

Children's public behavior – a cause for admiration or anger

Children misbehaving in public—a topic near and dear to both parents and general citizens alike. Children in public places can be a delight to those around or a disturbing menace, the source of complaints and dirty looks. Parents of those children take that behavior personally—either with pride or embarrassment. Often parents feel out of control of their children's public behavior and react ineffectively due to the mortification they feel at the world witnessing their (perceived) ineptness. Sometimes parents appear oblivious to the reactions of others around them, perhaps thinking their child has special rights by virtue of age. Restaurants, airplanes, churches are common places where bystanders can feel victim to children's behavior.

Public misbehavior often results from the assumptions and fears the parent is consumed with. The Approval Button gets pushed whenever we think that our children's behavior reflects on our competency as parents. "What must people think?" is the mantra of the majority of parents when they feel on public display as their child is screaming in the frozen foods aisle. So used to being blamed for their children's behavior, mothers especially feel judged by the great *They*. Wishing the ground would open up and swallow them, their fears become the obstacles to their effectiveness with their children.

Caring more about the *perceived* judgments of total strangers than about the child's immediate needs, the humiliated parent is bound to be caught in her fears, grabbing at what she thinks she should be doing, hoping for at least a modicum of approval for her reprimands. In this state, she cannot possibly focus on her child's needs and get to the root of the problem. But her punitive reprimands, which she hopes will gain a sigh of relief from those strangers, leave her child feeling unheard, unjustly accused, and more of whatever caused the behavior in the first place—and the vicious cycle spins.

Then there are parents who don't seem aware of the presence of others and allow their children to do as they please—those scenes that inspire the feared judging eyes. Good meals and longed for quiet can be ruined when children are left to their own impulses with parents who indulge those impulses anywhere.

Balance is always the key.

Mortified parents reacting out of fear of what others will think need to focus on the pain and frustration or over-stimulation their child is experiencing that is the cause of the embarrassing tantrum in the supermarket aisle. This parent must help her child come back in balance. But connection and empathy are in short supply in the face of humiliation. Focus means thinking if I were my child what would I want right now? Leave your grocery cart or your seat and change the environment. Help your child through whatever is causing the upheaval by remaining calm—much easier to do when you are away from staring eyes—and understand your child doesn't like his behavior anymore than you do.

Parents who seem not to care what others think need to teach their children the balance between their needs and the needs of others. Again, you may need to take the child out of the situation for a calming change of scene and a lesson in understanding that what they want and what others want are of equal importance. Anger and confusion may result if it is the child's fun that is interfering, so first validate the child's agenda before talking about the needs of others. "You really wanted to climb over the booth and talk with those other people. That would be fun. The other people are having their own conversation right now. Maybe they would like to say goodbye when we're all done, but right now let's have our own conversation." This is more likely to teach and get cooperation than, "Stop doing that. You're annoying people."

Children allowed to do what they please in public don't learn that public places are for the benefit of all. Asking a child to be quiet in order to respect the rights of others is not squashing a child's spirit but is teaching respect of the rights and needs of everyone.

We all want children in public to show exemplar behavior—parents and strangers alike. Public areas are important teaching arenas for children. The more time, effort and consciousness a parent brings to his child's behavior in public, the sooner that child will be a delight for all. Know your child's temperament. If overstimulation causes meltdowns in the supermarket, make sure trips are short and successful. If you work for your child's comfort level rather than your need to stock the refrigerator, your child will make positive associations. Do take your children to restaurants, but begin with family friendly environments where you can focus on teaching respectful behavior without the fear of offending those

who have spent a lot of money on their meal. Remember to set expectations according to your child's level of development and how she is presently capable of behaving when stressed. Teaching appreciation of the rights of others needs to be taught with consistency and gentleness.