Help, Dad! It's Eating My Hair!

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I barely had relaxed a few days after returning from a Mediterranean-Arabian Gulf deployment when my wife handed me the dreaded honey-do list. The first priority was my backyard because everything had grown so much during the hot summer months while I was gone.

I attacked the job with gusto, yanking weeds, trimming bushes, and redistributing mulch. My 11-year-old daughter was an eager helper. She and I were joking around and having a good time catching up on everything that had happened in the past six months.

I was using manual clippers to knock down the shrubbery to a manageable size while she used an electric leaf-blower and vacuum to move all the clippings to a central site for bagging. The leaf-blower and vacuum was new; my wife had bought it during the fall, thinking it would come in handy when I got home. This new contraption promised to save me a lot of blisters I usually got from using a lawn rake.

All you had to do with the new piece of equipment was to install the right attachment, plug in the power cord, turn on the switch, and you were in business. It was so easy I decided to let my daughter use the leaf-blower and vacuum. Everything was going fine until I heard a cry for help. I turned around to see my daughter with the equipment on top of her head. At first, I thought she was clowning around, but she again yelled for help.

My daughter had lifted the blower-vacuum over her head to get the top of the shrubs. When she did, about 18 inches of her loose, shoulder-length hair caught in the unit and wrapped around the armature of the motor. The unit was tight against her scalp.

By the time I reached her, the blower-vacuum had shut down, so I unplugged it to prevent further damage. I then removed the hose attachment and the air-inlet cover and reversed the impeller to free some of her hair–enough to cut

it loose with scissors. She was scared but held back her tears until I had freed her hair from the motor.

As she cried, I hugged and reassured her. I knew her mom would be upset that the hair was all chopped up and frizzy, but I also knew I'd be the one in trouble–not my daughter. We explained what had happened as soon as my wife returned from work that day, and, as I thought, I promptly was reprimanded for being careless.

She was right; I hadn't read all the precautions in the booklet, including a warning about long hair. I didn't even think about it. The men and women I worked with on the ship all meet military-grooming requirements, and you didn't have to worry about hair getting caught in equipment. Spouses and children, however, can wear their hair as long as they like.

In my own defense, I had looked at the air intake on the blower-vacuum and had warned my daughter not to let anything get near it. However, when she lifted the unit over her head, her hair was pulled into the cooling vents for the electric motor, not the air-inlet duct. The small cooling fins on the ends of the armature grabbed her hair through the very small openings, and, of course, we know the rest of the story.

In the future, I'll be more careful around the house, and I'll always do a risk assessment before I let anyone in my family use a piece of equipment.