

A Rock and a Hard Place

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“I don’t know what to do! My son has to have a cavity filled, but he flatly refuses! He’s terrified of needles, and the dentist says the cavity goes too close to the root to not use Novocain. He’s too big to pick up and put in the car, and no amount of punishment or bribes has made a difference!” My client felt stuck. Her son had to get his tooth repaired, or the damage would get bigger, but he was flatly refusing to cooperate. What was she to do? My client admitted that her son had received shots before, but said that each time was worse than the last. Her son sometimes made a scene or even passed out in fright at the doctor’s office. When I asked what she was doing during his shots, she admitted that she mostly tried to reassure him or calm him down, but that she was perhaps even more anxious than her son. She hated needles herself, and it was hard to watch her son have such a hard time. The issue seemed two-fold. First, both she and her son believed that shots are horrible, and he probably wouldn’t be able to tolerate them. Second, her parenting style left her with no strategies for holding a firm line when it was needed. When we’re trying to do something hard or scary, it helps to have someone who has confidence in us and about what we’re trying to do. If we can’t tell anyone else thinks we can pull something off, it’s harder to imagine it or believe in it for ourselves. I worked with my client on her own fears about needles so that she could be more relaxed and confident with her son when he had to have shots.

Secondly, I worked on my client’s ability to set limits. While heavy-handedness is rarely required, it is important that we hold firm lines as parents sometimes. In this case, her son needed a cavity filled, but he was under the impression that this was optional. And she admitted that she didn’t want to have to make him do it. She didn’t like to get dental work, either! I helped her to see the bind she was putting her son in. He couldn’t quite make the decision for himself to see the dentist, but he was getting neither the confidence nor insistence from her to make it possible. In addition to working toward building relaxed confidence in her son, we also worked on a plan she felt she could do. She told her son that he had to get the cavity filled for several reasons. Period.

However, she also asked him if there were things that could make the experience go better. Did he prefer morning or afternoon? First of the week or before the weekend? Could they make a music playlist to listen to during his dental appointment to help divert some of his attention away from the procedure? She didn’t guarantee that she could get his preferred appointment time, but she let him know that he could have some control of the timing and the environment.

As expected, her son got more scared as the appointment day approached, but my client was able to respond relaxedly that she understood that he was scared, but the work had to be done, and they had a good plan. On the day of the appointment, she sat with him (per his request) and mostly read a magazine while he listened to music. She cried later about how hard it was to see her son go through the procedure, but she was proud of herself that she was able to decide (over and over) to stay relaxed and confident about the procedure while she was with her son. Additionally, her son seemed pleased with himself that he had worked out a plan to get through a situation that seemed impossible before. As parents, we are often willing to put ourselves way out for our children. Sometimes this means that we have to show our relaxed faith in them, even if they are trying something hard. And sometimes this means we have to set an immovable limit, without harshness, but decidedly firm. Some call that tough love. Others call it good parenting. Whatever you call it, we owe it to ourselves and our children.

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