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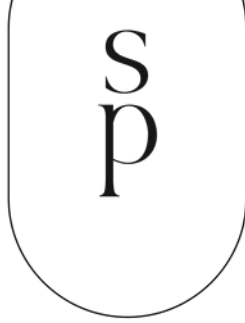
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THE ZEBRA STORY

(EMOTION COACHING WITH CHILDREN)





Jessie was two at the time. We were on a flight home after visiting with relatives.

Bored, tired and cranky, Jessie asked me for Zebra, her favourite stuffed animal and comfort object. Unfortunately, I had absentmindedly packed the well-worn critter in a suitcase that we checked in at the baggage counter.

“I’m sorry Honey, but we can’t get Zebra right now. He’s in the big suitcase in another part of the aeroplane”, I explained.

“I want Zebra”, she whined pitifully.

“I know sweetheart, but Zebra isn’t here. He’s in the luggage compartment underneath the plane and I can’t get him until we get off the plane. I’m sorry”.

“I WANT ZEBRA, I WANT ZEBRA!” she moaned again.

Then she started crying, twisting in her safety seat and reaching futilely towards the bag on the floor where she’d seen me go to for snacks.

“I know you want Zebra”, I said, feeling my blood pressure rise. “But he’s not in that bag. He’s not here and I can’t do anything about it. Look, why don’t we read Frozen instead”, I said, fumbling for her favourite storybook.

“Not Frozen!”, she wailed, angry now. “I want Zebra. I want him now!”.

By now, I was getting those ‘do something’ looks from the other passengers, from the airline attendants, from my partner, seated across the aisle. I looked at Jessie’s face, red with anger and imagined how frustrated she must feel. After all, wasn’t I the person who could whip up a peanut butter sandwich on demand? Make a huge blue dog appear with touch of an iPad? Why was I withholding her favourite toy from her? Why didn’t I understand how much she wanted it?



I felt bad. But then it dawned on me: I couldn't get Zebra for her, but I could offer her the next best thing – comfort.

“You wish you had Zebra now,” I said to her.

“Yeah,” she said sadly.

“And you're angry because we can't get him for you.”

“Yeah.”

“You wish you could have Zebra right now,” I repeated, as she started looking at me, rather curious, almost surprised.

“Yeah,” she muttered, “I want him now.”

“You're tired now, and smelling Zebra and cuddling with him would feel really good. I wish we had Zebra so you could hold him. Even better, I wish you could get out of these seats and find a big, soft bed full of all your animals and pillows and blankets where we could just lie down.”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“We can't get Zebra because he's in another part of the aeroplane,” I said. “This makes you feel frustrated.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh.

“I'm so sorry,” I said, watching the tension leave her face. She rested her head against the back of her safety seat. She continued to complain softly a few more times, but she was growing calmer. And within a few minutes, she was fast asleep.

Moral of the story:

Jessie didn't want Zebra. Not really anyway. She wanted someone to contain her emotions. She wanted comfort. She needed emotional regulation. This is how we achieved it.

To summarise:

- You wish you had Zebra now
- You're angry
- You're tired now, and smelling Zebra would feel really good
- We can't get Zebra... that makes you feel frustrated
- I'm so sorry

The key elements of emotion coaching:

- Be aware of your children's feelings
- Listen with empathy and hold the space for them
- Help your child label their feelings
- Set limits while helping your child to problem solve
- Remind your children you're there for them, and with them
- Keep your cool - *be bigger, wiser, kinder, stronger*