

Everyone is Watching

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Parents commonly feel like “everyone is watching,” particularly when their child is misbehaving in a store, restaurant, or on the playground. Many parents make a connection between the quality of their parenting and their child’s behavior. A well-behaved child allows parents to feel proud, and often elicits compliments from even strangers. Meltdowns attract attention, and people watching or listening are likely curious and concerned. In moments like these, your attention seeking child has put the two of you in the spotlight. The challenge many parents face, if they rely on others for validation of a good job, is that you are then more prone to feeling negatively judged.

Your thoughts about the situation will influence what you say and do. When you are focused on others’ reactions there will likely be a magnification of the feeling that “all eyes and ears” are on you. Next you may be entertaining thoughts of “why can’t people mind their own business?”

Understandably parents want their child to “Stop it now!” When your child is putting on a public display of his emotional intensity, it is certainly challenging to remain calm. Parental effectiveness goes downhill fast when parents are tense in response to their child’s intensity. They may be having thoughts of “Why is my child doing this to me?” Taking a child’s meltdown personally, may activate feelings of rejection in a parent, and result in distancing from him to avoid the hurt. Reacting like this, is typically based on the assumption the child knows what he is doing, and his goal is to humiliate you. Really, how many babies are capable of reasoning this out?

Parents are human, not always on their best behavior, and can feel an impulse to react intensely to their child’s intensity. When a parent is dependent on others for validating their parenting ability, their goal is likely to be, finding the quickest way to restore their favorable image in others’ eyes.

What would you most likely be thinking or doing if your child was having a meltdown in a public place?

1. Would you be able to successfully calm him down?
2. Would you scoop up your child and make a run for it?
3. Would you be locked into a battle, fighting with your upset child?

Consider your beliefs about why children misbehave or have meltdowns at home, or at inconvenient times or places. Do you believe your child wants everyone to know you are a “bad” parent? Is your child angry, he wants something and you said “no?” You have offered your child some choices, and none of these are acceptable to him, and he wants the world to know.

The fundamental reason why children experience meltdowns are the result of being overwhelmed and unable to cope. A child collapsed on the floor screaming is illustrating he “is done” and cannot hold it together anymore. Considering this, you may respond differently, knowing your child is in a “can’t” state; not a “won’t” state, this is not a willful refusal. Parents want their children to be more mature, and often forget children are not consistent, just because they could do this yesterday does not mean they can or will do it today. We are all affected by stress, and children as well as adults have variable tolerance levels. Some

are more sensitive to light or temperature, crowded or noisy environments, and being hungry or tired can increase everyone's vulnerability to getting overwhelmed.

Parenting has many agendas, lots of lists - things to buy, places to go, and activities to do. It is easy to fall into the trap of "doing" and expecting children to be along for the ride, accompanying you where you need to go. Often parents, trying to attend to the business of life, prioritize agendas over relationships. Your children can call you out, and this is a good thing if you understand there is a purpose, and a goal to be achieved. Children's alarm signals can be quite loud when they are screaming for your attention. They are delivering a powerful message using S.O.S. signals, alerting you that the balance is off, and they need your attention. Understanding children's meltdowns from this perspective will hopefully allow you to convert your annoyance into reassurance.

Let's face it, being a good parent is a challenging job, and there are circumstances that can wear any parent down. The reality is that on some days parents are better equipped for the job, and are fully present physically and emotionally. When it comes to being a parent, you can rarely call in sick or ask for a day off. While "Everyone is watching," most observers have also been in your shoes, remembering or forgetting what it was like - the best gift you can receive is compassion, and your most powerful resource is self-compassion.

- Remind yourself, you and your child are doing the best you can right now
- Stay focused on your child's needs in the moment, and not on others watching
- Empathize with your child, convey understanding, he is having a hard time
- Accept responsibility for your actions, doing too much in one day
- Remember compassion and exercise self-compassion