

Coffee Talk: Two Sugars One Life

The Homework Meltdown

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My nine-year-old threw a pencil at the wall and I almost became my father.

Tuesday night. 7:43 PM. Third-grade math. The worksheet had twelve problems. We'd been on problem four for forty minutes. Forty minutes of "I don't get it" and "this is stupid" and the kind of theatrical sobbing usually reserved for Shakespearean death scenes.

I'd explained it four different ways. Drew pictures. Used M&Ms as visual aids, which backfired because now he wanted to eat the math. His tears had graduated from frustrated whimpering to that full-body hiccup cry where the snot gets involved and suddenly we're surviving a natural disaster in the dining room.

If you've ever watched a child melt down over homework and felt your own meltdown building behind your teeth, this one's for you.

Kid meltdowns are contagious. Their nervous system catches fire and yours reaches for the matches. It's not rational. It's biological. Suddenly two people are spiraling over what seven times eight equals.

I could feel it building. The jaw clenching. The voice getting that sharp edge it gets right before it becomes the voice I swore I'd never use. My brain was drafting sentences I'd be apologizing for at breakfast. Things like "*If you'd just LISTEN*" and "*This isn't HARD*" and the one my dad used to pull out like a weapon: "*What is WRONG with you?*"

I was one breath away from adding my noise to his noise and calling that "helping."

Then Gary, my right eye, twitched.

And for once in my life, I listened.

I stopped. Not gracefully. Not like some mindfulness commercial where the parent takes a serene breath and everything gets soft-focused. I stopped like someone slamming the brakes at a yellow light. Ugly. Abrupt. Necessary.

I said it out loud. Right there, in front of my kid, snot and all: “I need to stop. I’m at a four.”

He looked at me like I’d started speaking Klingon.

“I need a minute,” I said. “I’m going to the kitchen. I’ll be right back.”

Stop. Drop. Roll. That’s the Emergency Brake. You stop whatever you’re doing. You drop and name the level (how far gone are you). And you roll. You physically move yourself somewhere else. In parenting, “somewhere else” is usually eight feet away staring at the refrigerator and questioning your life choices.

I stood in the kitchen. Hands on the counter. Breathing like I’d just run a 5K I didn’t train for. Letting my nervous system remember that third-grade math is not a life-threatening event, even when it absolutely feels like one.

Two minutes. Maybe three.

When I came back, something had shifted. Not the math. The math was still impossible, apparently. But the energy between us. My son was still upset, but he was watching me now with this curious look. Less panicked. Like maybe if the adult in the room could stop spiraling, it was safe for him to stop too.

We didn’t finish the worksheet that night. The rest went back to school incomplete. Nobody died. His teacher didn’t call CPS.

Three days later, I watched my kid stub his toe on a doorframe, wind up to scream, and pause. He looked at me and said, “I’m at a three.”

I didn’t teach him that. He just watched me do it.

I can’t control the homework. I can’t control the meltdown. I can control my spiral. And apparently, that’s the lesson that actually lands — not the one I planned, but the one I modeled while barely holding it together.

Parenting isn’t about getting it right. It’s about getting it wrong in front of witnesses and then showing them what you do next. The homework never matters as much as

the human doing it. And sometimes the most powerful thing a parent can do is stand in a kitchen, white-knuckling a countertop, choosing not to become the storm.

Here's to the unfinished worksheets, the pencils in the drywall, and the parents brave enough to say "I need a minute" before saying something they can't take back.

Cheers, Clayton

Coffee Talk 2.0: For every parent who's ever lost it over long division and found themselves in the kitchen wondering how this became their life.

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