

The Reluctant Disciplinarian: The Truth About Mothering

I remember wanting to hit him.

The sippy cup hit me in the side of the head. Finn had lobbed it again from his car seat.

“That hurts Mommy,” I said. I was trying to remember any line from Jim Fay’s book “Parenting With Love and Logic.” I knew I was not supposed to show my anger. I was supposed to remain calm, to model the perfect proper response for confronting conflict in a loving and generous way. But I wanted to turn around and whack him blindly with my right hand, strike any skin I could get at as my father might have done when my brother and I fought in the back seat of the station wagon while driving to Sunday School.

I don’t remember what I actually said. Though my voice was calm, I don’t think the Fay’s would have approved of the content. Something like, “Finn, I want to hit you back. Do you want Mommy to spank you?”

He said, “Yes.”

Finn is two and a half. He has not been spanked, but he knows what it means.

His yes was ice water to my anger. The urge to pull over the Volvo subsided completely. I did not want to hit him. I wanted to hug him. I wanted him to apologize sincerely. I wanted him to never throw his bottle at me again.

I did not want to be the disciplinarian.

But that is my job. And throwing bottles at mommy is his job. He’s two. And while he knows right and wrong, what he needs to understand now are consequences.

I guess that I didn’t understand the consequences of being a mom. In those blissful, quiet nine months before birth, I didn’t understand discipline would be such a big part of my job description.

I’d imagined mothering to be more about nurturing. Feeding him whole grains. Finger painting.

Playing on the see saw. Teaching my child to love reading and writing. Going to the zoo.

We’ve gone to the zoo once. I discipline once every five minutes.

This is what mothers must do.

I’m a reluctant disciplinarian. It’s not the role I thought I signed up for. But since it’s clearly mine, I’m searching for ways to embrace this scratchy new mantle. It sounds military and puritanical, not adjectives I easily embody.

So I looked it up.

The first time discipline appeared in English was in the 13th century. It originally derives from *discipulus*, “learner,” which in turn derives from the verb *discere*, “learn.”

I can embrace learning.

The noun *disciplina*, “instruction, knowledge,” was derived from *disciplinus*. Annexed into the English language, the word eventually came to mean “maintenance of order (necessary for giving instruction).”

I can embrace instruction.

And it’s from this notion that we get our idea that discipline means “treatment that corrects or punishes.”

So what’s a *disciplinarian*? “One who enforces order,” first attested in 1639; earlier used of Puritans who wanted to establish the Presbyterian “discipline” in England (c.1585).

And so it is that I am choosing to think of myself less as a military commander or minister, and more in the original sense of the word, as in instructor.

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And, as in all other aspects of motherhood to date, I see that I am also the learner. That I am the one being disciplined, learning what it means to be a good mom. Learning how we don't always get what we think we signed up for. Learning once again that expectations can get us into trouble. What is is what is. Sippy cups flying through the air and all.

In the end, I let the sippy cup stay on the floor. "This is so sad," I said, finally remembering my lines from Jim Fay. "Now the sippy cup is on the floor and if you're thirsty, you won't have anything to drink."

When Finn asked for his drink a few minutes later, I reminded him that he had thrown it. "That wasn't a very good choice."

"But I waaaaaant it."

"This is so sad."

The next day he did it again. And the next. And the next. And probably even the next. And each time, the bottle stayed on the floor.

That's a month ago now. We're on to screaming like a pterodactyl and running away when mommy says, "Time for dinner." New disciplines needed. Sigh.

But Finn learned not to throw the cup. Mommy learned to hold her ground and her temper. And next month, we're planning another trip to the zoo.

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