



Mourning Kindergarten

A mother's wish for two little letters: A.M.

By Kelli Wheeler

The letter came in the mail a month ago. We'd been waiting eagerly for it. Actually, that's not true. I'd been eagerly waiting for it. Nobody else really cared. Especially not my 5 1/2-year-old son. When it finally arrived in the mailbox, my husband announced its arrival with, "I think that letter you've been waiting for is here."

I dove at the mail and held the letter out, noting the return address from Logan's new school. I hovered over it like it was a letter from Harvard, closing my eyes and praying that the words said, "Welcome and congratulations for beating out 68 other applicants to A.M. kindergarten."

I desperately wanted my son in A.M. kindergarten. And apparently so did every other mom at kindergarten registration. When they instructed anyone who had a "hardship" case to turn the paper over and write out the details on the back of the enrollment form, the wave of air pushed through the multipurpose room was like the leading edge of a cold front as everyone quickly flipped papers over, trying to get their sob story down first. Including myself.

Actually, that's not true. When I taught fifth grade, I decided that when I had kids I wasn't going to be one of the pushy, overbearing parents who dominated my nightmares about showing up to teach class naked. So I simply marked the A.M. box and jotted a little note next to it that

read, "Whatever is the best fit for Logan." I was rather proud of myself for resisting the urge to flip the paper over, begging for my mornings free as I had grown accustomed to with both my kids going to A.M. preschool three days a week.

By the time kindergarten assessment rolled around three months later, I had found out that my daughter would be in a daily morning pre-K program. When I thought of Logan also being in a morning program, I practically fainted with pleasure at the thought of having five mornings a week to get things done. I envisioned myself no longer having to write past midnight when everyone who wanted me to play with them had gone to bed. (That includes my husband.) I pictured myself getting a consistent exercise routine going. I dared to imagine actually reading the day's paper before the day was over.

So at kindergarten assessment, when they told the group of parents assembled that *somebody's* kid had to be in P.M. kindergarten, everybody in the room—including myself—thought, "Not mine." The teachers again mentioned writing down any hardship cases on the back of the student information sheet, and being the prolific writer I am, I put down my moving sob story.

So here we were, the moment of truth in my hands. A small audience—my husband and my mom—circled around me as I excitedly opened the letter from Logan's school. Logan declined the invitation to come over, waving me off for "Nova" on television. Actually, that's not true: It was Sponge Bob.

I read the first line aloud: "It was impossible to honor all the many requests we had for A.M. kindergarten, and hope you will agree that the proper placement of your child is the most important consideration." I kept reading, trying to decipher if this was a rejection or a confirmation. When there was more administrative mumbo jumbo, I quit reading aloud and silently scanned the following paragraphs, looking for the A.M./P.M. designation.

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"OK, yeah, whatever. Is he in A.M. or P.M.?" I almost shrieked. I scanned to the bottom of the page, where there was a sticker with Logan's name and his teacher's name. "Great, Mrs. So and So, but is she A.M. or P.M.?" That time I did shriek.

Don't get me wrong: I was deeply concerned about the quality and qualifications of the teacher who would be molding my child's first perceptions of his school career. And I was sure she must be the gifted-and-talented-program teacher. But I was desperate in my rising panic for her to be an A.M. teacher.

Now everyone was over my shoulder, trying to help me find the words designating my son's kindergarten time slot.

And then I saw it in the last paragraph. The teachers' names and the classes they taught. "He's P.M.," I said quietly, trying not to sound disappointed, hot tears stinging my eyes. I looked up at my family and saw the pitying glances reserved for someone whose fish just died. You know, trying to validate their sadness, but it's just a fish.

Finally I said, "Well, I did say I wanted what was best for him . . . so this must mean he's in an accelerated learning program." I knew it meant nothing of the sort, but it was the only thing I could tell myself so I wouldn't burst into tears. I had just gone from having three days a week to get my freelance writing and other little slices of adult freedoms in to none.

I rushed to pick up the phone like an addict desperate to find her next score. "I need to know what Meghan got. I wonder if Ryan's mom is home. I know if Hannah's in that class it's got to be accelerated. I wonder if I can find someone at the school on Saturday and make sure this is right."

The voice of reason made me put down the phone before I could dial. That would be my husband. "It doesn't matter. Logan is going to have a great kindergarten experience whether he's in A.M. or P.M. He's going to love his teacher no matter who she is. And if none of his friends are in his class, he'll meet 19 other new ones. It's just kindergarten. Let's save the battles for when it really does matter. And we can work something out so you can get your writing done during the day. Things happen for a reason, and it isn't until afterward

that you realize it all works out for the best.”

Actually, that’s not true, he didn’t really say all that. But those are things we came up with later after I was done having my pity party. Once I got over the sting of my disappointment and put my own selfishness aside, I was able to see reason.

I’m still not sure how it will all work out, but I am looking forward to walking my son to and from school, which I wouldn’t have been able to do

if he was in the A.M. class. And I will have one last priceless year of one-on-one time with my children, something I know I’ll look back on and cherish when my kids would rather be with their friends than to be seen with me. And I did find it hilarious that in my girlfriend’s school district, all the parents wanted P.M. and she got A.M.

Kelli Wheeler lives in Arden Oaks and is a mother of two. She can be reached at kellimwheeler@aol.com. ●