



oh, behave!

A generation ago parents felt free to discipline other people's kids. Today? Not so much. Seems there's a fine line between speaking up and provoking a confrontation—here's how to walk it.



BY LESLIE PEPPER

RECENTLY I came across a discussion thread on an Internet board about whether it's okay to discipline children who aren't yours. Evidently this is quite a hotly debated topic among moms, and I should know.

Flashback: Last summer my 9-year-old daughter, Madeline, brought home a friend from camp. With sand-covered clothing and muddy shoes, this young lady sauntered into my family room, plopped down on the couch and grabbed the TV remote. Immediately Maddie »

THE CLASH

You're treating your son's soccer team to pizza after a big victory and one of the boys is being rude to the waitress and spilling soda all over the place.

REASONABLE RESPONSE » Because you've taken the boys out, you have implicit permission to discipline them if needed, says Maria Schmidt, Ph.D., assistant professor of human development and family studies at Indiana University in Bloomington. Calmly take him aside and tell him that under your supervision, his behavior is not acceptable. Then tell him what you expect: "We respect others and don't make a mess." If he replies that you can't tell him what to do, remind him that you're in charge and that, therefore, you can. If he continues to be rude, call his mother and ask her to pick him up.

“Hey there, isn’t this a great movie?”



THE CLASH

Your friend’s kids are sitting behind you at a movie, poking each other, laughing loudly and letting their cell phones beep over and over again.

REASONABLE RESPONSE ▶ “Turn around, give them a big smile and say something like, ‘Hey, Jimmy, isn’t this a great movie?’” says Carleton Kendrick, a family therapist near Boston. “Just knowing there’s an adult that knows them—and their parents—in the theater will probably be sufficient to stop them from acting out.” If you can’t bring yourself to say something or if they’re still too loud after you’ve intervened, call an usher. “Dealing with this type of thing is their job,” Kendrick points out.

looked at me with a mix of horror, curiosity and fascination. In our house we don’t sit around in filthy clothes, and we definitely don’t turn on the television without first asking permission.

I froze for a few seconds, weighing my next move. “Come on, let’s all go outside. It’s a beautiful day,” I said. Our guest groaned, settling herself onto a pillow. “My mom always lets me watch TV when I get home from camp,” she said. And then I did the one thing I would never do with my own children. I slunk out of the room and let my daughter and her friend live it up in front of the tube until the girl’s mom came to pick her up. And when she did, I didn’t mention the incident, even in passing.

Why did I let a tween run roughshod over me? Setting and enforcing limits for my three kids is in the job description, and, at this point, it’s like a reflex. But these days it’s just not PC to police other people’s children.

“Sad as it is, discipline no longer seems to be a collaborative effort among parents,” says Ron Zodkevitch, M.D., a

child psychiatrist in private practice in Beverly Hills, California, and a Family Circle Health Advisory Board member. Of course, that didn’t used to be the case. In fact, the opposite was true.

Boston-area family therapist Carleton Kendrick recalls that when he was growing up, all of the adults in the neighborhood had permission—and were even openly encouraged—to think

of themselves as his surrogate caretakers. “I remember like it was yesterday, when Mrs. Garrity saw me helping myself to some fruit from a grape arbor in another neighbor’s yard. She yelled out her window, ‘I don’t think your mother would want you stealing, do you, Carleton?’ You better believe I straightened up and dropped those grapes!” Back then families generally knew one another’s values, and there was a shared sense of right and wrong, says Kendrick. And thanks to that universal community vibe, adults felt free to dole out discipline wherever it seemed warranted. “You don’t see that very much anymore,” he says.

Today, we are the most wired yet least connected generation in history. Adults are more likely to e-mail or text message one another than actually talk. Kids are scheduled to the hilt with sports practices, tutoring, religious school and music lessons. It logically follows that we don’t feel any real sense of responsibility for the children next door—we hardly know them. A common sense of purpose, once a given, appears lost. In fact, the only collective thinking seems to be, “What my kids do is nobody else’s business.” Says Dr. Zodkevitch, “Today, you’re not supposed to stick your nose in where it doesn’t belong.”

Which only makes things harder. “I’ve been a family therapist for 30 years, and I’ve never seen a generation of mothers and fathers so guilt-ridden and

THE CLASH

Your next door neighbors are away for the weekend and their 17-year-old daughter is having a party. Looking out the window, you spot someone carrying in three cases of beer.

