

Oh, Behave!

WHEN IT COMES TO THE SUBJECT OF KIDS, OFFERING ADVICE CAN BE TRICKY BUSINESS. AFTER ALL, WHAT PARENT WANTS TO BE TOLD, EVEN BY A CHEERFUL STRANGER, HOW TO KEEP THEIR PIPSQUEAKS IN LINE? STILL, **PHILIP GALANES**, "SOCIAL Q'S" COLUMNIST FOR *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, FORGES ON. WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH KIDS TODAY? THE QUESTION IS ETERNAL—LIKE THAT CRUNCH BERRIES STAIN YOU'VE GOT IN YOUR CARPET.



A MY FAMILY HOSTED some friends and their children for dinner. After dessert, their tween daughter returned her spoon to the table, leaned forward, and began licking her plate. I waited, dumfounded, for her parents to correct her, but they never said a thing! I didn't want to embarrass the girl or her parents, so I didn't say anything either. But my younger kids were fascinated by her behavior. What should I have done?

—Heather, Newport News, VA

You mean, other than passing her your pots and pans to lick clean?

My hunch is that the tweeny bopper was trying to provoke her parents into a wild rumpus. Mercifully, they didn't take the bait—in front of you, anyway. You did the right thing too, Mummy, by keeping mum. Never discipline other people's kids when they're there to do it themselves! Just follow up with your own kids later, and make sure they understand how silly Pamela the Plate Licker's behavior was.

Sometimes we can't see what's right in front of us. And practically no human interactions involve quite as much willful un-seeing and heel-digging-in as those involving children, whether ours or someone else's. Friends and neighbors can't seem to hold themselves back from weighing in on the tyke's bad behavior. And parents can be counted on to insist that these eyewitnesses are dead wrong, even when presented with compelling evidence to the contrary.

It makes a kind of sense. We love our kids so much, and see such wonderful qualities in them.

To us, they're often the walking, talking manifestations of our best and most vulnerable selves. No criticism required! And if there were a legitimate problem with our little spawn surely we'd see it ourselves, right? Not necessarily.

Consider the following:

Q: *Some good (and usually reasonable) friends brought their two sons, ages nine and twelve, to our place one evening. After dinner, the adults played cards, and the children went off to play. At one point, I found the boys jumping on the family-room sofa and asked them to stop, which they did. After they left, I discovered that the boys had caused some major damage, so I called our friends to let them know. Far from apologizing, the parents claimed that I'm responsible, since we weren't all in the same room. They also accused me of failing to supervise the boys and said that I should have brought the jumping to their attention immediately. What do you make of this?*

Let's hear it for (occasionally unreasonable) friends and dinner guests!

Because if abdicating parental responsibility were as simple as temporarily changing address, America would be more mobile than it already is. Your friends' kids are *their responsibility*, no matter which room of your house they're in.

Most parents I know would have checked on their children a couple of times during the course of the evening—and those kids are middle-aged. And while you might have mentioned the trampoline act to the parents, I can understand why you didn't: You thought you'd handled it. My hunch is that your pals heard the story as an attack on their darling boys, so they dug themselves into a defensive, NRA-style position ("Kids don't break sofas; derelict hosts who don't supervise them do") rather than simply apologizing for the damage.

Why would reasonable people do this? Who knows? Maybe they can't bear to think of their sons as sofa-stompers. Or maybe (as I suspect),

we turn our kids into little ego extensions of ourselves, and just can't bear the criticism.

WHERE CHILDREN ARE CONCERNED, PARENTS OFTEN DIG IN HARD AND FAST. So either let your sofa go or prepare for war. Of course, menschiefer folk would simply have offered to pay for the damage, but when it comes to other people's kids—even sensible people's kids—all bets are off.

Lesson No. 1 for Parents:

If your kid breaks it, just apologize and whip out the old checkbook.

Corollary for Non-Parents:

If the parent blames you instead, don't be surprised.

So what's the solution? Excluding kids from you parties? Hardly:

Q: *We're giving a big party. In our invitation we made it clear, in a polite way, that this would be an adults-only affair. But some guests have insisted on bringing their children and are deeply offended that we're not giving in. Our home is not child-friendly, and some kids are impossible. We decided it would be worse to make exceptions, so we've gone with a blanket rule: Get a sitter or send regrets. Are we wrong?*

Blood is thicker than water, which may explain my continued conviction that my brother is not a moron—as well as your pal's determination to drag their kids to your adult party. But note: Blood is also harder to get out of the living-room rug. So you did nothing wrong, dear hosts.

The kindest gloss here may be that parents love their kids so much that they assume everyone else does, too. They might even agree that a general rule prohibiting kids from your fancy parties is your prerogative—as long as you make an exception for their little terrors. Still, your friends go too far when they badger the people lavishing them with food and drink about the guest list.

