

Are You Disrespecting Your Child with this Type of Attention?

This past weekend was the 4th of July, and I went to visit my mom and her husband with my 2.5 year old.

There were many people there from both sides of the family, and while I don't blame them (ok, maybe I do a little), I couldn't help but notice how unconscious so many people are about how they interact with children. I don't blame them because the very culture we are all brought up in has a fundamental phobia and lack of understanding around children. If you look around, childism is covertly operating all throughout society from the way we speak to kids, to the way we educate them, to the way we don't allow them to go many places, etc. In this post I want to address the way we speak to them. It is ironic because when people do it, they actually think they are being friendly or engaging the child in a respectful way, but they are actually mocking and belittling them because they are coming from the stance that the child is dumb.

The child being dumb may not be the conscious thought had by the other person, but remember, childism is unconscious, mostly. It is woven into the fabric of society. One (of many) exchanges between my bright 2.5 year old son and another adult went a bit like this:

My son picks up a hat, examines it, and puts it on his head,

Adult immediately gets up in his face and says, "What you got there buddy?! You got a hat? You like putting hats on your head?!"

My son stares back with a furrowed brow.

"Look! I got a hat on, too! Do you like my hat?! Do you have a lot of hats back at home?!"

My son takes the hat off, throws it on the ground and walks away.

"Haha! Well, ok! Fine then..."

Upon first reading this you might think, "What's the big deal? Seems like a nice guy trying to talk to your kid."

And yes, I do not doubt the good intentions, but ask yourself, do you think he would have spoken this way to another adult who put a hat on? The likely answer is no. My son was simply minding his own business and modeling what he sees adults do (putting on hats without a fuss) only to get put under a huge microscope and have someone make a big

deal about him putting a hat on. I often see that adults have this way of abrasively intervening on children when they are in the midst of things like exploration, thought, and imagination.

Another example is when my son was in the family room alone and totally focused on this helicopter toy. He was completely absorbed in this helicopter and its functions when this same adult walked in and exclaimed, "You got a helicopter?! Can you make the noise a helicopter makes?! Can you go WOOOSHWOOOSHWOOOSH?!"

To which my son replies, "Nooooo!"

I know my son enough to know that he isn't being a brat to this person, he is simply objecting to his abrasive attitude the only way a young child knows how.

Don't get me wrong. I think attention is a wonderful commodity and the anecdote to so many of the problems that arise with our children. The key is to understand what kind of attention is helping and what kind of attention is hurting.

The type of attention that is **hurtful** is when the giver of attention (usually an adult when it comes to children) wants something in return. They want a certain response, like for the child to act cute or give them certain feedback. Normally, I see the adult responding with something like, "fine then," in a bitter way when the child doesn't engage back in the way they desire. They come to the child with an agenda to entertain and expect to be entertained back by the child on some level. It is given with the assumption that they are smarter and the child needs their input. That what the child is doing in that moment isn't "enough" and they need to add more to the situation by asking obvious questions and dumbing themselves down "for the child." I see this in adult relationships, too. When people dumb themselves down for others, what they are saying is that they don't trust the other person to "play on their level," so to speak. This behavior is actually unkind because it doesn't give the other person the opportunity to learn and grow.

Helpful attention is unconditional and without agenda. It is simply present to where your child is emotionally and open to their feelings and thoughts. It is available when they need it, and it is trusting that when they need it they will ask for it (assuming that they have been made to feel safe in doing so). It is not abrasive and it is not unwarranted. It is understanding that sometimes the most respectful thing you can do is allow space. I know that if my son wanted to show me helicopter noises, *he would*. Oh boy, would he! He doesn't need coaxing or prompting. It is a sense of radical trust in your child. That they have their own built in system that tells them when they want you for things like play, presence and attention.

Think of it like this: What if your friend was walking her dog? Would you walk up to her and say, "What you got there, Sarah? Is that a puppy dog?! You like dogs? What do dogs say,

Sarah? Can you say, 'RUFF RUFF!?'”

I won't even go into how someone tried making my son say, “magic words” before handing him a toy boat that he asked for. That is for another post, but it is important to note the many ways we treat children that we would never dare treating our peers.

“Hey Chantel, can you bring me my book?”

“What do you say, Tim? What are the magic words? C'Mon...what do you sayyy???”

I would never honestly say this to my friend, Tim. So why would I say it to my child?

I understand that some people will think that I am being extreme or thinking too much about this, but I ask that you really consider these ideas. Why do we speak to children so radically different than we do each other? Sure, they don't fully understand everything that adults do, but they understand so much more than we often give them credit for, including the nuances in how we treat them differently. There are ways that you can speak to them in a way that meets them developmentally, without undermining their intelligence. They might not have the language to explain what is happening for them when we do this, but trust me, *they feel it.*



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