

When “other mothering” set your judgment aside

By SUZANNE KENNEDY

I call it “other mothering” – a situation in which another mother can’t keep her nose out of your business. Is it ever socially acceptable?

It happens all over the place. At the park, in church, at school, in the store, even at family get-togethers. At some point, there’ll be another mother nearby, watching what your kids are doing or not doing. She wants so badly to say something. Sometimes it’s a passive aggressive little side comment and sometimes she lets it rip loudly and without shame. Either way, chances are that you’ll hear it, and you are probably intended to.

Is it ever appropriate to scold or redirect someone else’s child? The answer is a muddled maybe. Is the parent present? Do you know the parent? Have you talked about it before? Does she do it to your kids?

Here’s an example. You’re at the park with your kids and there are some other children that are throwing bark. One of your kids has been caught in the crossfire. If you see the mother and she either doesn’t notice or doesn’t seem to care, approach her first. Being an adult, you owe her at least that much. If that doesn’t work – maybe she says



her kids are fine and your kids can go play somewhere else – avoid confronting her kids. Most likely they are not going to listen to you, so leaving or moving away may be the best decision at that point. If the mother isn’t there, go ahead and ask them nicely to play something else that doesn’t bother other children.

Maybe you’re in the grocery store and pass by a mom who is obviously at her wit’s end with her child who is throwing a tantrum. Rather than trying to calm the child down (thereby reinforcing to the mother that she is unable to),

lighten the mood with a statement that shows her you understand and empathize, something that tells her you’ve been there, too. A light-hearted “I’m so glad mine aren’t the only ones who do that in public” will make her chuckle, calm her down, and give her some strength to get through the rest of the store.

Now here’s another situation. You’re at the Children’s Museum with a bunch of friends and their kids. You need to be gone for a minute for whatever reason. Let your friends know it’s okay to tell your kids to cool it if they are being naughty. I’ll say something like, “Hey, I need to take Susie to the bathroom. Feel free to ‘other mother’ my kids while I’m gone!” The difference is that I know my friends and I trust them. I’m giving them my permission to say something if it’s necessary.

Judging other people’s children often extends to the parents themselves. Let me be perfectly clear – it is never okay. We are all doing our best and, let’s face it, parenting is hard. You are only viewing a



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snapshot of that person’s life. You have no idea what else they may be going through, what needs the child may have, or what may have led them to make those parenting decisions.

What makes us assume that other people’s dietary or behavior decisions for their children are wrong just because it’s different than how we handle things? We may see one dad as way too lenient or another mom as way too strict. Some people will even go so far as to argue that they are just looking out for the child. (Aside from cases of actual abuse, this, my friends, is usually a crock.) What leads us to these judgments – is it ego? Do we worry about our own parenting decisions and so we have to immediately begin defending our choices? I think in large part the answer is yes – we judge others out of a sense of fear that we aren’t perfect either.

The best approach is to follow the Golden Rule and give others the grace and respect that you would want to receive in return. Let’s give more fist bumps and fewer snide comments. Let’s offer support rather than unsolicited advice. Let’s be understanding and supportive of each other.

If judgment and being judged breed insecurity, imagine what we can accomplish with respect and understanding.

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