

At Least He Didn't Kick (This Time)

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It all started with the muffins.

Banana muffins, to be exact. The ones my five-year-old specifically asked for when he woke up. The ones I had made so often, I didn't even need to consult a cookbook. The ones I probably didn't have enough time to whip up from scratch on a school day, but I did anyway. With my husband out of town for work, I wanted the morning to feel memorable.

Indeed, it *was* memorable—just not in any of the ways I hoped.

When the muffins came out of the oven, my son proclaimed them to be “no good.” Then he dismissed the entire day as “the worst day ever,” and I had to carry him to the car while he yelled into my ear. During the drive to school, I coached him with my best calming strategies:

“Let's take some big deep breaths ... ”

“Listen, here's your favorite song. Let's sing it together ... ”

“Remember, today is Apple Day at school! What do you think you're going to do?”

In response, he pulled off his tennis shoes and flung them onto the floor.

As we entered the car drop-off line, I bit my lip and watched him through the rearview mirror, trying not to let my panic show. *What would his teachers think if he was still having a tantrum when we arrived?*

We inched toward the school, and his screams subsided to sniffles. At my urging, he unbuckled and put his shoes back on.

But when the smiling volunteer opened our door, he curled up into the fetal position on the backseat and refused to move. After a few attempts to coax him out of the car, I sighed. “I'll just pull around to the front and walk him back,” I told the on-duty teacher. She nodded and waved me around, relieved that we were no longer holding up the line.

Maybe it didn't start with the muffins.

Maybe it started a few months earlier, when he stood on the precipice between preschool and kindergarten. When the summer sun blazed hot, and our tempers simmered in the suffocating humidity.

His older brother, reading chapter books on the couch, refused to play any of the games he proposed. In the kitchen, he tried unsuccessfully to start a game of Uno with me while I chopped up onions and bell peppers. In frustration, he threw a handful of refrigerator magnets across the room.

I was as puzzled as I was exasperated. *What could have prompted such a big reaction to such a small trigger?* When I asked him to pick up the magnets, he doubled down, grabbing and throwing every object within reach.

I stopped chopping and carried him upstairs to his room. The whole way, he banged against my back with clenched fists. Gently I set him down on his bed to give him a soft place to land.

He screamed. He raged. He kicked my pregnant belly.

In the stunned silence that followed, our eyes locked, wide with shock. He dissolved into sobs, and I sat down to envelop him in a hug. He already adored his not-yet-born baby brother, and his remorse was both instant and genuine. I felt my own anger melt away, writing the incident off as a strange summer fluke.

But the next day, some other trivial thing sparked another explosion—and again the day after that. Whether he could articulate it or not, a primal, middle-child instinct had kicked in. Threatened by tiny changes to our routines, he vied for our attention as though his very survival depended on it.

I searched the web for solutions to his tantrums. I consulted other mom friends, created a colorful behavior chart for the fridge, and even invested in play therapy sessions. Nothing made a noticeable difference.

We didn't have much time to fix the issue: he would start school in three weeks and become a big brother nine weeks after that. At nighttime, I lay in the darkness and voiced my fears to my husband: *"What if he gets kicked out of kindergarten?"*

Maybe it didn't start that summer, either. Not really.

Maybe it had started more than a year earlier when his world, and all the world, turned upside down.

When the boundaries between home and work and school split wide open, and we started juggling Zoom meetings for everything. When words like “quarantine” and “social distancing” entered his preschool lexicon and viruses took on starring roles as the villains in his superhero games.

During our first session with the play therapist, she asked pointed questions about our daily schedule and my work-from-home arrangement, which had begun during the pandemic. “Sometimes it can be hard for children to have a working mother,” she said, an offhand observation that sent me into a spiral of shame. I waited for a corollary about working fathers, but it never came.

“Sometimes,” I wanted to retort, “it can be hard for the mothers, too.”

Or maybe it had started even before the pandemic. Before I had bookmarked any parenting sites or given thought to my own parenting philosophy. Before I had spent time overanalyzing the roots of our family dynamics.

Before he and his brothers were born.

Back then, I believed I’d instinctively know how to persuade my children to eat their vegetables and clean up their toys. If I just appealed to their better natures through logic, surely we could avoid any embarrassing displays in the grocery aisles.

Maybe it was entirely out of spite, then, that my own children had arrived and, with their peculiar brand of illogic, set me straight about the whole thing. At eighteen months old, he had thrown a massive fit because I would not let him climb inside the oven. No amount of reasoning could convince him to back down, and even as I stuck to my calm, logical guns, all I could do was laugh. (And snap a video on my phone.)

I didn’t realize at the time how often I would return to that video. As he grew older, he found the exchange hilarious and asked to watch it over and over. Whenever I shared the video with him, I felt a twinge of nostalgia: though his toddler tantrums had felt exasperating at the time, they now seemed comparatively straightforward and solvable.

Regardless of how it all started, that morning I found myself parked in front of our elementary school. I hauled my 36-week-pregnant body into the backseat and held my son close. What was left of his anger dissipated, and he clung to me.

After a few minutes, I took a deep breath—for myself this time—and said, “I don’t want you to be late for kindergarten. Let’s walk back up to school together.”

He nodded. I opened the car door and waddled out, where the school librarian waited on the sidewalk. “You cannot drop off here,” she said sternly, a refrain she likely repeated every morning.

My eyes welled with tears, and she took a longer look at us both. Then she knelt beside my son and said, in a gentler tone, “Do you know what? I need some help setting up for the Book Fair. Would you like to come be my special helper this morning?”

He nodded, his nose and cheeks streaked with snot. I managed a soft “thank you” before returning to my car.

But I couldn’t seem to make myself drive off. Instead, I sat still, allowing my hot tears to finally spill over. In all my wildest dreams about motherhood, I hadn’t imagined the depths of frustration and inadequacy I would feel in moments like these. *Why can’t I fix this?* I wondered, a pit forming in my stomach just behind where my youngest child was growing.

“How’s kindergarten going?” my co-worker asked later that day while we heated up our lunches in the office kitchen. It was an innocent enough question, the kind of surface-level small talk we often exchanged in passing.

I sighed. “This morning was ... rough,” I admitted. Then, with a wry grin, I added, “But at least he didn’t kick anyone this time.”

The truth of my own words struck me. As bad as the morning had been, he hadn’t hurt anyone. Even though he had pulled his shoes off, he hadn’t thrown them *at me*.

Compared with his tantrums from a few months ago, this felt like progress. But what had caused the change? Maddeningly, I had no idea. With three completed sticker charts under our belts, maybe our consistency was finally paying off. Maybe the strategies he learned in play therapy had suddenly kicked in. Or maybe he had just grown a few months more mature.

My coworker smiled, the smile of a mother who had been there. “Celebrate those wins however you get them,” she advised.

She was right, of course. Progress doesn’t usually come in straight lines or forward leaps, but in barely perceptible, baby-step shuffles—in the stacking up of small moments, one after another.

Maybe it didn't matter how we had gotten here or whether today's gains would last until tomorrow. This day—this moment—was a win. And whatever happened next, it was worth celebrating.