

The Restaurant

I sat for an hour a half in Houston having lunch with a Montessori mom and her children, five and eight and a half, at an upscale restaurant full of professional people. After dessert the younger child, a boy, complained of sticky hands. He had saved the mussel shells from a dish we had all shared, and both the shells and his hands were smeared with dried red sauce. He wanted to go to the men's room to wash them.

We had been eating and visiting for fifty minutes or so, and I was amazed at the children's relaxed and pleasant manners while we enjoyed our bread and olive oil, selected our salads and a main course to share, waited for our food, and slowly talked and ate. The children had sometimes entered into the conversation and at other times listened to us talking, all the while daydreaming off and on. Knowing these to be very active, energetic children, I suspected that the mood could change at any moment, triggered by just about anything. Perhaps his desire to go to the men's room to wash up would be the beginning of the end of our idyllic meal.

I listened while the mom slowly and carefully guided her five year old son's observation of the restaurant. Who were the people eating here? How were they dressed? What was their mood? Were there any other children in this restaurant? Could the wait people see him over the big trays they were carrying? Was the door from the garden room to the inner dining room wide enough for him to pass through at the same time as a waitperson carrying a large tray? Where would he stand aside to let someone pass by? Did he see that his mother was not ready to get up yet? Would his sister be willing to accompany him to the door of the men's room and wait outside? The boy listened, observed, and offered his conclusions with studied self-respect.

Obviously, it would have been quicker and easier for the mom just to have taken her son to the men's room herself. Had she done so, however, her children would have missed an opportunity for growth, an experience of their mother's trust and respect for them, and an example of her willingness to discipline herself to meet their needs. This mother had no problem with impulse control or delayed gratification. Children gradually model their own behavior and habits after those of their parents. This mother put her children's needs first: to practice respect for her, respect for workers, respect for restaurant guests, and respect for themselves as capable of considering a situation, others involved in it, and modifying their own behavior accordingly.

And so off they went and back they came with quiet self-esteem and happy confidence. At this point the children found a foot-deep stucco window sill in an out of the way place but still clearly within our view and sat cross-legged there, chatting quietly, one playing with the shells and the other one reading her chapter book, Number the Stars by Lois Lowry. We finally left after an hour and a half, satisfied by the long visit and the delicious food.

I wondered how differently the scene might have played out had the mother not stopped, cleared her head, evaluated the situation, and slowly, quietly, and skillfully addressed her children's needs.

Very often, when we parents find ourselves at a loss for how to discipline our children, it is because we need first to address our own issues of self-discipline, delay of gratification, and impulse control. We need to slow down and think things through, get to bed on time and get up early enough, have regular mealtimes and nutritious food, turn off the TV and prepare the home environment. We need to spend as much time at home as possible, avoid shopping and running errands with children, read to ourselves in the children's presence, read aloud to our children, and turn off the radio and VCR. We need to plant things, make things, and cook with our children.

When we are the masters of our selves and our own lives, we will very likely find our children more reasonable and their need for our discipline less frequent.

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