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Nov 24, 1981

Going shopping with kids:

By GLENNA ANDRADE
Special to The Bee

Since "big grocery shopping" is the most dreaded trip for a mother of three youngsters, I stall as long as I can. Boxes of tissues replace toilet paper; paper towels substitute as napkins; and, when things really get desperate, tuna fish supplants Tender Vittles. All of these replacements go unnoticed by the children.

However, when gnats vacate the fruitbowl and cinnamon toast displaces Oreos, the children get restless. "Mommy, this is the last piece of bread!" can make me jump as if someone had yelled "Fire!" Even if I can calm my tremors for a day and pawn off the heels of bread with, "It'll make your hair curly," the situation soon escalates. Eventually, the trip to Save-Land must be braved.

The first problem, upon arriving at the grocery store, is disconnecting the two baskets which have been welded together, while balancing the baby on one hip and clenching the hand of the 3-year-old, who thinks grocery day is a weekly Christmas Eve. Inevitably, the cart chosen has at least one wheel which strains to the

right, making it necessary to push it crab-ways down the aisles.

The next problem is finding room for the groceries once the 3-year-old is caged in the cart, the 2-year-old is crammed into the seat beside my purse, and the empty bottles clutter up the bottom shelf. Obviously, a second basket is required. Since the 5-year-old has his hands free, he is delegated to push it, not just because he is the most trustworthy, but because it keeps his hands occupied.

This arrangement has some serious disadvantages. My stomach is now the target of the baby's Buster Browns; the baby's neck is a handle for the 3-year-old's fingers; and the entire grocery basket is a bull's eye for the 5-year-old's rampant driving. Nevertheless, after having tried other combinations, I have found that this works best.

Once before, I had let 5-year-old Kevin push the baby, so I could placate 3-year-old Karen in my cart. This was a mistake. First of all, without the baby to balance the load, Karen's rocking nearly flipped the cart. Then, as my cart was teetering, I watched helplessly as Kevin

all the joy of Armageddon

charged down the aisle and rammed into a pyramid of wine bottles. Luckily the baby escaped injury, but the linoleum flowed with sparkling burgundy, frothed with the disintegrating floor wax, and sparkled with slivers of glass.

Another time, I allowed Kevin to push Karen as I steered the basket holding the baby. As soon as he said, "Wanna ride?", I knew I'd erred. I had no control over the second basket, which careened through the cereal section and sideswiped a grandmother who dropped a jar of granola directly in the cart's path. Even though I apologized, the little old lady spouted an unthinkable word and hobbled away. Aggravated, I drew Kevin aside and spanked him smartly, harder than I'd intended. When I looked up, the school principal had very discreetly turned his head to examine the ingredients on a box of Sugar Smacks. Thus, the first arrangement, with Karen and Keith in my cart was best; I had to chance Kevin's driving.

Because physical punishment is far more embarrassing to me than it is effective in controlling my children's behavior, I often resort to bribery.

"Here, have an Animal Cracker," I told Keith one day just after we'd entered Save-Land.

"I want a tiger," Karen said, inspecting the cookie I'd given her, "not an elly-phant."

I caught her hand just before she replaced the gummy cookie back in the box. "Wait, let me look through it."

"I want a tiger, too!" yelled Kevin as his basket skidded close to mine.

"Sorry, kids there's only one tiger in the box"

"It's mine," Karen shrieked, "I asked for it first."

"That's not fair," Kevin quibbled, "I wasn't here."

"So," I sighed, "How am I going to divide up one tiger between the two of you?"

Karen, anticipating my solution, spoke up quickly. "Don't break it, Mommy, that'll ruin it."

"Well then, since I can't break it, I'll eat it." When I popped it into my mouth, Kevin stared dumbfounded, Karen wailed, "No, no, NO," and Keith, naive about the

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finer points of arbitration, began squalling too. Mother was now on center stage, the object of other shoppers' scorn. I wanted to blurt out an explanation, but that seemed even more ridiculous. Besides, my mouth, already parched with cookie starch, had dried up further from my embarrassment.

"Look," I consoled them. "Why don't you two go over to the cookie aisle and bring back another box." I lifted Karen out of my basket. "Here, hold your brother's hand and come right back."

I pushed my cart next to the vegetable bin, breathed a sigh of relief, and was contentedly contemplating a tomato when Keith said, "Ball?" and snatched one from the bottom layer. All at once, the tomatoes avalanched. Some bounced into my cart, some thudded onto the floor, and the firmer ones rolled across the aisle, stopping traffic. Keith squealed with glee, "Balls, balls, balls!"

A young clerk threw down his vegetable hose and hopped over to help me retrieve the tomatoes. Whether from frustration or from the effort of picking up 40 tomatoes, my face ripened with fury. "You shouldn't stack tomatoes like that," I snipped, "It bruises the bottom ones." His immediate response was a loud snap of a paper bag, which he opened with the flick of his wrist. He dumped all the split tomatoes in the bag, plunked it into my cart, and hissed, "Not if they don't fall on the floor."

Keith must have been forewarned by my outburst; he sat meekly in the cart, gumming a tomato, drooling juice and seeds. I had just cleaned him up with a spare diaper when my neighbor strolled by.

"Good morning," she said.

"It's not really."

"Pardon me?" She looked perplexed and continued. "And where are your other two children?"

"Lost," I said, hoping it was true.

"Oh?"

"Well, actually they're in the cookie aisle. Nice seeing you. Gotta go."

"Wait!" she said. "I want to tell you something. I was just talking to Walt, my husband, last night about you and the three children."

"And?" I gulped breathless with anxiety.

"Yes, I told him how wonderful it was that you moved in next door. We miss our grandchildren so much. We never get to see them except once a year when we fly back to Maine to visit. Here," she said, opening her wallet. "These are the very latest pictures." As I feigned interest, another picture nagged me — that of a 3-year-old and a 5-year-old investigating the cookie aisle. "You know, you really are lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yes, to have three wonderful children. They're such dolls."

"Well, thank you," I said, wondering if she'd like to babysit.

"You know," she continued. "You probably don't appreciate it now, but they'll grow up too fast."

"Yes," I agreed, but only to the first part of her sagacious statement.

"It's so nice," she sighed wistfully, "to have your three children so close together. They'll grow up being best friends."

Suddenly I heard a shriek in the distance, about three aisles away, and I said, "Gotta go. Nice talking with you!"

I whizzed around the corner of the cookie section, but the children had already fled. Actually, I was relieved that there was no obvious mess. Unless I looked very closely, I could scarcely tell that the Oreos and Hydrox were mixed together, as were the graham and soda crackers. The section of Ritz had not withstood the blitz either, they now had a facade of Vanilla "wipers," as the kids called them.

I found the children in the soft drink section, playing quietly on the floor. Each time Karen shook another bottle of Seven-Up, Kevin giggled.

"All right," I said, "that's enough. Get back in my cart, Karen." I turned to Kevin. "How could you let her do this?"

"Gee, Mom, I told her not to."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

He only shrugged.

"Well, I've had it for today. We're going home." I snatched a loaf of bread and headed for the check-out counter, uncertain I could withstand the usual kid-candy-gum wrestling which always occurred there. Finally, I paid my bill and hustled the kids out the door.

"Wait!" A familiar voice called. "I'll walk out with you." My neighbor scurried up and gushed, "Oh, look how well-behaved your children are!

They're so sweet."

After I loaded my car with groceries, I glanced at her basket. "Well," I said, bubbling with vengeance, unable to resist one parting shot. "See you later. Enjoy your Seven-Up."

She laughed uncertainly as I sped away.