

Opinion

Ordinary Days By Lauren Denton

Baking with kids and letting it go

My dad's youngest sister, Joanne, was a pastry chef. My mom has told me the story of how, for my fifth birthday, Joanne wanted to make petit fours for my birthday party. She set up camp in my parents' kitchen and whipped up a beautiful platter of the little treats.



Denton

After the party when my mom went in the kitchen, she said it looked like a flour bag had exploded, along with all the sugar and icing. There was even flour on the cabinet knobs where Joanne had opened doors to look for mixing bowls.

I think of this story any time one of my kids says she wants to bake something in the kitchen. I tend to find flour in cracks and crevices I didn't even know we had, sugar trails from the pantry to the counter, and hours after I think we're finished, I still find drips of batter in random places. And don't even get me started on those little round sprinkles.

But even more than the goes-with-the-territory part of baking with kids, I have this annoying little perfectionistic streak that pokes its ugly head out from time to time. It's the one that sits on my shoulder and whispers, "She's oversteering that batter." "If the rows aren't straight, the cookies are going to run together in the oven." Or "It'd be a whole lot easier and quicker if you just take over the baking part and let them eat the cookies when you're done."

I try to shut that voice down, but sometimes it's pretty loud. Especially when I have other things on my to-do list or when I know the clean-up is going to be especially tedious.

So the other day when Sela and I had a rare couple of hours alone together and she asked if she could make cookies, my enthusiasm took a bit of a hit. I know as a mom, I'm supposed to look for opportunities to teach my kids all kinds of life skills, and I do (mostly), but for some reason, practicing those life skills in the kitchen — actually letting them learn from their mistakes — fills me with a particular kind of anxiety.

But I took a deep breath, and I said yes. As Sela pulled out all the bowls and spoons and ingredients we'd need, I told myself to let go of every concern for the showers of flour onto the floor, every worry about batter consistency and messy fingerprints and sugar granules underfoot. And for the most part, it worked. I did help her with the flour, but other than that, I backed off to avoid over-controlling the process, and she did most of it herself. She was proud, I

was happy, and I checked my little "good mom" box.

Then the girls got a new set of cookie cutters for Christmas, and I knew what was coming. We were going to have to figure out how to make real dough: mounds of butter, two kids fighting over a rolling pin, flour sprinkled all over the counter — on purpose! But I put on my big girl pants and decided to let them do it.

I helped make the dough — it was a new process for all of us — and showed them how to roll it out, then I sat back and let them get to work.

Their first batch was filled with nicely shaped cookies, all spaced out well, ready to be iced. The second batch somehow included two massive handprint cookies (that I was sure wouldn't cook well but they did), a couple shapes I was never able to identify and a few extra pieces of dough that were too small to shape into anything. When it came time to ice them, I decided to keep it easy and skip Alton Brown's royal icing recipe and instead pulled out the tubs of Duncan Hines frosting and a jar of sprinkles.

And surprise, surprise, without me in the way, acting like the kitchen director the whole time, they actually did everything great. The dough held up, none of the cookies ran together in the oven, and they tasted great.

But more importantly, Kate and Sela had a blast. They giggled and encouraged each other and sneaked fingerfuls of icing and sprinkled sprinkles. At one point, Kate gave me a hug and said thank you. I asked, "For what?" She said, "For letting us make cookies and use the sprinkles and eat the icing."

Message received, loud and clear. The kitchen is a good place to practice new things, to learn from mistakes, and to have fun, whether you're 8, 11 or 41. I could have squelched all their creativity and micromanaged every little step, which was what that annoying voice was telling me to do, but what I learned was that it was much more fun to let go than sit back and watch.

When I'm not writing about my family and our various shenanigans, I write novels and go to the grocery store. My novels are in stores and online. You can reach me by email at lauren@laurenkdenton.com, visit my website, laurenkdenton.com, or find me on Instagram @LaurenKDentonBooks, Twitter @LaurenKDenton, or on Facebook ~LaurenKDentonAuthor.

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