



Everyone is Watching

Parents commonly feel like “everyone is watching,” particularly when their child is misbehaving in a store, restaurant, or on the playground. Many parents feel as though they are being watched and judged by others. A well-behaved child allows parents to feel proud, and even receive unsolicited compliments from bystanders. Meltdowns attract an audience, and lots of attention with strangers watching or listening, they may be curious or concerned.

In moments like these your child seeking Mom’s or Dad’s attention has put all of you in the spotlight. The challenge many parents face when seeking approval from others, is the need to be prepared for negative as well as the positive. Ideally, you know your child and recognize the signs of pending meltdowns; and know when it is time to go home.

Sometimes, going home is not an option. When this is the case, how you think about the situation will influence your response. Are you focused on what others think, or are you tuned into your child? Do you recognize that your child is tired, hungry, or overstimulated? Or, are you thinking about how embarrassed you feel? Are you wondering “why” he had to meltdown now? When parents get caught up in what others

think, they are vulnerable to feeling as if “all eyes and ears” are on them. In the next moment you may be wondering - why can’t people mind their own business?

Understandably, away from home parents want their child to “Stop it, right now!” When your child is putting on a public display his emotional intensity, it is very challenging to remain calm in the heat of the moment.

Parental effectiveness goes downhill fast when parents become 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 can activate hurt feelings, and out of anger distancing from him. Reacting like this, is typically based on the parent’s assumption that their child knows what he is doing, and wants to humiliate you. Really, how many babies or toddlers are capable of this type of reasoning?

Parents are human, and even as adults not always on their best behavior. Often a vicious cycle is set off, parents have an impulse to react intensely matching or overpowering the emotional intensity of their child. Attempting to restore their power, making clear who is in charge parents may unknowingly escalate the situation. When parents are motivated to restore a favorable image in observers’ eyes, they are putting their needs ahead of their child’s.

What would be your response when your child has 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 and places.

Do you believe your child wants everyone to know you are a “bad” parent?

Is your child angry, he wants a toy, 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 is the result of being overwhelmed and unable to cope with hearing “no.” 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, and recognize that this is not a willful refusal.

Parents want their children to be more mature, and often forget that children are not consistent. Even though your child could do something yesterday, it does not mean he can or will do it today.

We are all affected by stress, and children as well as adults have variable levels of frustration tolerance. Low on time, energy, and hungry, it is likely patience will be down. Temperaments may be different, some parents or children, are more sensitive to light or temperature, crowded or noisy environments. Recognizing the conditions, and signs early, and being flexible about plans let’s everyone know nothing needs to be a big deal.

Parenting involves lots of tasks, and many agendas, lots of lists - things to buy, places to go, and activities to do. It is easy to fall into the trap of wanting to accomplish one more thing. Parents are the drivers, and sometimes expect their children to cooperatively be along for the ride. Sometimes parents lose sight of their children’s needs, and the importance of their relationship in eliciting cooperation.

Sometimes children need to call out their parents on choices and priorities. If you can look at this from a new perspective - this is a good thing. Children’s alarm signals can be quite loud when need be, 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 need for you to respond. Hopefully, you can learn from your children, and convert your annoyance into the reassurance they are seeking.

Let’s face it, being a good parent is a challenging job that can wear any parent down. The reality is some days parents are better equipped for the job, and are fully present physically and emotionally. Parents 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.
- Remember compassion and exercise self-compassion.

Sharona Stone, MEd, LCSW, DCH is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Child Development Specialist, and the founder of Jump Starts for Growing Families, located in the Denver Tech Center.