

### **Making It Better**

How one mom realized that easing her children's pain is not always her most important job as a parent.

By Marnell Jameson

We're sitting in the pediatrician's office, my daughter Marissa and I, awaiting her kindergarten physical. She'll need three shots, a TB test, and a finger prick for a blood sample.

We're both miserable, only she's openly so. She's missing a morning at camp to be here. Meanwhile, I'm trying to tell myself that the physical is a rite of passage for mother and child -- like a first communion or a bat mitzvah, it's something noble that builds character. But I'm unconvinced. I've been through this with my older daughter, Paige, so I know it's neither noble nor character building. It's just a drag. I've even looked at the literature for an honest way out, knowing that vaccines are an option some parents forgo. But faced with the facts, I side with the medical establishment: In my opinion, the benefits to many outweigh the risks to the few.

As the moment draws closer, I find myself promising Marissa everything. "We'll go to the toy store," I say.

"Out for a milkshake?"

No smile.

"A milkshake and the toy store?"

No deal. "I just want to leave this place now."

Kids are different. Paige, now 8, never misses a toy op, but the younger one can't be bought. After Paige's shots, we went straight to a store where she picked out a stuffed cocker spaniel to console her. Somehow, buying her a present consoled me, too, for the guilt I felt about her having suffered. Marissa wasn't letting me off so easy.

Soon, the nurse came with the needles and began the shots. Marissa sat on my lap, complying but crying. That I was crying, too, went blessedly unnoticed.

"Let's go to the toy store," I suggested when the visit was finished. Though she dutifully followed me outside, she said something that gave me a jolt.

"Mom," she groaned, in a don't-you-know-anything? tone, "How is a new toy supposed to make my arm feel better?" And then I thought, not for the first time, how right she was and how wrong I was.

As parents, it's natural for us to want to make up for all the world's hurts, whether physical or emotional. No matter how old my children are, I'll want to do what I can to trade their pain for pleasure. But the truth is I can't and shouldn't.

Vaccinations are among the series of insults our children are destined to endure while we parents watch them navigate their way through the world. And we'll suffer, too, when they get passed over for the school play or don't get invited to the prom or are teased for wearing the wrong clothes. But in the long run, these remarks and rejections are shots we all have to take to help us build up resistance to the larger hurts in life.

And Marissa was right. Nothing we could buy was going to ease her pain. I still took her to the toy store, partly to make me feel better. But Marissa didn't want to shop. Nothing struck her until she came across the sequel to *The Little Engine That Could*, a \$2.99 paperback. I told her that she was just like that engine, a little girl who could do hard things if she chose to.

"Mom," she said in that tone again. "Could we please just stop talking about this whole thing?"

So I quietly drove to her camp. Once there, Marissa hung back, self-conscious about joining in late. "Mom, would you stay a minute? I'm feeling a little shy."

"Of course," I said and pulled her onto my lap. From her safe harbor, she watched the kids throwing water balloons. And suddenly, for the first time that day, I knew exactly what I was supposed to do. This was it. It wasn't about gifts or even words. It was just this, a quiet lap, a soft embrace.

A few moments later Marissa left me and joined a group playing duck-duck-goose. I watched as she walked onto the field with the bandages dotting her arms where the shots had gone. I felt, beyond love, tremendous admiration. And I knew she would be just fine.

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