

Using your parenting noodle

A few weeks ago Catholic Charities asked us to make an appearance at an information session for people considering adoption. At one point, one of the men in the audience asked whether adopting was easier the second time around.

I sort of shrugged and said that all we had skipped was having a second health inspection of our house.

Then John spoke up.

“It’s not the adopting that’s hard,” he said. “It’s the parenting.”

Ah, how true that is. And we are certainly trying hard to get it right.

Before we brought Leo home from China, we had so much time on our hands that we enrolled in a parenting class. It was helpful, but it was sort of like sitting in a driver’s ed class when you’ve never ridden inside a car. It all seemed fairly easy in theory.

Then all of a sudden we found that we were parents of two of the most magnificent children in the world. We are so, so, so blessed to be on this journey with them, and we thank God for the honor and joy of being their parents every day. But—here’s the shocker—it is not always easy.

Some days after we put the children to bed, I remember the parenting instructor telling us that in parenting you must praise seven times for every one criticism. Then I think of all the ways I’ve corrected the boys throughout the day.

“Don’t poke your fork in your eye.”

“Don’t run ahead of Mama to get to the car.”

“Absolutely no Irish dancing on the stairs.”

“Don’t dive headfirst off the couch!”

And that's just a five-minute slice of the day.

So, after hearing an idea from another mother, I decided we would try something positive. We would find a jar and fill it with uncooked noodles. The boys can earn noodles for anything—speaking kindly, sharing nicely, helping clean up their toys, watering the plants, saying grace beautifully, and any number of other kind, thoughtful gestures. Our goal? When the noodles reach the top of the jar, we will take a family trip to Strasburg, Pa., to ride the train.



The boys are totally on board. Even Daniel, who has never been there, talks about Strasburg, points to himself and says, “Me, me, me.”

I'm not sure it's a great parenting strategy. Maybe we should have charts with specific goals for the boys to accomplish and stickers. But what I like about the noodle jar is that we are Team Buettner. It discourages the “Naah, naah” taunting, which seems to arise at an early age.

What I am enjoying most about the noodle jar is that it makes me more aware of the beautiful moments, the small kindnesses the boys show each other. I don't know whether those moments are happening more frequently or whether I am just noticing them more because there are noodles on the line—and because Leo points them out to me if I miss them. But I do like that the boys feel they are getting recognition for their efforts.

Now, it's an enormous jar. It formerly held 645 animal crackers, most of which the boys ate at my parents' house. Even with all the noodles Leo and Daniel have been earning, Strasburg seems about as likely to happen as our next trip to China. So to keep them from getting discouraged, we promised treats as we reached lines on the jar.

Tonight to celebrate hitting the first line, we went out for frozen yogurt.



It was a hit—especially when a policeman spotted Leo and Daniel through the shop

window and came in to chat and shake their hands.



Can Strasburg top that? We'll just have to wait and see.

We still have a lot of noodles to earn before we get to go.

