



My wife was leaving town to join her sisters in Wisconsin for a “girl’s weekend”. I committed to all the kids that if they behaved well for daddy for the three-day weekend, that he would bribe them with toys. You see, when you’re not a full time stay at home dad, you sometimes rely on anything to get through and ensure that your wife can relax away from the house. I find occasional bribery is a good solution.

Nicholas immediately knew what would work for him. He had been a fan of the Harry Potter legos for the last 6 or 9 months. For 5 years we couldn’t get him to play with legos. He had no interest. He didn’t want to build from his mind. He wanted directions. Then we discovered Harry Potter legos. They came in small, medium and large size boxes with varying complexity. The boxes would contain from 80 to 700 pieces with diagrams on how to attach the legos to make the picture on the box cover.

There were approx. 20 different boxes of in the set. Nicholas wanted the train. It came with an engine and passenger car, a train stop and a few miscellaneous figures. It was about 650 pieces, and he wanted it. “I want the train”, he would respond when I asked him what he wanted to entertain him for the weekend. So the train became the toy to find. Fortunately, the toy was in stock and became easy to find.

When Nicholas wants to do something, there is no one more relentless. “I want to put my train together”. OK, but let’s have dinner first. “I want to put my train together”. Ok, but let’s clean up the table first – so we cleaned up the table. “I want to put my train together”. Ok, but it’s getting late, let’s get our pajamas on first – so we put on our pajamas. “I want to put my train together”. Ok, let’s do it.

This was followed by Nicholas asking for assistance to open the box and the bags inside so he could get his hands on the legos themselves. Now, he was in heaven. Over time we learned that Nicholas was a toy dumper and learned to only open the bags that pertained to the next step (thank you Lego for identifying them this way!). Nicholas proceeded to dump approximately 300 legos on the table and many went energetically in all many directions. After picking them off the floor, we got down to business.

Directions are a very important thing for Nicholas. With directions, comes order. With directions comes a plan. Knowing what will happen and in what order. These are important to him. We started building the train engine and proceeded for the next 30-45 minutes to assemble it piece by piece. My job was to find the pieces that would be needed. I wasn’t allowed to attach them, since I didn’t do it correctly. You see, legos are not only form fitting, but the corporation decided that each bump on the lego must also carry the corporate name “LEGO”.

All LEGO’s must face the same direction. You aren’t allowed to just place a lego on the train. It must be placed very carefully in the correct direction, with the word “LEGO” facing in the correct direction. Failure to follow the Nicholas directions results in “you’re doing it wrong!”



response from the leader of the train building exercise. I found it best to just locate the legos and let Nicholas actually attach them. I tried to catch him just once misplace a lego, facing the wrong direction. But Nicholas would not let that happen. It was as critical for him to place them all in the same direction, as it was to build the train.

Next came the second train car. We emptied all its pieces on the table and began that exercise. By now it was getting late, and once the bag was opened, it had to be finished. With the same attention to detail as the engine, I found the pieces and Nicholas assembled them. He was meticulous and proud of his results.

We were now past his bedtime and fortunately we had not opened the last bag (the train station). I was able to defer the construction process until morning; however, the train had to accompany Nicholas to his bedroom.

The following morning we had to finish the train station, all before breakfast. Nicholas didn't necessarily play with the legos, he preferred to construct the object necessary, then within a short period of time, unassembled it. Sometimes we were able to enjoy the finished product for minutes, sometimes days; but almost always the fun was the building, not playing with it. Nicholas never showed a penchant for imaginative play (taking characters and mimicking conversation, making up story lines) – he preferred to assemble. Unassemble. Assemble.

The most important element of the lego set was the directions. We still maintain all the directions from all the lego sets we've ever purchased. Without them he won't assemble them. They only go together one way. Over time we accumulated a majority of the Harry Potter legos, from castles to trains to local storefronts in the movies. Thousands of pieces overall. There were times when finding the exact piece necessary to construct the building was hard to find. This created a crisis for Nicholas; the world order was not in order!

Over time, Nicholas was willing in most situations to skip a lego and continue building, provided we returned later upon finding the missing part. This did not happen the first, second, or third time it happened. But continuing to remind him that we would find the part and attach later finally resulted in an "ok, fine, we'll move on, but find the piece". I would find the next 3-5 pieces, and then search for the missing piece until we found it.

That weekend Nicholas taught me a few valuable lessons. First, the world has a certain order to it, and Nicholas liked a world with order, and directions. We should use the directions whenever they are available. Second, he can migrate outside the controlled world, as long as we return to fix the part we skipped. This was true in the world of legos, but also migrated into other parts of his life.