My Magical Son

When my son, Ben, was 6 he asked for one thing for his birthday: “A real magic kit.” He tore open the package first thing in the morning and with an enthusiastic “Yes!” he pumped his fist to his side when he saw the little boy wearing a black top hat on the box. It was the gift – the only gift he really wanted, and now he had it.

Not waiting to show it to us, he ripped off the top and inspected his magic kit piece by piece, and with each one his face became more perplexed: a card deck with secret flaps, a top hat with a Velcro hiding place, a two-topped vase.

He waved the wand in the air a few times, hit it on the table in hopes of jump-starting it and then set it down. When he got to the directions, he held them up with his back to me and said, “What is this for?” He then quickly turned to me and said with wet eyes, “This isn’t a real magic kit.”

My heart broke a little. You know how it does as a parent when you realize that a little bit of innocence just escaped through their footie pajamas out into space, never to be seen again. When he circled the magic kit in the catalog, he thought he would be getting — magic. Of course, he thought he was getting the ability to be magical — he would become magic. It never occurred to me that in his mind, magic was for sale for only $35.99, plus shipping and handling.

Now comes the tough stuff in parenting: Can I frame his disappointment so it will hurt less? I’ve always been a firm believer in promoting the sprites of childhood imagination. Invisible friends? Bring them on! Santa? Yes, sir! The Tooth Fairy? She always leaves her fairy dust on their pillows. But I promised myself that when the time came, I had to come clean.

I told him the truth — mostly, that the magic he sees is really sleight of hand or illusion. It’s a skill like playing music or dancing, I explained. After I showed him the first card trick and he performed it for his sister, he was hooked again.

He christened himself Bengee the Wonder-Full, and his sister made him business cards. We took the cape from his vampire costume, and his dad gave him an old briefcase to hold all of his tricks. Bengee the Wonder-Full’s adopted catch phrase: “You wanna see some magic?”

After a week, he had 10 solid tricks in his repertoire and had received several standing ovations from friends and family. After a show, he and I sat on the edge of his bed, and I asked

him how he felt about magic being different than he had expected. He said he liked his magic kit and performing, but his eyes turned watery again as he stared at his powerless wand.

Walt Disney had a phrase he used to describe the little place of wonder, magic and belief that never entirely disappears in a person. He called it, “That fine, clean, unspoiled spot down deep in every one of us.” I want Ben to stay that little boy who believes in real magic forever, for him to always have that “unspoiled spot” inside his heart.

“You know, to your audience you are magic,” I encouraged him by lifting his chin with my finger. “You get to bring that to them just like you had hoped.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he answered.

“Just think about how amazed they all were with your tricks, shaking their heads and clapping,” I said. “I’m sorry this sort of magic isn’t what you wanted it to be.”

He started to perk up. “Yeah, but I still have Santa, So-So (his invisible friend) and the Tooth Fairy … you know, all those guys.”

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