a balance every day to be with our kids as much as we want (to leave a meeting or cancel a call to be at their school drop off and pick up, to never miss their activities and classes, etc). The pull of work knowing you can always do more to grow the business has to be constantly balanced by the more important pull of being as present a mother as possible. It will never be a perfect balance but staying as close to center, while remaining centered ourselves, is a big challenge perhaps for all working moms. The upside is that we work with our husbands so we share the load at work and at home. We end each day by going over the next day's calendar. Who will do school drop off and pick up, who has meetings they can't miss. Then the guys take over at work after school/naps are over because we are with the kids.

Another huge challenge is working out as much as we want to: boxing, spinning, yoga, swimming, anything! Somehow, it's always the thing that gives. There's also the challenge of taking the leap of faith itself, believing that the idea would work for a community of families without really being completely sure. There is a confidence you have to have in the idea and in the timing. We are doing that again 5 years later in a new neighborhood, the Upper West Side, and we will do it yet again for our 3rd location. It's the leap of faith that brings energy and excitement but it's a risk and a challenge nonetheless.

A surprising challenge? Where to park so many strollers! We underestimated the amount of people coming in and strollers that don't fold. You'd be amazed how much real estate we give up to park strollers so people can have as comfortable of an experience as possible.



Photo credit: apple seeds

BN: What are some of your favorite activities to do with your kids (in or around NYC)?

AQB: 1. We love going to as many children's theatre shows as we can – which is so amazing about living in New York City, there is one in every neighborhood 2. A lazy weekend day in the

park and playground 3. Driving out of the city to see as much green as we can – visiting cousins and grandparents in NJ, going to beaches in every direction and visiting their Nonna at the farm in Maryland (read: polar opposite of NYC). 4. Hanging out with the Schlanger family! (Yes, our kids really and truly love each other like we do!)

AS: 1. We love to see musicians play in the parks around the city. Washington Square Park has the most diverse and constant group of amazing artists. 2. Museum of Natural History. Before I had kids I favored MOMA and almost every other NYC museum. After kids, I have seen the light. The Museum of Natural History has so much for them. We never run out of things to do there. The mammals, the dinosaurs, the hall of biodiversity, the ocean life, the gem room, the planetarium, that awesome cross section of a tree...we have still not covered it all! 3. We leave the city on many weekends to go skiing, to the beach, to see the leaves change, and to see family in the suburbs. 4. Many of the activities listed are done with the Berna's by our side.

BN: You're on a desert island...with your kids – name 5 must-have items you'll want with you.

AQB: 1. Yogurt sticks, crackers, cheese sticks, almonds, granola bars – any snack I can fit in my bag. My kids eat all day long!

2. Books – all kinds of chapter books, picture books and some for me.

3. My yoga mat and the kids' mats too

4. Hiking shoes for all of us to explore every crevice of the entire island (while climbing as many trees as possible)

5. Surfboards

6. Adding a sixth as much as I hate to admit it: my iPhone. I'll use it for the cool camera apps since I take way too many pictures and can't imagine being on a deserted island and stopping that obsession.

AS: 1. A guitar pick — 2 out of 3 of my sons (Sam & Dov) will make anything into a guitar (a tennis racket, a stick, a baseball bat, a magic wand, a hairbrush...) Once they add a pick they are good for hours of band practice and concerts.

2. Books – all my guys love books, but my son Ari is obsessed. He can read the same book over and over again a never get tired of it. Did I mention they are all VERY quiet when they read?

3. Pencils & paper – they all love to draw and it keeps them very busy.

4. A compass – with me as their navigational guide they are up a creek without a paddle. We love to explore...climb rocks, follow paths...but at some point we need to get home.

5. Sunscreen!

BN: What are your goals for the future of apple seeds (realistic or in your wildest dreams)?

AS & AQB: Our goals for apple seeds are really the same – the two of us and our husbands. We are constantly amazed at how similarly we think. We strive everyday for apple seeds to be a place that families can come to enjoy just being with their child. We keep our space safe and clean so that our families can truly have fun. That has always been our primary goal at every location and it's something we infuse into our staff – the priority is always and will always be the children.

While having fun, we also love that kids learn so much at apple seeds. We want them leaving with new ideas, and while we never pretend to be a school, we do accept and respect the enormous responsibility of kids taking classes every day in our space. Their minds are so young

and open – we love that they go home from class or the playground with a new understanding about how things work – say from an art class or science class. Or leaving Songs for Seeds humming the tune to a new song they learned or doing a new animal sound or knowing how to say hello in a different language.

With each new location, we want to go deep into the neighborhood and really become a safe and fun community space for families. We would rather go deep than spread wide quickly just to expand our business. We strive to get to know our families, to listen to their unique needs and to try to get it right every time. This is what we hope our families feel when they come to play at apple seeds.

Visit <http://www.appleseedsplay.com> and let the adventure begin!

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