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Steering Clear of Grumpiness

How one mom used her son's love of cars to teach him to how to navigate bad moods and angry moments. By Elizabeth Pagel-Hogan

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Until recently, it seemed as if our middle son, Dylan, age 4, would come downstairs feeling out of sorts almost every morning. Minor complaints were expressed as major catastrophes.

"You didn't make me cinnamon rolls!" he would cry.

The next day, even if cinnamon rolls were ready and waiting, he'd still feel like something had gone wrong. "You didn't wait for me to help you make cinnamon rolls!"

Some mornings he'd be cheerful, filling me with hope that he'd have a great day. But then the grumpiness would reappear. Whether it was "I don't want anyone to color with me!" or "Why won't anyone color with me?" he seemed to have a knack for giving any situation a negative spin. My husband, Edward, and I walked on eggshells, braced for the next time Dylan would break down and ruin a family game or meal or party or trip to the store -- or just about anything.



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Clearly, we needed a strategy to help us tackle Dylan's unhappiness habit, and I wanted a solution that didn't involve catering to his arbitrary demands. First, I sought some advice from our pediatrician. She told me that it can be extremely hard for 4-year-olds to manage their emotions, and that the old advice of letting them "vent their anger" by hitting pillows or stuffed animals usually made the problem worse. She suggested we look for ways to help Dylan calm himself down, such as listening to gentle music* or sitting in a favorite rocking chair. I stashed away this advice for a rainy day.

A short time later, Dylan and I were at the toy store to buy a birthday present for a friend. Despite my attempts to prepare him for the situation and remind him that we were buying a present for someone else, he boiled over with anger.

Driving to the party afterward, I thought to myself, "We're on a highway to hell."

The thought stuck with me, and I realized that we could just as easily be on a "road to success." An idea started forming in my head. Could a story featuring Dylan's favorite things -- cars, trucks, and other vehicles -- be the way out of the land of grumpiness? I jotted down a few ideas, and during a quiet moment the next day I decided to share my made-up tale with

I told him about a little boy driving a car down a road. When the little boy got angry, shouted, or hit his brothers, the road got bumpy and grumpy and was not fun to drive on at all. But when the little boy took a deep breath, said he was sorry, and asked his mom or dad for help with a problem, the road was smooth and fast and lots of fun to drive on.

Dylan appeared to enjoy the story, and over the next few weeks, I brought it up gently whenever he started to get upset or angry. "Do you remember the story I told you about driving down the road?" I would ask. "What road do you want to drive on? You're in the driver's seat.'

Edward was skeptical about how well this approach would work in the heat of the moment. "I don't know that I'll have the patience to bring up this whole road story," he said. I sympathized. A cute story didn't seem like much help when an argument was escalating fast.

*Elizabeth recommends the soothing tunes on Enya's Shepherd Moons as ideal calm-down music for kids. "Dylan listens to it enough to know that his favorites are tracks 2 and 9!

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