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How to Handle 'Unsolicited Advice' With Peaceful Parenting(r)

By Nancy Buck

Think back to when you were pregnant. Did you begin hearing all of the horror stories of every other woman's pregnancy and delivery? Did your mother, mother-in-law, aunts, cousins and godmother give you her best advice about what you should and should not be doing?

When the baby finally arrived, did the advice continue? During a grocery store outing when your baby or toddler began a melt-down, did total strangers feel compelled to give you "good advice?" Now that your child or children are older, has every innocent question you ask of any other parent turn into a lecture leaving you feeling less competent or less able to handle your question?

Let's go at this from another angle. Are you the person who is sharing her good ideas and tips to other mothers of younger children than your own? It's hard not to. We each have our own stories, our own experiences, our own wisdom learned from lessons our children present to us. How to hold back from teaching another mother what we have learned from our own parenting experiences?

Sometimes the advice we receive from others is welcomed. Sometimes the tip your mother-in-law or older sister shares about walking with a cranky infant is just the thing that finally helps you and your baby settle down. Learning the trick about laying your toddler's jacket on the ground is just the advice necessary to move your daughter to learn how to dress herself. Another mother's advice about her son's bedtime ritual is the ticket to help you and your son find peace and success at bedtime.

But sometimes advice, no matter how well intention feels like criticism. When your mother suggests that you hug your child more, you wonder if you are unloving. When your daughter's teacher suggests that you spend more time helping her with her homework, you begin to wonder if you are less than involved than you should be.

What makes the difference between helpful advice and well meaning suggestions turning into criticism? The biggest difference is whether or not you have asked for help and advice. When you ask your sister-in-law how she handles the bickering between her two children, you are asking her to share her experiences, hoping to learn some tricks to solve your problem. But when a total stranger suggests you hold your son's hand while walking through the department store, the advice feels like someone else has evaluated that what you are doing is not okay. You haven't asked for nor are you ready to receive any parent ideas, thank you very much. So when unsolicited advice is offered it is more likely to be unhelpful. When you solicit advice, you want help and suggestions to a challenge or problem that you have acknowledged exists.

Now take a moment to imagine what life is like from your child's perspective. Almost every place in your child's life there is an older person at the ready to offer advice, suggestions for improvement or correction. At home, one or both parents have ideas of how your son could manage his time better. At school, her teacher hands back

work with corrections. At music lessons or on the softball or baseball field the teacher/coach may tell or yell at your son to help him improve his athletic or musical skills. The life of a child is filled with unsolicited advice and correction from every angle in unlimited sources.

When is advice and correction helpful to your child and when is it a threat to her self-esteem? Just as with you, what determines this difference is whether or not the advice or correction has been solicited, asked for, or not.

When your son is making his bed and has trouble tucking in the sheets or fitting the sheet, if he asks for your help or suggestions, he wants advice. But if you happen to walk by at his moment of struggle and suggest that tucking in corner angles first may help, your suggestion may easily be perceived as criticism.

When your daughter asks her coach what she can do to improve her soccer skills, she wants advice and help. But when the coach tells her that she was in the wrong place for the last play, your daughter may leave the field questioning her skills and abilities.

In the first example, your child has self-evaluated that he/she needs assistance and help. In the second examples, the adult has evaluated that the child needs correction and help.

It would be grand if from this day forward you vowed and succeeded in eliminating all unsolicited advice that you offer, to your children and all of the other people in your life. That is my unsolicited advice offered to you. But until I can succeed at such a feat, I won't offer it to you.

Instead, I offer another piece of advice. ASK It really is that simple. When you see your daughter struggling with her homework, ask her if she would like your help. When you hear your son mistakenly naming the capital of South Dakota, ask if he would like your advice. When you see another mother juggling with her baby, carriage and dog, ask if you can help. Your desire to help, to correct, to offer your well earned wisdom will be more readily accepted if you ask first if the person wants to receive your ideas, advice and suggestions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nancy S. Buck, Ph.D. established Peaceful Parenting, Inc. in 2000 to bring her knowledge and experience with effective parenting to the greatest number of parents and other caretakers of children. She developed the Peaceful Parenting® program from her 25 years of experience as a developmental psychologist, trainer and educator with The William Glasser Institute and as the mother of twin sons. Her genuine, warm and authentic teaching style is clear and concise, helping learners move from the theoretical to real life situations.