

Trying to escape the grip of the claw machine



I can't tell you how many times I have told our children that claw machines are designed so that most people lose.

Still, for the child who can see the stuffed Angry Bird sitting there and those metal fingers just waiting to carry it to him, a mother's explanation is meaningless.



During our recent trip to the boardwalk, Leo walked up to a machine, inserted his quarter, and—of course—the claw came up empty.

He wanted to try again and again and again. And I was cringing and thinking of how much I'd rather have a quarter than a claw full of air.

Then I turned around and saw the claw machine of my dreams.

It was going to cost a ridiculous four quarters for one play—but we were guaranteed a prize. The prizes themselves were nothing exciting, just tiny stuffed dogs with no personality or flair. But they were prizes.



"Let's try this one!" I said, steering the boys over.

Daniel, who has a bit of a lucky streak, stepped up to play first.



On his first try the claw didn't snatch anything. Then the claw moved again and picked up a prize—no, wait, THREE prizes from the machine. They tumbled down the chute and Daniel scooped them up happily.

They were gray, black, and brown dogs. And they were as bland and poorly made as I had imagined.

"Why don't you share one with your brother?" I said. But Leo only wanted the gray one. And suddenly the gray one was the only one anyone wanted.

Besides, as we know, the claw machine victory is not about the prize as much as the win. So we handed Leo four more quarters.



He slid them into the slots and we held our breath again. And when the claw reached into the pile of animals, it picked up a single dog and—you won't believe this—it was gray. And, here's the really astonishing part, Leo didn't care that his brother had won three. He was content to have won the one he wanted.

I think we all felt pretty lucky at that moment.

But although I thought a machine that guarantees a win was a great idea, I soon realized I was wrong. That machine actually redeemed the boys' faith in claw machines. And now they will expect not just that they'll win every time, but also that they can make some Babe Ruth call as to which stuffed toy should come down the chute.

Ah well. Even with you "play till you win," you can't win them all.

