

A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

Imagine how terrific it is to write a column and then get great mail from others sharing their stories and perspectives — in the true spirit of Child Care Information Exchange. I want to thank all of you who reponded to my last column by printing the following letters:

Recently, I was standing in line at the post office. It was the end of a Saturday morning and the line was pretty long for me. I'm kind of impatient about things like that. But I had to mail a package to my daughter and it couldn't wait — so I had to.

A young woman in her late twenties and her daughter got in line right behind me. The little girl was about seven and looked like she'd done about enough errands with mom for one day! She was playing with a pen that was attached by a long chain to the countertop beside us — a harmless, mindless way to cope with boredom. I wished I'd thought of it!

Almost immediately, the mother started running her mouth at the girl, ordering her to stop fidgeting and threatening all kinds of consequences if she didn't. The kid just ignored her. She had that little twinkle in her eye I've seen so many times before in kids who are fighting for their dignity and their integrity. It's a defiant look, but it's not mean. There's a grace and humor to it that always makes me cheer for the kid. How can innocence survive so much abuse? The twinkle says: "I don't care what you want. If you treat me like that, I'm not going to do anything you say!" Hooray!

So there I was in line. The mother was still going on — about what's going to happen when they get home . . . blah . . . blah . . . blah.

When I got to the window, the clerk was still finishing up his last transaction. So I turned and looked back. I made very brief eye contact with the girl. I think I smiled at her. It

felt like I did. I hope I did. Then I turned back and told the clerk how I wanted to send my package. I turned back toward the girl again and happened to make eye contact with the mother just as she was spouting forth another threat. I held the eye contact, and in my most baritone and assertive voice said simply: "STOP IT!"

I turned back to the window, paid the clerk, and walked away. I heard nothing more from the mother — to me or her daughter. I didn't notice any reactions from the other adults in the room.

This all happened about three weeks ago. I've thought about it several times. Your article has brought it all back again. I wonder how life really is for that little girl. Where did the twinkle come from? Is that support still available to her in her day-to-day life? Is her mother really that insensitive and insecure — and abusive all the time? How did she feel about what I said to her — did it have any effect at all? Did she punish her daughter for any embarrassment or public humiliation I might have caused her? Did I really support and protect the child, or just satisfy my own self-righteous need to "defend" her? Did I make things better or worse?

I don't really know the answers to any of these questions. But I'm glad I did something, that I trusted my feelings. I don't always. Something had to happen — to change. Maybe some of the other people who witnessed this incident will be motivated to speak up the next time. Or maybe nobody — not the girl, not the mother, not the other people — paid any attention at all to what I did!

As for me, I don't know what I'll do the next time. I do know that I'm never outside my "jurisdiction" when confronted with abusive human behavior. I know I want to learn how to more positively and pro-actively address the injustice, violence, and inhumanity in my

world. I know I'm an experiential learner. I hope I'll trust myself again, and **do something** — maybe just add one word: "**PLEASE, STOP IT!**"

Peter Stuckey — Portland, Maine

I, too, have felt paralyzed when I have witnessed inappropriate and borderline abuse to children in public places. If it takes a whole village to raise a child, then the whole community is my "jurisdiction" (much to my children's chagrin).

A key to an effective response lies in what we already know about communication and interaction as it relates to children. Sometimes we forget to apply it when we interact with adults. There are three steps:

- Start where the adult is. Validate his/her feelings. "Gosh, it's hard (or frustrating) to be a parent, isn't it?"
- Instead of advice, offer experience. "When my kids were little, sometimes they were fussy at the store, too. I always fed them a snack before we came to the store, or turned going to the store into a treasure hunt for healthy food."
- Model. Include the child. Give them a positive message, after you have spoken to the parent, so it won't be interpreted as undermining. "It's hard to see things you can't have, isn't it? Look at all these oranges your mommy picked out for you. You must like healthy oranges."

I learned these techniques through Parents Anonymous, a non-profit organization, whose mission it is to reach out to help parents, especially those parents for whom non-punitive parenting is a struggle.

Luci Kelly — Austin, Texas

Things to Say When a Parent Is Inappropriately Handling a Child:

Is he tired? Does he need a nap?
He seems to be trying your patience.
My child used to get upset like that too.
My son behaves like that sometimes and I
Children can wear you out, can't they? Is there anything I can do to help?
She has beautiful hair — to get the parent in a more positive mood.
Isn't it amazing how children think they can get what they want by kicking and screaming?

Looks like you're having a rough day. Is there anything I can do to help?

Looks like your little girl is giving you a hard time — hoping to relieve some tension and perhaps open up some communication.

Things to Do:

Divert the child's attention. Engage the child in conversation.

If you are concerned about the physical safety of the child, alert the store manager.

Praise the child or parent at the first opportunity.

Marty Appelbaum — Houston, Texas

Helpful Words for Parents in Public

Chances are if you're in a grocery store or shopping mall, you're going to see at least one tired parent trying to cope with a young child who is whining or having a temper tantrum. Maybe a few words of understanding is all that parent needs to get her through the experience without lashing out at her child. Here are some suggestions from the New Hampshire Task Force to Prevent Child Abuse on what you can say or do to help:

1. "She seems to be trying your patience."
2. "It looks like it's been a long day for both of you."
3. "He has beautiful (eyes)," to get the parent in a more positive mood.
4. "My child used to get upset like that."
5. "Children can wear you out, can't they? Is there anything I can do to help?"
6. Strike up a conversation with the adult. See if you can redirect his or her attention — away from the child.
7. Sympathize with the parent, even if it's just a knowing glance or smile.
8. Divert the child's attention (if she is misbehaving), by talking to her, engaging her in conversation.
9. Praise the child and/or the parent at the first opportunity.
10. If the child is in danger, offer assistance. For example, if the child was left unattended in a grocery cart, go stand by the child until the parent returns.

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