REASONABLE RESPONSE ▶ With any luck her parents have left you their cell phone number and you can call them to ask what they would like you to do. If not, and if the girl is basically a good kid, you could walk over and just inquire whether she thinks she should be doing this when her mom and dad aren’t home. She may be grateful that she can blame her nosy neighbor for her having to kick everybody out. However, if you don’t know the family at all, you should call the police. You need to consider the safety of the children in the house.

“Can you guys slow down a bit? There are little kids here, and we don’t want them to get hurt.”



THE CLASH

At the park some teenagers you don’t know are going wild, climbing up the slide, swinging really high and riding around on their bikes ridiculously fast.

REASONABLE RESPONSE » If you feel you and your child are in no danger, take a nonconfrontational, work-with-me tone with the teens. “Can you guys slow down a bit? There are little kids here, and we don’t want them to get hurt,” suggests psychologist Paul Donahue. “Teens are looking for respect, and if you speak to them in a respectful tone, they’ll usually listen,” he says. If, however, you feel that the kids are dangerous, call 911. “I hate to sound paranoid, but you don’t know if they’re high or how they might react,” says Dr. Zodkevitch. “You don’t want to intervene if you might get hurt.”

overwhelmed with their lives and their role as disciplinarians,” says Kendrick. Even a fairly mild suggestion from another parent that their kid needs to be reined in comes across as both an indictment and a personal attack because we see our kids as extensions of ourselves. Since we all have moments when we doubt our own ability to parent effectively, we don’t have the confidence to question other people’s skills in that arena. And last but not least, if we grant ourselves permission to judge others, then we’re saying it’s okay for them to judge us. That can be a terrifying thought for some insecure parents. Why open that door? Better to keep to yourself and expect others to do the same. In short: no harm, no foul.

Except that’s not really true. Creating and perpetuating a culture that deprives

THE CLASH

In the grocery store you see two tween boys ripping open packages, sampling the contents, then throwing the boxes on the floor. Their mother is right behind them but not stepping in.

REASONABLE RESPONSE : “In situations like that, there’s always a bigger story,” says assistant professor of family studies Maria Schmidt. “These kids are begging for someone to notice them.” If they seem otherwise harmless, give them the attention they crave without scolding. Ask, “Do you need some help cleaning this up?” Sometimes kids listen better to parents other than their own, and they may straighten up immediately. If they tell you to bug off or you feel there’s any safety issue, don’t say anything more. Let the store manager know there’s a problem in aisle 9 and stay away.

kids of constructive, useful feedback from authority figures other than their doting mothers and fathers robs them of opportunities to learn to interact positively with other adults. What we have to remember is that child rearing, though wonderfully rewarding, is also difficult and challenging. None of us has the foolproof formula. Admitting this and accepting the aid—and watchful eyes—of other parents can help us all breathe a collective sigh of relief. And that’s not all we gain. “When you let kids know that you, a grown-up, are paying attention to them, they feel that they matter,” says Kendrick.

DISCIPLINE DO’S AND DON’TS

Okay then—so what’s proper protocol for dealing with other people’s kids? For small-group situations, like carpool drives or a sleepover at your house, it’s a good idea to speak to the child’s parents up front. At minimum, make sure they’re good with you setting and enforcing basic limits with their son or daughter. Of course, safety is nonnegotiable. A very simple, straightforward, “We always wear seat belts in my car” should suffice for a kid who’s refusing. If he continues to protest, call the parent.

Sometimes, though, it’s not as clear whether to assert yourself. Table manners, for instance, require a judgment

call. “A kid talking with his mouth open, that might not be your style, but it’s something you can look the other way on,” says Paul Donahue, Ph.D., founder of Child Development Associates in Scarsdale, New York, and author of *Parenting Without Fear* (St. Martin’s Griffin). Loud burping at the table, on the other hand, is simply inappropriate. Directing your comment to the group is a good bet: “Let’s all remember our manners and to say excuse me.”

Taking charge of an out-of-control child when his parent is there—especially if she’s a friend—is particularly thorny. You probably don’t want to discipline a kid if his mom is present, but you can speak to her. Donahue suggests something like, “It seems the kids are getting a little nuts. What do you think we can do about it?” This approach doesn’t single her child out and should leave your relationship intact.

I see now that I lost some community parenting credibility the day my daughter’s friend took over our den with her filthy shoes and poor attitude—but if it happens again, I’m now much better prepared. I’ll smile sweetly and ask the girls to please take off their sneakers. “Feel free to play with the computer in here but no TV,” I’ll say. “Or leave the shoes on and go outside.” After all, as the adult, my footprints will leave a lasting impression. On both girls. ●