

I Lost Track of My Son for Two Hours, and It Was One of My Most Terrifying Experiences as a Parent

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I was trying to teach him the consequences of his actions, but I didn't think about how the result might affect my whole family.

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I woke up on a Monday morning to my 10-year-old son, Ryan*, wailing, “Someone stole my LEGOs! I need to find them *now!*”

I knew no one took his LEGOs. I suspected he knocked them off his nightstand when he was getting ready for bed.

“I promise we’ll find them,” I said, taking a cursory glance around his room. “I’ll help you look tonight, but right now you have to get dressed. The van rolls out of the driveway in 25 minutes.”

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Then I went about readying myself and my other two boys for the day ahead of us. We got dressed, packed lunches, made and ate breakfast and headed for the door.

Ryan was still upstairs dressed only in Superman boxer shorts.

“Bud, we’re leaving in 10 minutes,” I chirped. I reminded myself to stick to natural consequences, which in this case meant leaving the house without him. When Ryan’s twin, Alex*, realized time was running short, he filled Ryan’s water bottle and made his lunch. He even brought Ryan his school uniform.

We’d done this dance before. Weeks earlier my husband, Ben*, took our boys for haircuts and left Ryan behind due to a similar snafu. That time, I stayed home with him. This time, though, I didn’t have another adult to fall back on. Ryan had never been home alone for more than a 10-minute stretch.

I told Ryan we were leaving, then his brothers and I piled into the van. We idled in the driveway, giving Ryan a 5-minute grace period. At 8:05 a.m., I pulled out of the driveway and called Ben.

“I left Ryan home alone,” I said. “I’m trying not to panic, but I feel like a terrible mom.”

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Ben reminded me I’d be back in less time than a *Johnny Test* episode. “You did the right thing,” he said.

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After we hung up, Ben called our landline. No answer. He wound up calling 37 times. Minutes into our drive, I began calling Ryan on a loop, too, with no connection. *Maybe he’s trying to punish us*, I thought.

To calm our frayed nerves, Alex and my youngest son, Josh*, imagined what Ryan was doing, using *Home Alone* as inspiration. Alex suspected he was raiding the pantry. Josh envisioned him trying to hack into the Xbox so he could beat the Ender Dragon. Meanwhile, my self-bashing monologue went into overdrive.

I can’t believe I left my son alone, angry and without a viable exit strategy. What if something happens to him?

I dropped Josh off then sped home to scoop up Ryan and get him and Alex to their school. Instead of listening to favorite tunes like we usually do during our commute, we said prayers and took deep breaths. Our fear was so intense, it felt like the van was closing in on us.

When we finally pulled into the driveway, I was unsteady on my feet, even fumbling to force my key inside the doorknob, which I discovered was already unlocked. *Didn’t I lock the door when I left? I wondered. Maybe Ryan unlocked it?*

I couldn't imagine him leaving the house on foot. This isn't a kid who enjoys a leisurely stroll. No. This is a kid who tries to hitch a ride on one of his cousins' backs when we go hiking. A kid who would rather stay home, nose in a book, than play at the park.

Alex and I screamed his name as we raced up the stairs and into bedrooms and bathrooms. We looked under beds, inside closets, even inside showers. "Ryan, this isn't funny," I yelled. "Where *are* you?"

Near hysterics, I ran out our front door screaming his name until my throat was raw. Silence. I walked back inside and pleaded with my scrambled brain to think. That's when I noticed Ryan's backpack and lunchbox missing.

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"Oh my gosh! He's trying to walk to school!" I said, mentally ticking through the 6.7-mile route.

Frantic, Alex and I got back into the car and began driving toward the school, our eyes peeled searching for a kid in khaki pants and a green polo shirt. With each block we passed, I grew more terrified. "There's no way he could have walked this far," I said.

I called the school and asked if Ryan reported to class. An administrator told me the kids were outside at a flag ceremony, then scanned the field while I remained on hold. "There's no sign of him," she said. My stomach dropped.

