

Dan Naumovich: ‘Cute’ spell must be broken

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At a school open house last semester, I was eager to meet with our youngest son’s preschool teacher. Actually, anxious might be a better word.

Our son, Mark, is part superhero and part jungle cat, with budding lothario tendencies. He’s a boy whose favorite word and general outlook toward life is “Charge!” While getting dressed recently, he pointed his finger in the air to punctuate his declaration that, “Today, I will wear my underpants backwards!”

I was worried how Mark would comport himself in a formal educational setting.

It turned out he was doing fine. He’s able to suppress his hyper-expressive behavior when it’s time to buckle down and work. He can be a bit chatty, the teacher remarked, which led to the one issue she did want to address: his speech.

“You have noticed it?” she said, noting the quizzical look on my face.

Well, yes, I did notice that “Mawk” pronounces his L’s and R’s as W’s. And that his S’s tend to splurt out a little sloppily, especially when he is excited, which is often the case.

But, you see, none of this is a problem. It’s adorable. Right now, I’d no more want Mark to lose his misarticulations than I would have him sprout up three feet and grow a beard.

Funny thing, though — if Mark were to sprout up and tower above us (and at 6 feet tall, he would do that), he couldn’t possibly rule over our home as almightily as he does as the family runt.

As the youngest, and barring some sort of immaculate event, Mark will never have to cede the title of “our baby.” This distinction, accented by his child-like diction, empowers him with powerful persuasion over our parental will. The boy gets away with everything.

Early on, my wife made it a rule that once weaned, the kids would sleep in their own beds. Mark is in ours most every night. He has veto power over broccoli, even while the other kids are forced to eat what’s good for them. And he’s given free reign to wear his underpants backward.

I don’t believe we’re unusual in coddling our youngest. I suspect it’s this way in most families, except maybe the Partridges, who clearly had little fondness for baby Tracy and her pointless tambourine playing.

The question is, why do we let the least mentally developed in the family hold dominion over all?

The common theory holds that it is simply a matter of fatigue. By the time the last tot comes around, we parents are just too tired to mount any type of disciplinary defense. There’s some validity to that excuse, but the truth lies much deeper.

I think that, in our case anyway, we subconsciously entered into a bargain with Mark: If we promise to not subject him to the rules and responsibilities that life eventually demands, he has to promise to stay cuddly and never grow up.

Of course, it's a delusional bargain and we've since realized the wisdom of breaching terms. We've begun to strip Mark of his authority so that he knows he's not the boss at school. Teachers aren't as likely to fall under the spell of his magical dimples when there are 15 other kids just as cute and rambunctious.

And Mark started to see the school's speech specialist this semester. Now when he says "lollipop" and really concentrates, his tongue shoots out of his mouth as he exaggerates each "L" sound. It's pretty adorable.

The joy of watching Mark grow up is certainly tinged bittersweet, just as it is with our other three kids.

I can accept that he'll likely be taller than me someday — just as long as he never stops believing he's Spider-Man.

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