

Time Tricks
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When I can't stop myself any longer, I glance up at the clock. I've been trying to convince myself I think it's only ten to six, but really I'm desperate for it to be ten past. In fact, the hands are resolutely vertical: six o'clock exactly. Ah well, only an hour to bedtime.

I turn back to the table. It looks like the fall-out from a minor nuclear explosion. Little Daniel, just one, has more food over him than I swear was in the bowl in the first place, and three-year-old Becky, determined to master a fork alone, is little better. My children have turned into orange blobs.

"Had nuff now," Becky declares.

She's barely touched her vegetables but she's not the only one who's had enough so with a resigned sigh I go for a cloth. 'Fifty-nine minutes to bedtime,' I think, how hard can that be?

Don't get me wrong. I like being a Mum. I don't wish all day with my little ones away, but the last bit can get pretty tough sometimes – and tonight is one of those times. My husband's working late, we've been at the park all afternoon, and Daniel is teething. The sooner I can get them bathed and bedded, the sooner I can sink into a tubful of bubbles myself. Fifty-eight minutes.

They leap down and head determinedly towards the playroom. I throw dishes into the sink and follow.

"Do painting!" Becky demands.

"No."

Her face crumples and my eardrums flinch in anticipation, but this is one thing I'm not giving way on. I know about painting. I've learned the hard way. Twenty minutes of preparation, fifty minutes of clearing up afterwards, and all for, at best, five minutes of entertainment.

"It's too late," I say firmly, casting around for inspiration. "How about a nice jigsaw?"

In truth, if you ask me, there's no such thing as a nice jigsaw, but Becky loves them which is good enough these days. And, indeed, she cheers at this, painting forgotten instantly. After a brief tussle over which multi-coloured box to choose, we all hit the floor. Perfect. I feel a glow of good-mummy virtue as we sort through the pieces of the Winnie-the-Pooh picture.

"Mummy! Daniel's eating Eeyore. Stop it Daniel!"

I rescue Eeyore swiftly but Daniel is determined and no sooner am I bent over the picture again than he's gumming all over Rabbit.

"Mummy!" Becky protests.

"He's teething," I offer, but this cuts no mustard with a three-year-old jigsaw fiend.

"He's 'gusting.'"

I glance up. 6.14. Forty-six minutes to go. My eye falls on the tempting, shiny box in the corner. If I turned it on Becky would be absorbed immediately, but she's already watched more TV than I feel she should when Daniel was having his nap because I fell asleep too. (It's the teething. Nights just don't seem to be made for sleep these days.) Gritting my teeth, I pull Daniel onto my lap, find a car for him to chew, and push on with the jigsaw.

"Can you find some more sky Becky?"

"Erm..."

"The blue bits. See, like this?"

"Erm...."

I force myself not to look up at the clock again. There are times at home with my little darlings that I feel I'm actually going insane with boredom. Not that previous stage of my life have been non-stop excitement. There were the horrors of visiting ageing relatives as a teenager, then enduring droning lecturers as a student and then those maddening slow days at work. (I was a receptionist in a former, more glamorous life and let me tell you, we don't read magazines and paint our nails because our heads are empty, just because we're bored out of them.) But none of it matches up to the mind-numbing tedium of amusing cooped-up toddlers, especially at the end of a tiring day's play.

“Daniel, no!”

Becky screams in fury as her little brother escapes my clutches and crawls blithely across the middle of Winnie-the-Pooh’s near-completed picnic party. I snatch him back but the damage is done. Becky lashes out and now Daniel’s screaming too.

”Bathtime!” I cry and, picking them both up, head for the stairs. It’s a bit earlier than planned but so what? The water should calm them down.

And it does. For a while they play happily as I tidy their clothes, making the sort of soft, gurgling sounds that remind you why you’re putting yourself through all this. I pause, babygro in one hand, Barbie knickers in the other, and allow myself a loving smile and then,

“Waaaahh!” punctuated by “it wasn’t me.”

I rush in and find Becky with a bottle behind her back and Daniel with shampoo in his eyes, screaming blue murder.

“Oh Becky!”

Then she’s off too. I say no more but swoop in with clean water and towels and pyjamas. It seems to take forever to restore relative peace but the bedroom clock says only 6.43. How can that be? Which evil spirit stretches this last hour of a Mummy’s day into twice its usual length?

Still, chin up and all that! In just over fifteen minutes they’ll be asleep, cuteness restored, and I’ll be free to collapse.

“Stories!” I proclaim.

That’s better. Two warm little bodies pressed into mine, two sweet little faces scanning the pictures, a yawn or two. This is nice. This is love. This is the final countdown.

“The End.”

“More.”

“No.”

“More.”

“No Becky.”

“Yes Mummy!”

“No. Teeth.”

It's a bit of a scrum and the floor tiles are probably more calcium-enriched than my children's teeth by the time we're finished but, at last, I'm tucking them up. At last, they're snuggling down, giving up, sliding into sleep. With two loving kisses, I creep out to the landing and promptly collapse onto the floor. Done it! One asleep already, one singing softly to herself. Aren't they gorgeous? Aren't they exhausting?

I close my eyes for a moment, just for a quick rest, and when I open them again Becky and Daniel are packing to leave home. Where on earth did the time go?