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## Brace Yourself

By Carol Band

Before we got married, my husband and I got a blood test to check for genetic glitches - like Tay Sachs and the Rh factor. We were screened for various STDs and for AIDS. The church encouraged marriage preparation classes to ensure that we were spiritually compatible, but no one ever suggested that prior to saying "I do" we consult with an orthodontist. I wish they had. Because it turns out, despite being well-matched in most areas, combining Harris' narrow jaw with my horsey teeth has had serious consequences not only for our children's class photos, but for our financial security as well.

Yesterday, that security got a little less secure, because Lewis, our youngest, got braces. My husband says that they are called braces because you have to brace yourself when you get the bill. Braces, for those of you who still have time to reconsider the various ramifications of parenthood, aren't cheap. In fact, they cost thousands of dollars. It's nothing to smile about.



**A Household Word**  
BY CAROL BAND

"His teeth don't look that bad to me," I said to the orthodontist as I squinted at my son's X-rays during the initial consultation. "Maybe we should leave them alone. A slight overbite might give him character."

"It'll give him periodontal disease," the orthodontist said. "Without braces, his bite will be misaligned, his bicuspids will rotate and his molars will grow through his brain. By the time he's 25, the damage will be so severe that the only job he'll be able to get is as a door stop."

"Can I get invisible braces?" Lewis asked hopefully.

My immediate reaction was "No!" Call me a snob, but I figure that if I am going to shell out close to \$5,000 on braces, I want people to see them. I want people to look at that mouth full of metal and think, "Gee, that kid's parents really care about his teeth. They must be wonderful and generous people - fabulously successful, too."

Frankly, I don't understand how parents who seem perfectly average (and by average, I mean that they shop at Target, like me) manage to outfit a kid - sometimes two or three kids - in thousands and thousands of dollars of wires and bands. I don't understand why braces haven't become a huge status symbol - like Hummers or Hermes scarves. Why aren't there options to upgrade say, to solid gold bands or braces with a built-in iPod? I'm sure there are people who would be happy for the opportunity to spend more money, like the new parents who buy those \$700 Bugaboo strollers, simply because they can.

On the other hand, why hasn't some enterprising parent of genetically predisposed kids invented a cost-saving, [do-it-yourself](#) kit so you can assemble your child's braces at home using paper clips and twist ties?

When I discovered that our dental insurance would cover only a tiny portion of Lewis' orthodontia, I was tempted to start bending the paper clips on my desk. I even did some research and learned that braces are a lot cheaper outside of the United States - specifically in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Perhaps these countries might become vacation destinations for families with kids with malocclusion, the way people flock to Mexico for quickie divorces and Brazil for liposuction.

Indeed, for us, the outlay of thousands of dollars for braces comes at a bad time. In our haphazard approach to family planning, we failed to consider that our youngest child's orthodontia would coincide with college tuition payments for our two oldest kids. Someone should have warned us that reproducing would mean that instead of spending our 25th wedding anniversary watching the moon shine over Waikiki, we'd be eating Kraft dinner and watching the silver sparkle in our son's mouth. Someone should have told us to move to Uzbekistan.

In the 24 hours that Lewis has had braces, he has been complaining that his teeth hurt, that the braces are cutting the inside of his mouth and that he is in excruciating pain. It's not often you get to lavish so much money on your kid and still come away feeling like an abusive parent. He has been mourning the list of forbidden foods (gum, mozzarella cheese, hard candy, chewy candy - all of his major food groups) and says that it still hurts too much to eat. I guess that's a good thing, because for the next two years, we won't be able to afford food anyhow. Who knows, maybe we'll be able to save a little money. Now, that would be something to smile about.

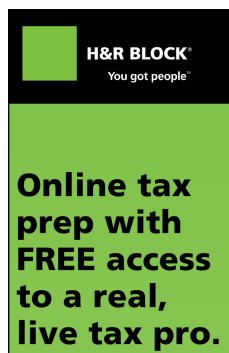
Carol is collecting twist ties and paper clips for her new business venture. Write to her at [carol@carolband.com](mailto:carol@carolband.com). To read more of Carol's Household Word columns, visit the [Household Word Archives](#).

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