A party for adults is perfectly reasonable. When I was a kid, adults rarely invited us to their shindigs. It helped us understand that we were not the center of the universe. Today's tykes may



well have a harder time with this concept, since many of their parents arrange their adult lives around the hobbies and sporting events of those not yet able to read, drive a car, or vote (except on *American Idol*). So if you want to give a party for the mature set, go for it.

Lesson No. 2 for Parents:

The rest of us probably aren't as enthralled with your kids as you are.

Corollary for Non-Parents:

Somehow, parents never believe this.

Not even the just-for-kiddies playdate is exempt from trouble:

Q: *My best friend and I have crawling babies who put everything they find in their mouths. So my husband and I don't allow shoes in our home. Unfortunately, this same friend has a habit of picking dead skin from her lip and scratching her scalp, then flicking what she collects under her nails onto the floor. I don't want my son ingesting this—or her daughter either, for that matter! I've asked her if she needs a tissue, but she misses my point. Do I need to phase her out of my life?*

Wild guess: First kid?

New parents have two choices: Pour yourself a big glass of chardonnay and relax—like our parents and their parent before them—or drive yourself nutty as you fixate on the grotesque things your little angel might shove into his piehole.

Because scalp slough is just the beginning! As parents, we're charged with keeping our children safe. But the world is overflowing with gunk, and we can't control our kids' every waking moment. So let the head-scratcher scratch and put her shoes back on. Focus on immunizing your baby and feeding him well. Read to him every chance you get. But he's going to swallow a few nickels any way you play it. So you might as well relax—and stock up on latex gloves.

Lesson No. 3 for Parents:

Try to relax. Your kids aren't made of glass.

Corollary for Non-Parents:

Try not to be offended by your friends' belief that your sole purpose in life is to infect their precious children. They don't mean it. Really.

These lessons and corollaries can serve us in all sorts of child-related pickles, even as the children in question grow older. Try choosing the right one to solve the following Social Q's:

Q: *My niece and nephew, now ages 16 and 18, have never thanked me for the annual birthday and holiday gifts I send. It hurts my feelings. Last year, I even sent a tactful email on the subject to both of them. Neither replied! Do I keep buying gifts? Or should I tell on them to their mother (my sister)?*

No one likes a tattletale, Auntie. And rubbing your sister's nose in the ingratitude of her nearly adult children will probably backfire on you. This is consistent with the First Corollary: Don't be surprised if parents blame you for their kids' lousy behavior. What's more, you've already made your (completely reasonable) point directly to the gift recipients, and their ignoring your email speaks volumes. So vote with your pocketbook and save the booty for people with the good sense to thank the goose who lays the golden eggs. Move on! As will we:

I've been asked by good friends to be the godfather to their newborn son. I'm an atheist and would be one of THREE godfathers to this child. I don't feel comfortable with the commitment to raise the kid if something should happen to his parents. May I refuse this request without giving offense?

Beware! This is a classic example of Lesson No. 2: Friends of new parents must either act as if the newborn were the most extraordinary thing since Haley Joel Osment in *The Sixth Sense* or



suffer the consequences. Oftentimes, parents just don't get that we're not as into their children as they are.

Fortunately, religious feeling is not required for the task at hand—but gifts are! No need to worry about raising the child either. Your friends only want to include you in the happy occasion. They wouldn't entrust you with their precious bundle if you were Dr. Oz. And I don't believe you can refuse this gig without giving offense—unless, perhaps, in a fit of self-denigration, you hurl yourself to the floor and cry out that you're not worthy. They'll agree in a hot second!

Okay, last one:

Q: *My 13-year-old son has just started going out with girls. I think he comes on a little strong: first calling, then texting, then calling again to see if she's gotten the text. I suspect the girls find all this communication annoying, and I'd like to tell him to take it slower. But my wife thinks we should stay out of it. How about you?*

Classic Lesson No. 3: Relax, Dad! Sonny is not made of glass.

Part of me thinks you should speak with your son about phone etiquette—the same way you taught him to shake hands when he was introduced. But the 13-year-old in me keeps rising up to say, "This is not about the phone; it's about your son's burgeoning romantic life." So I'd stay out of this, unless you really like *Portnoy's Complaint*.

Nothing you say will overcome your son's strong impulse to reach out (again and again) to the object of his affection—until his pride grows as wounded as his ardor is bold, which will probably take several years, several girls, and a calming of the hormonal waters. Interference by you will only make you a handy target for his rage.

But if you simply must weigh in, incorporate a story about your own excessive behavior in the throes of adolescence. It might be good for bonding.

And a pith helmet couldn't hurt.

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