

BY LISA BRAVER MOSS

"How about a dollar each?" I ask my sons, hoping I've hit on an amount that will generate enthusiasm without making me appear desperate. "I cut your hair, you get the dollar. What do you say?"

It used to be that the Junior Mints I popped into my boys' mouths at strategic intervals were incentive enough. All I had to do was grab the shears, fill a pitcher with warm water for dipping the comb, and sing out, "Haircut time!"—and Evan and Reuben would come padding into the kitchen.

Lately my boys have discovered the occasional pleasure of accompanying their father to the barbershop, and although the three of them return looking like adorable clones—with their identical

At 8 and 5, Evan and Reuben have little tolerance for overt displays of love. Evan, once eager to grab my hand at crosswalks, now alternates between resistance and indifference. Reuben's latest version of kissing Mom is to offer me the top of his head, assuming I'll be satisfied with the chance to graze it fleetingly with my lips. And if I should steal a kiss on either boy's cheek? Evan shrieks, "Eeeewww!"

and begins an exaggerated rubbing-off ritual;

rency. But then one day Evan requested an "away" hug, by which he meant that he preferred affection delivered from a distance, the hugging equivalent of an air kiss. Life hasn't been the same since.

In my quest to be close to my sons without bothering them, I've had to become inventive. I thought I'd found the answer when I introduced "bejoojie dust," the make-believe sleeping powder my father originated when I was a child. At first the boys were enthusiastic about my tracing circles

I feel lucky on those rare occasions when Reuben gives me a hug for no apparent reason or when Evan matter-of-factly takes my outstretched hand. During cold and flu season I savor the utter sincerity of their feverish hugs. Nor can I deny my delight at Evan's using my body to shield himself from the scary parts of his favorite TV show.

Clearly, we all enjoy our children's affectionate gestures. But I wonder if that pleasure goes deeper than mere enjoyment. Perhaps it is physical

Barbershop bribery

When kisses are "yuck," home haircuts provide a high-touch solution.



wire-rimmed glasses and close-cropped heads—I can't help but feel deprived. I miss the uninterrupted time with my sons, engaged in an activity that precludes their scrambling away. I miss sneaking close-up glances at their sweet faces as I work. I miss tousling their heads afterward to make sure the drying strands fall nicely together.

Reuben absently lifts his T-shirt to his face to wipe clean my trespass.

When my sons were tiny, I never imagined I'd find myself contriving ways to maintain physical contact with them. I assumed that affection between parent and child occurred naturally, effortlessly—no Junior Mints required, let alone U.S. cur-

around their eyes before dispensing the magic substance into the corners. But even though the ritual put off bedtime for a few minutes, they soon lost interest.

Fortunately, we still engage in our riotously rule-free version of thumb wrestling, in which Evan sticks his elbow way out for leverage, both of Reuben's thumbs do battle against my one, and each boy's eyes shine with the hilarity of finding ever more preposterous ways to count to three before commencing the blatant cheating. I'm sure my sons don't realize my maternal battery is recharged by such silliness.

affection that gives us the stamina to keep facing the demands of parenthood. Why else would thumb wrestling replenish my energy for car-pooling, mediating, and looking for lost shoes so much better than the solitude of a hot bath?

So I tickle my boys, and I hold them close on my lap when I trim their nails. And tonight I will snip over every contour of their darling heads, starting at the ears, then doing the bangs, then moving to the back. I hope their hair grows fast. I think I'll leave it a little long, just in case. □

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