

At-home dad learns dress-up is no game

So I'm the at-home dad now. Like any new "job," I assumed there would be a detailed job description or training manual. There isn't. Dad's only job description is actually very straightforward: "Take care of (insert child's three most immediate needs here) as soon as possible."

And while the needs of two little girls are in an almost constant state of change, there's one thing that you need to address each and every day, sometimes more than once. Getting dressed.

It doesn't seem like it should be such a traumatic thing, getting dressed. But there's far more to clothing a child than I once thought.

Unlike grown-ups who press that snooze button as often as they can, kids can't wait to get out of their beds. Strangely, they are equally anxious to get into ours.

You see, they think the TV in our room was placed there for their entertainment. Apparently, they also think that, even though cable TV brings cartoons into the home all day and night, our bedroom television is the only place in the house the cartoons can be viewed in the early hours of the morning.

"Daddy, can we watch a cartoon in your bed?" they ask.

In my mind, I respond, "No! Do you need a map to the family room? Get outta here! Scat!"

In reality, I tell them, "Sure, sweetie." This is a big mistake.

I have found that cartoons have a mysterious power that deafens children to adult voices. I ask the children to get dressed. Their response is, well, nothing. They simply continue to stare blankly into the TV.

I step between them and the TV, hoping that they'll better acknowledge my existence. But before I can say a word, my usually cute children growl at me, "Daddy, we can't see!"

How rude of me to come between them and this episode of who-knows-what that they've watched so often, I find myself reciting the dialogue.

So now, I have a choice to make. The hard-nosed approach is to turn off the TV. With this

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For The Post-Crescent



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option, there's anger. And while they do become responsive again, they're only response is moaning over the loss of their precious cartoons.

Option No. 2 is bribery, which I prefer to think of as the incentive-based-reward program: "If you go and get your clothes, you can get dressed while watching the cartoon."

This approach gives me control. I maintain their attention and speed by threatening to take away their brain candy with a simple touch of the "off" button.

It sounds cruel. But believe me, morning TV junkies need tough love. The drawback to this approach is that you're relying on them to select their clothes.

If they're running to make a selection and get back before the commercial break ends, they're probably not making the best choices. Tie-dye is cool, on a given shirt or pants. Wearing enough colors and patterns to simulate tie-dye is atrocious.

Do you give them credit for picking out their clothes or let them know that these combinations would offend even the most vision-impaired people in bad lighting.

I try to explain to Daughter No. 1, "Honey, these don't really go together. How about your pink shirt with the ice-cream

cones?"

She looks at me, blank faced, starting to shake. She can't tell time very well, but her little internal clock tells her that there are only seconds before the cartoon comes back on.

"Uh, I couldn't find it," she said.

I offer to help, but as I approach her dresser, I realize that she isn't with me. She has returned to my room to bask in the warm glow of the television.

Even if they do manage to pick out two items that match, problems can still arise. Shirts, even pants, go on backwards. Then there are the occasional head/neck injuries that arise from Daughter No. 2 trying to put on her favorite old T-shirt.

Not willing to admit that she has outgrown the shirt, she struggles with all her might to force her 4-year-old head through an opening barely big enough to accommodate her fist.

I gently suggest, "Sweetie, I think that shirt is too small for you."

She responds, "Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Note to self: Divert little-flow-er shirt from laundry to rummage-sale pile.

With the right timing (around commercials) and steady reminders that getting dressed means with underwear and socks, the clothes are on as the cartoon ends, and the TV goes off.

"So kids, what do you want for breakfast?"

"I want fruity loops!"

"No, let's have waffles!"

I rub my forehead for a moment as the argument rages on. Then, I smile at the sight of these two little debaters, each rigorously campaigning for my endorsement of their breakfast candidate. Sadly, I too am hungry and neither choice sounds very appealing to me.

I decide to wander downstairs and scope out the cabinet. Perhaps we're out of both items? I hope so. At least that will ease the pain of one of today's challenges for at-home dad.

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