

“Judgment Day”

“What kind of a mother ARE you?” she bellowed, her eyes bulging at the sight of my friend’s newborn baby lying flat on his tummy in his stroller on the corner of Broadway and 79th Street in Manhattan. “You better roll that baby onto its back immediately!” My friend, who had finally discovered a sleep solution for her son, was too shocked to offer any retort to this woman’s unexpected affront. How can you possibly respond to someone who is so presumptuous and so reproving? I hadn’t realized that a perfect stranger could be so totally judgmental, especially when she wasn’t aware of my friend’s dire sleep situation. I also didn’t realize that the road of motherhood would be marked by moments of mothers judging other mothers, no matter what the circumstance.

Now living in California, seven years and three kids later, I continually witness (and often fall prey) to a litany of lectures about mothering from strangers, friends, even family -- all of whom are moms. I have graduated from the verdicts about whether I breast-fed long enough (6 months didn’t “cut it” for many), and from the inquiries of whether my napping regime for all three kids was too intense (yes, I admit parading a stroller through parks in New York City or driving up and down 280 to ensure slumber). The catalog of opinions on napping and nursing has been superceded by a repertoire of views on other subjects such as going back to work or staying at home, public versus private school, what foods we serve our kids, and even how many children we choose to bring into the world. The list is infinite. As mothers, we judge and we are judged. Why we judge warrants an investigation; how we respond to the judging becomes secondary.

We stroll, schlep and struggle, and we manage to make instant connections with other mommy comrades – fellow moms who support our need to have a sip of wine at 5:00 even though we’re still nursing, and friends who support our decisions to go back to work full-time, part-time or no more of the time. The bonds of motherhood seem to supercede our educational background, our work experience, and even our dress code. New moms may share parenting tips, coffee at Starbucks, and phone numbers but very soon, they may exchange disparaging looks, whispers, and criticism. In an instant, the pendulum shifts and our so-called sorority of supporters seems to transform into a coalition for criticism.

Dr. Bob Livingstone, LCSW in San Mateo believes that mothers have a “need” to compare themselves to other moms to “gather information.” They want to figure out what’s best for their own kids by observing others in action. When another mother does something differently than what you do, it highlights an internal conflict: “Is she doing it right or am I doing it right?” Instead of accepting these differences, the response usually comes out in the form of judgment.

To illustrate this omnipresent sport of judging, I kept a log for one day of disapproving comments that I heard directly as well as those that I had solicited from friends about

how we may unwittingly judge others. The following represents what I consider the worst offenders from “Judgment Day”:

“Have you noticed how James no longer cries during music class? It’s because he is coming to class with his nanny who pays more attention to him than his own mother does!”

“I feel sorry for Emily. The Dad works hours a week and the Mom decided to start her medical residence this year. They have nannies on call 24/7!”

“I would NEVER give my child that kind of yogurt. It’s 100% sugar.”

“She is going to the gym again! She spends more time on the treadmill than she does with her twins!”

“What on earth is her daughter wearing? It’s pathetic that she spends more time focusing on herself!”

“Who has time for conversation or coffee drop-off? I’m in a rush to get to important work meetings.”

“I think your next car should be a mini-van. Don’t you think it makes sense for the carpool?”

These “Judgment Day” remarks certainly demand further analysis: some remarks appear dangerously offensive while a handful can be interpreted as innocuous banter – suggestions to improve our sanity, the nutritious well-being of our children, or our personal appearance. But when your brain has been temporarily liquefied and your favorite jeans no longer allow you to button them, it becomes hard to distinguish between a helpful hint and a condescending criticism. Motherhood feels like we’re back in high school all over again. You don’t know what’s expected, and you want desperately to fit in. It becomes natural to project your own insecurity onto other mothers, and on the flip side, it’s easy to see how you can become the target of other mothers’ uncertainties.

When another mother makes a statement that feels like a judgment about our mothering, it most likely stems from a need to bolster her own confidence in her decisions as a parent. In her book, “Dispatches from a Not-So-Perfect Life,” Faulkner Fox believes that women judge each other as a way of asking themselves if other mothers are as selfless as they are. If not, women may feel compelled to say something critical to other mothers in order to get them to feel anxious as well. When I observe my friends criticizing other mothers, Fox’s points become validated. Moms who are insecure about their choices for their own kids – nanny, school, bedtime, allowance – gain self- assurance when they simply think negatively about another mother’s actions.

How many times have you listened or participated in conversations with friends privately berating other friends for working too many hours, for allowing their kids to watch too

much television or for letting babies sleep in their parents' bed? Other mothers – even the ones we claim as our friends-- can make us feel apprehensive about whether we are doing the right thing for our children. Undoubtedly, this need for approval unleashes a common fear: Am I a good mother if I do or if I don't?

The path of motherhood is often so difficult to navigate that when we question our own actions, it becomes easier to release some of the tension and self-doubt by criticizing others. Most likely, we pass judgment on others as a way to avoid judging ourselves. We would rather point the finger at the mom who isn't directly behind her toddler in the swimming pool. Or we would rather gasp at the mother who has not armed herself with the equivalent of a traveling toy store on a cross-country flight. Sometimes, we opt to judge because being self-righteous is more palatable than feeling jealous, inadequate or just plain dumb. When we compare, we may often despair --especially if it seems like someone is doing a better job than we are!

More than any other sociological group on this planet, we as mothers tend to sermonize and scrutinize each other about the ways we parent and the decisions we make for our children. Janet Penley, a parenting coach and author of "MotherStyles: Using Personality Type to Discover Your Parenting Strengths," asserts that judging mothers has become a popular American pastime. Women often regard other women's choices as wrong if it differs from their own. Penley has observed that women divide themselves into two groups – good moms or bad moms. It comes naturally for women to judge other mothers when they don't measure up to their own standards or if it feels like other mothers are getting away with something. Penley believes that judging is particularly damaging to women's emotional health. One of Penley's major points is that parenting decisions stem from our individual temperaments as mothers. Examining the differences between someone else's style and your own may help you understand someone's choices rather than judge them.

The bottom line is that we are all in this matriarchal mess together. While we emerge emboldened from the delivery room as newly medaled mothers, the badges of vulnerability are quickly added to our sleeves. Instead of sitting on the judgment squad, let us become ambassadors of support and goodwill to each other. Instead of passing judgment about someone, take a moment to reflect: 1) Do you know the whole situation? 2) Why do you feel the need to judge? 3) Are you insecure about what it is that you are doing or not doing in comparison to this mother? Try and recognize that everyone is entitled to make her own decisions about parenting. Focus on your own path and smile at those you meet along the way.

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