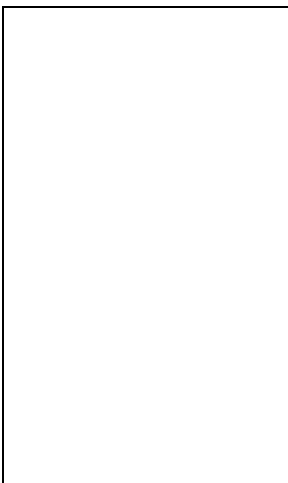


Public Parenting

By Mary Marsh



If you have more than one child (or if you have a toddler which I think counts as three), you probably spend a lot of time at home unless you can find a babysitter. Whether it is the boisterous play that leads to frayed nerves and withering looks from childless companions or the embarrassment of a tantrum, every outing has the potential for disaster.

Most parents can neither afford nor want to hire babysitters everytime they need to go out in public. Yet, just running a few necessary errands can lead to

embarrassing outbursts from grumpy or restless children. Even "enjoyable" family outings can turn into Treks of Torture by bickering and complaining. Sometimes it seems hard to just leave the house!

The standard methods of discipline we work so hard to maintain at home, don't translate well in a public place. You won't always be able to find a spot for a quiet time-out. You may become engaged in a conversation and won't notice your child's pent up energy until s/he is racing around the room at top speed. Not only are you in a relatively unfamiliar setting and without your usual tools, you are on display. Every word, every gesture is open to public scrutiny. You know that whatever happens, you will be the one complimented or chastised. And as much as we like to pretend it doesn't matter, our children's behavior reflects on our parenting skills.

Speaking as one who has spent many hours traveling about town with three children as companions, I have learned a few things to lighten the load and enlist the cooperation needed to make for a smooth

outing. There are a few simple ways to ease the challenges of parenting in public, and I have found that when I remember to follow my own advice consistently, I often get invited back "with my children!"

Plan Your Trip Carefully

I think the best place to start is by respecting your children as people who have their own ideas about how their time should be spent. Just because your top priorities include paying the

gas bill and picking up something for dinner doesn't mean your children agree. While you have to make the final decision, it will be a lot more agreeable to everyone if you can incorporate a few of your children's priorities into your plans. I know with my kids, I can get several important errands run with ease if I just include a stop somewhere to pick up a slushie or a soda. Brief stops at one of the many city parks also demonstrate my willingness to include their preferences in our plans.

Have Clear, Reasonable Expectations

Tell your children clearly and specifically where you'll be going and what sort of behavior you will be expecting. Give your children concrete guidelines. (ie. no running indoors, use a quiet voice, stay where I can see you). Avoid vague generalizations like "be nice" or "be good." Kids have a hard time matching their definitions to yours.

I also like to tell my children what sorts of possibilities we have. If, for example, we can get all the errands done quickly, we'll be able to go to the park. If I have to spend a lot of time reminding them to behave, we just won't have time.

Be Prepared

Bring a lunchbox or backpack for each child. This amazing little trick can make all the difference. A few favorite toys, a thermos of juice and a baggie of carrot sticks can brighten any trip. If your kids are old enough, I highly recommend personal cassette players with earphones. This is especially helpful on family trips. Your children should help decide what they want to bring. If you keep the "trip bag" ready, the next time you have to fly out of the door, you can throw in a quick snack and be on your way.

Involve Your Children

When you get where you are going, try to involve your children as much as possible. Have your children do some price comparisons while shopping or check items off the list as you get things done. Ask their opinions and have conversations with them. The more you can let them feel they are a part of things, the more they will be invested in the success of the trip.

Be sure to let them involve you in the outing that they are on as well. Kids will notice different things and it can be refreshing to enjoy their point of view. The other day we were walking on a downtown sidewalk when my kids discovered the fossilized remains of a leaf imprinted into the cement. We started looking and found many more. We got where I wanted us to

get, AND we observed something they found interesting.

Public Communication

And finally, work on a discreet method of communication. Loud, overt methods simply make everyone uncomfortable. Parents are considered as much of a nuisance as the child. You want to try to get the attention of your child only. Here are a few suggestions:

- Develop a look that says it all. Something between a glare and an "evil eye". When your kids know this look you need only catch their eye to get the ever-resentful question, "What did I do?" Which, of course, you can then answer quietly between the two of you.
- Quietly approach your child and pull her close. Now you can explain, in a firm but discreet voice, what needs to happen.
- If your child is just out of reach but within quiet voice distance, speak very quietly, even whisper. A whisper will often get a better ear than a yell. If they can't quite hear you, they will come closer!

The suggestions I have made here are not a lot of little tricks and tips. These are ideas grounded in the concept that my children are people who deserve respect and consideration. They are also capable of living up to reasonable expectations. It is more work and takes more planning to travel around with kids. However, the extra time you spend preparing will be more than worth it when you hear someone say to you, "Your children are so well behaved!" Or when you realize you have just gone to the bank, picked up the cleaning and bought the groceries, and you are still cheerful and ready to have some fun.

Mary Marsh is the mother of three children and a freelance writer living in Davis. After 10 years as a professional Early Childhood Educator and 11 years as a parent, Mary focuses a large part of her writing on parenting and education.