

Judgment in Aisle Four

At a recent trip to the grocery store, I observed an overwhelmed mother trying to get groceries with three children in tow. They were tired and hungry and not on their best behavior—including the mother.

She responded to their whining in a voice that was certainly too harsh—a voice full of frustration and fatigue. But what happened next was even more unsettling to me.

In the most dramatic fashion, a middle-class, middle-aged woman pushing her cart past the family blatantly rolled her eyes, shot the mother a disgusted look, and resounded with an exasperated huff. She openly signaled to this mother that she was a nuisance to other shoppers and unfit to raise her own children.

The beleaguered mother clearly received the message. With a red face, she beat it to the check out stand. I worried all evening about that family.

Child abuse is a scourge, for sure—one that every adult has to care about. But here's the thing: Being judged by others doesn't help parents cope with the frustration that leads to hurting children. When your children have put you in a position at the grocery store that made you feel like a monster, you will likely behave like one before the groceries are put away. This frustration adds to parents' sense of incompetence and lack of control.

Adults who see a parent stressed out with kids at the store can help. Offering a sympathetic smile is a great place to start. Commenting on that beautiful baby or handsome young man gives frazzled parents a chance to refocus. Commiserating—*“Boy, it sure is hard to shop with kids, isn't it?”*—makes parents feel they are not alone and that someone understands.

When the three-year-old pitches the toilet paper out of the cart and you reach to grab it as it sails by, you add to a parent's sense of support and strength. You remind her that she is not alone, and that others care, too.

If you have a moment for a brief conversation with a stressed parent in the store, you may give that parent something more valuable than you could ever cover with your debit card at the check-out stand. Ask her which aisle has the fruit juice. She'll know, for sure. And you may give that parent the chance to regain her dignity and start over for a happier day with her children.

I used to love the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." Used to, until its use as a book title made it a battle cry in the partisan Family Values War. But whatever our politics, surely we can all agree that while it does, indeed, take a family to raise a child, the support of a loving community empowers a family to do it better.