

Advice You Didn't Ask For

No matter how you choose to bring up your children, there will always be people who think you should be doing things differently. Some of those people will be quick to give you their opinion, even if you didn't ask for it. They aren't always tactful either. How can you deal with comments that seem to judge your style of parenting? What should you do with advice you didn't ask for?

Your response will depend partly on who the advice is coming from. It could be a stranger in the grocery store or perhaps your child's teacher. It could be your best friend or maybe someone in your family. What's certain is that someone, sometime will say something negative about your parenting. You can be prepared with a response that doesn't necessarily criticize them in return.

Comments from strangers

Imagine your child is getting impatient while you're waiting in the doctor's office. If you speak severely, someone may frown and say, "Children behave better if parents speak gently." So the next time he's having a bad day, you speak gently. Then the stranger next to you may turn to her friend and say, "Parents today let their children get away with anything."

These people don't know you, don't know your child, and have no idea what's going on in your lives. Their opinions are just opinions; you don't have to defend yourself. If you need to reply, try something like, "Everyone has a bad day sometimes. I guess this is his." Smile and then ignore them.

Advice from professionals

There are some people you *want* advice from, like family support practitioners, health care professionals, child care providers and teachers. They all base their advice on their specialized knowledge about children. When a teacher suggests ways to help your child learn to read, the recommendations are based on her training. But when she suggests that you enrol your child in more after-school activities, that opinion is probably based on her own values and experience. She might have some influence on you, but you are the expert on your child and it's up to you to decide. The teacher cannot know the whole context, which includes your values, your family's situation and your deep understanding of your child. A short answer that respects everyone might be, "Thank you for your concern for my child's well-being. I will think about what you've said."

Advice from people close to you

Aside from you, the people who care most about your child are other family members. They are the ones most likely to be watching your parenting and offering advice.

In fact, they may feel they have a duty to do this. It may sound like criticism, but if you see their comments as a sign of how much your child means to them, it will be easier to listen to what they have to say.

Think about it. Start by considering your family member's observations about your parenting. Set aside your urge to defend your choices. Even if the person is not completely right, is there a grain of truth there? We can all improve by learning from feedback.

Get more information. If it turns out you're not so sure about the choices you're making, you may need to get more information. For instance, if your mother says you should start feeding cereal to your baby at two months, you could ask a public health nurse or read up on current recommendations. You will increase your confidence that you are making the best decisions you can for your baby.

Give some information. Some people's suggestions may be based on outdated information. Parents used to be told to put their infants to sleep on their stomach. Recent studies have shown that having infants sleep on their back helps prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Share information like this with your family members by passing on brochures or books. You might also quote a professional expert as the source of your information.

Look for things you can agree on. You don't want your baby's care to become a source of conflict with the people close to you. Look for things you can agree on and point out how your approaches are similar.

Avoid situations that emphasize your disagreements. For instance, if your toddler's table manners don't meet someone's standards, try to avoid meals with that person until the child's skills improve. And if you don't want someone's advice, don't complain to them about your child's behaviour.

Have a response ready. Depending on the situation, you can respond to unwanted advice by making a vague response, like "Oh, yes?" and changing the subject. Or you may want to be more direct: "I appreciate that you love the baby and you want to be helpful. I've thought about it a lot and this approach is the one that works for me." Remember to smile.

Look for people who think like you do. You will deal better with other people's judgments if you can find support for your way of being a parent. The support can come from books and videos, but the best support comes from finding other parents who share your values. They will build your confidence that you are making the decisions that fit for you and your family.

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