I tried to drop off Alex, but he protested. "I'm not going to school without Ryan," he said. "I need to help you find him."

We circled back toward home and I dialed 911. The dispatcher connected me to my local police department. While I was on hold, I mentally scrolled through the many times Ryan's dawdling derailed our family. How in his 10 years of life, whether he was absorbed in a comic, last to put on his socks or unable to walk away from his LEGOs, he often inconvenienced the rest of us. But now, the decision I'd made to help correct this behavior meant my boy was missing — and, when the officer came on the line, I struggled to field her questions.

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"Did you have an argument?" "Does he have a friend in the neighborhood?" "A park he goes to when he's upset?"

"I left because he wouldn't get in the car," I said, sheepishly.

She placed me on a long, tortuous hold, then came back and said, “We think someone may have seen your son. She called a few minutes ago to report a boy in a school uniform walking on a stretch of road with no sidewalks.”

Ryan had taken a wrong turn and walked 3.5 miles in the opposite direction. He’d crossed the street illegally (because there’s no crosswalk) and downed his 1.5-liter water bottle in the California heat.

My mind conjured images of him as Frogger in the old-school video game, dodging cars as he dashed between lanes, trying not to get hit. But when I arrived on the scene within minutes of the sheriff, Ryan was hot, sweaty, and, well, fine. There were no tears. No fear. No anger at me for leaving him behind. If only I could calm my nervous system to match his cool demeanor.

I rushed toward him as cars whizzed by. “Sorry mom,” he said over and over again. He hugged me tight (and he likes hugs less than walks).

“I got dressed right after you left, but when I came outside, you were already down the street,” he said. “I missed you by 20 seconds.”

It turns out Ryan’s natural consequences hit all of us. He spent an hour and a half hauling a heavy backpack en route to nowhere and Alex and I drove all over town worried he might be gone forever. When we finally reunited, Ryan’s remorse was as palpable as his hug.

True, he didn’t get into the van on time, but while I wrapped him in my arms on the side of the road, it dawned on me that he also tried to get to school, to do what he was supposed to do — and he stopped himself from looking for those missing LEGOs. That’s a huge shift for a kid who is hard-wired to keep after a task until it’s completed, a trait he likely inherited from me.

Later that night, when the house was calm and quiet, Ryan and I talked about how the day’s events unfolded. “At first I was mad that you left, but half-way into the walk I realized it was my fault,” he said. “I should have gotten in the car.” Then we went into his room together and found the missing bricks, just like I promised.

According to Dr. Alyssa Christensen, PsyD, LMFT, a Southern California-based family therapist, natural consequences can be an effective teaching tool, but parents also have to consider the risks of executing those consequences. **“Certain consequences, like leaving a child behind, can instill a sense of fear, panic and embarrassment, depending on the child’s sensitivity and personality,” she says.**

For Alex or Josh, being left behind might have left them frozen and crying at home. But for Ryan, who is strong-willed and unafraid, this natural consequence was probably a growth experience. His default was to realize his mistake, pack up and hit the road on two feet.

These days, Ryan is usually the first to get into the car before school, but he still can't make it to the dinner table on time, and he almost never shuts down the Xbox when I say, "Time's up!"

New York City-based psychotherapist, Dana Dorfman, Ph.D., author of *When Worry Works: How To Harness Your Parenting Stress & Guide Your Teen to Success* isn't surprised. "Preteens' ability to generalize learning to other tasks is erratic," she says. "Developmental learning ebbs and flows; progresses and regresses."

While I wait for our boys to master timeliness, no matter what the task or request, at least our mornings are less harried. Instead of using a fear-based motivator (leaving kids behind), I took Dorfman's advice to come at the problem in a proactive and positive way. Now, when everyone buckles into their seat by 7:55, the kids get to pick the morning playlist. I might have to listen to a lot more Linkin Park than I'd like, but that's a consequence I can live with.

**All names in the story have been changed, including the writer's.*