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Alicia Unterbrink

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No Mess Is Too Much

By Jaylese's Mom

It was a bright summer day, the kind of day that encouraged people to get out of their houses and move around. Since we both had the day off, my friend and co-worker Lee suggested we take our kids to Chuck-E-Cheese in Oklahoma City. It felt good to get out of Elk City; it felt even better to take my daughter, Jaylese, to go do something special. Life had been difficult for the two of us lately, and I knew Jaylese was in desperate need of some fun. So Chuck-E-Cheese it was, where a kid can be a kid.

"You can listen to whatever you want," Lee informed me as he made a right turn and headed in the direction of the interstate.

"Alright, I'll play DJ," I responded as I plugged my cell phone into the auxiliary cord hanging from Lee's cd-player and began scrolling through my music library. "Any requests?" I asked, turning in my seat and looking back at the two children in the backseat of Lee's little red car.

"'Dark Horse' by Katy Perry!" Jaylese exclaimed without hesitation.

"You got it," I said, finding and selecting the song. The popular pop song began playing the familiar tune through the car speakers, and I settled into the passenger seat, preparing for the hour and change drive to Oklahoma City. The sound of both kids singing along to the music made me smile, and I looked over at Lee driving just as he looked at me, both of our expressions playfully saying, "Kids these days."

We made it about halfway to our destination when Lee's son, Hayden, asked about snacks.

"I've got them over here," I replied as I retrieved the bag of goodies we had purchased at the convenience store before our departure. "Chips or M&M's?" I asked, holding up a bag of each.

"M&Ms!" Hayden squealed, fighting against the child restraints of his car seat in attempt to reach the bag of chocolate candies in my hand. He eagerly attacked the opened candy the instant his little fingers felt the bag within reach. Jaylese opted for chips.

"His juice goes in his cup," Lee told me as I rifled through the plastic sack for their drinks.

"Jaylese, please hand me is cup from back there," I said. I filled the cup up with juice, checked the lid to ensure it was screwed back on tightly, and passed it to Hayden. I placed Jaylese's drink in the cup holder designated for the backseat where she could reach it when she wanted it. "Make sure you put it back in the cup holder after you take a drink, ok? That way it doesn't get spilled."



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We were on the outskirts of Oklahoma City when I looked back and noticed Jaylese's bag of chips in Hayden's chocolate-covered hands. He was just sitting there with the bag turned upside down, chips smashed up and spilled all over the place, staring at me as if he had been waiting for me to see what he had done. Jaylese was staring at him, a look of horror on her face.

"Oh my," I gasped. I imagine my face mirrored the look on Jaylese's.

Lee glanced in his rearview mirror to see what was going on.

"Oh, no big deal," he responded with ease. "It's ok buddy, you're not in trouble. We can clean it up when we get to Chuck-E-Cheese."

Without thinking, I muttered, "Shoot, I'd be pissed. I hate it when kids make a mess in my car."

Lee surprised me with his response. "I don't make a big deal out of it. I mean, they're just kids. Kids make messes. It's just how it is."

"Still—," I said in a somewhat disapproving manner.

"What can I do?" Lee continued. "What are my options? Get mad, yell at him, and let it stress me out? What good will that do? In the end, I still have to clean it up. But I don't have to ruin a good time over it. I don't get mad at kids for doing kid-things. If I yell at him, he's going to get upset. I'd rather see him happy. It takes a few minutes to clean up a mess; it takes a lot longer to clean up the damage done by getting all bent out of shape at him about it."

I nodded my head, absorbing this perspective of his that was so new to me. I felt a twinge of guilt deep in my stomach. How often do I yell at Jaylese? I get so mad at her for what I consider to be an unneeded addition of work she loads onto me, and I am so unforgiving when it comes to messes she makes. At that moment, I felt ashamed of myself. If I simply took a minute before responding to an incident and reminded myself that she was just a kid, how many tears of hers could I have spared? Being so harsh to her made me feel bad, and to make matters worse, it made her feel bad too.

"You see," Lee said, "before blowing up about it, I ask myself if it's worth hurting his feelings over. The answer is always no. He's my baby; nothing is worth hurting his feelings and making him feel bad about himself."

I sat in silence for a while before looking over my shoulder at my beautiful little girl watching pensively out the window in the backseat. Feeling my gaze, she shifted her attention and her eyes met mine. Giving her a small, apologetic smile, I slipped my hand behind my seat. My smile grew bigger when I felt her softly place her hand inside of mine. For the next few miles we rode just like that, our hands entwined in each other's in a secret handshake that sealed an unspoken agreement. From that point on, I vowed to ask myself before responding to a situation involving her, "Is it worth hurting her feelings over?"

