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My Hillary Moment: It's My Son and I Can Cry if I Want to

By Delia Lloyd

Web Exclusive - October 31, 2008

"It's all right to cry...Crying gets the sad out of you..." Remember those lyrics? For those of us who came of age in the Free to Be... You and Me generation, Rosey Grier's tender, reassuring voice provided solace to millions of children who—in the aftermath of the emotional zeitgeist that was the 60s—learned that crying is both normal and healthy. In the decades since, scores of parenting books have echoed this theme: kids cry; it's a way of expressing themselves; don't worry too much about it.

But what about parents? Is it all right to cry in front of your kids? And if so, when? And why do we do it?

Article continues below

I've had reason to think about this lately because, like Hillary Clinton on the campaign trail, I recently had a crying moment of my own. I was stripping my son's bed when I came across a book underneath his pillow. It was a brand new picture book of the world's most famous soccer stars. I instantly recognized it as one he'd spotted at a school book fair the week before and had been hounding me to purchase ever since.

I'll be fair: we live in London, so for a six-year-old boy, a book full of photos and stats of professional soccer players is almost as exciting as a face-to-face meeting with Albus Dumbledore. But with Hanukkah, Christmas, and his birthday all about to arrive, I felt that the last thing he needed was another present. So I told him that I'd make a note of it and put it on his list, which he correctly inferred was my gentle way of saying, "No."

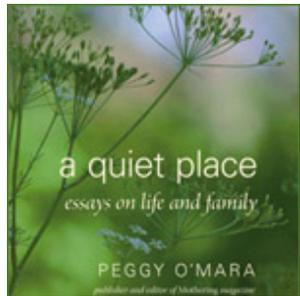
Seizing the purloined object from under his pillow, I ran downstairs to where my son was playing a match of Fantasy Footie on the computer.

"Isaac, where did you get this?" I asked sternly, waving the book in his face.

He blushed and lowered his eyes. "I...um...bought it with my own money."

"You don't have any money!" I shrieked, momentarily relieved that my dilatory approach to introducing an allowance had eliminated this as a feasible answer.

Knowing this—and here I give him points for creativity—he said that he'd bought it with his "foreign currency," a hodgepodge of Euros, Shekels, and US coins amassed from assorted travel.



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"Don't lie!"

He then resorted to his only remaining tactic: sympathy. "I just wanted to borrow it!" he protested meekly. "I was going to return it tomorrow!"

I took a moment to gather my thoughts as I decided how to respond. Should I explode in a fit of rage? Lower my voice, place a hand on his shoulder, and speak with furrowed brow? Give him time out for a week? And then I did something I never imagined I'd do in response to this kind of situation: I cried.

It's not that my kids have never prompted me to cry before. I cried when Isaac was one-week-old, and I was so engorged with breastmilk that I had every lactation consultant within a two-mile radius on speed dial to help sooth my pain. I cried when my one-year-old daughter had a double ear infection and stayed up all night, every night, for a week, screaming her lungs out. And, on occasion, I have cried from the sheer work that is involved in trying to raise young children. But it's one thing to cry out of the frustration or exhaustion of parenting and quite another thing to cry out of disappointment with something your child has done. And so, like the stream of media analysts doing their eternal postmortem on Hillary's crying episode, I had to ask myself: Why did I do it?

One answer is that these were tears of shame. In the narcissistic way in which we so often see our children as extensions of our own strengths and weaknesses, maybe I cried because of what others might think.

Another possibility is that my crying stemmed from that peculiar mix of fear and responsibility that parenting so often inspires—a "My God! What have I done?" sort of cry. Here it was, I'd been under the impression that I'd raised this bright, happy, socially adjusted child, when, in fact, he was a thieving monster. I feverishly asked myself, Where had I gone wrong? Had I misread the cues? Not breastfed him long enough? Should he have stayed in Montessori longer? (It didn't help that I was reading *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, a chilling fictional account of a mother coming to terms with her sociopathic son).

Or perhaps I cried to punish him. It's deeply disturbing for a child to witness a parent crying. I know from my own childhood that whenever my mother cried, I cried too. So maybe—short of actually hitting him—that was simply the most efficient mechanism I could come up with for inflicting pain—a sort of emotional substitute for the spanking I'd have gotten had I stolen something when I was a kid. If so, it worked. As soon as I began to cry, giant tears spilled down his face.

Finally, perhaps, my tears were designed to signal the severity of his offense—a morality tale of sorts. If I was going to successfully convey the depths of his wrongdoing, I'd need to cry to drive that home. "It was a school book fair!" I kept repeating over and over. "It's as if you stole from kids!" To which he wailed, "You're right! You're right! I don't deserve this book!"

The answer, of course, is all of the above. I cried because I was embarrassed, and I cried because I was scared, and I cried to make him feel bad, and I cried to prove a point. Were any of these legitimate reasons to cry? Who knows? As with so much of parenting, it's part instinct and part guesswork. What I do know is that this otherwise unpleasant episode with my son resolved well. First, we agreed that I would pay for the book (and he would pay me back with his tooth fairy money). Second, we also decided that rather than keeping the book, we would donate it to a charity that was collecting Christmas gifts for needy children.

"Won't they be excited when they see this book!" he exclaimed, once again the generous, caring child I'd always known him to be.

Perhaps the hardest thing about parenting is coming to terms with the fact that however much you love your kids, they will eventually do bad things. And these won't be just "Too bad he didn't share in the playground" sorts of things, but actions that are fundamentally, morally wrong. They might even remind you of the same impulses in yourself. And the first time this happens, it is an unnerving reminder of just how terrifying and monumental the task of parenting is. But I'm relieved that my first brush with this is over, because now we can move on. Or at least I can. He will of



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course have to revisit this issue with his kids of his own one day.

Delia Lloyd is a writer in London. Her essays have appeared in The International Herald Tribune, The Christian Science Monitor, and on the BBC World Service.

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