

Everyone's a Critic: How to Handle Mothering Critiques

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Being the recipient of criticism isn't easy for most of us, and it can be particularly difficult when the criticism is directed at our parenting decisions. In part, this is because of the unique vulnerability that comes along with parenthood as well as the constant and conflicting advice and information that surrounds us. It seems that, from the moment we become pregnant, we are flooded with opinions and recommendations from all sides: friends, family, professionals, and even complete strangers. No matter

which choices we make, *someone* is going to disagree and even criticize us.

How we respond to this criticism is largely dependent upon who we are, who the other person is, and our combined history. We may react with anger and defensiveness and regret it later. Or, we may question ourselves and our choices and become worried and confused. The end result of many of our responses to criticism is that we suffer along with our relationships.

There are many ways that criticism can be handled positively and, while it is true that it takes time and commitment to do this, ultimately it can be very rewarding. Following are general strategies that can be used to encourage peace in our relationships without sacrificing our beliefs or self-confidence.

Our confidence levels play a part in how criticism affects us.

Often people have a difficult time with criticism because they may lack confidence in the area being critiqued. Our personal confidence levels greatly affect our perceptions about ourselves as well as our perceptions about other people and what they are really saying when they make comments. Of course, building self-confidence is a life-long task for most of us, but there are some immediate ways we can bolster our confidence when we are facing criticism of our parenting.

There are many things that we can do immediately to help us feel confident in our choices and in our ability to communicate them. Make sure that we are clear in our own minds as to *why* we make these choices. We can gather together the resources that we feel reflect who we are as parents and let go of those that cause us to constantly question ourselves. Don't keep books on our shelves that stare down at us day after day, seemingly to say that we are doing the wrong thing. That can undermine our confidence. We cannot do anything about who makes up our family. So if we have family members who often criticize our choices, we can choose to spend time with people who support our parenting style rather than oppose it. This can make us feel more secure. Having friends with whom we can safely share our parenting choices can also help make us feel secure. This can also provide us with a great source of information and support if we are fielding criticism from others.

Knowing that we will probably face criticism at some point, we can boost our confidence if we practice giving ourselves positive statements. Some examples might be:



"I feel comfortable with my choices and don't need to defend them." "I am a loving and good mother." "I can enjoy being with my friends/family without needing to persuade them of anything." "I am not looking for approval from others. I am happy with myself."

Most of us never realize how difficult it is for one human to really see the actions of another without bias because so much of how we interpret what we see and hear is tied to our own personal history and issues. If we can recognize that the same is true for others—that their view of our actions is based on their own perceptions and fueled by their own fears and expectations—we may be able to avoid taking their comments personally. Maintaining a little objectivity can be helpful in trying to understand other people and why they say what they do, rather than immediately feeling like we have to defend our choices and actions.

So why do people say the things they say?

Most people who give us unwanted advice and/or criticism really think that they are being helpful. When someone criticizes our decisions, they are often saying something about their own feelings, such as, "I worry that the baby will be too dependent" or "Will the baby ever want to be with me?"

There is quite often some other meaning behind the words that someone says. Marianne Vakiener, in her article "Responding to Criticism", (*New Beginnings*, July/August 1999) calls this "the question behind the question." Taking time to figure out what someone is really asking or saying is more than just a way to promote peace in our relationships. It is a way to take a moment and to act with forethought rather than just react. The people who care about us are as

inundated with information as we are from their friends, family, and the media. When what they are told is different than what we are doing, they can experience a lot of stress. Additionally, many of our parents are now trying to figure out how to be grandparents. They may have raised us at a time when almost instant independence was the goal and they were warned against giving in to



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our needs. It can be hard for them to see us opt to make choices such as breastfeeding on demand or sharing sleep when those are a different way of parenting than what they were taught. It can be helpful to remember that they were a product of their time and of the priorities of their social group, just as we are now.

Family members and friends may also feel like they want to share the knowledge they have gained as parents. As they see us make different choices, they may worry that we will judge the choices *they* made as less loving or less informed. They may feel a bit defensive

and try to explain why they did what they did, which can sound like criticism to us. It may be useful to remember that this is most likely not meant as an aggressive action. It might simply be *them* perceiving criticism from us!

Grandparents who are looking for ways to be involved may want to help, yet they may not really remember how young children behave,

especially when those children are breastfed. Sometimes grandparents are embarrassed or feel rejected when breastfeeding children don't automatically want to go to them. When they feel as if they can't help by giving the baby a bottle or babysitting, they may wonder if we don't respect them or don't think they have anything valuable to add to the situation. It may help us to remember that one day we may be grandparents and there will probably be new information available that our children may choose to incorporate into their parenting, making decisions that differ from our parenting choices with them.

Previous generations, especially if they are from our partner's friends or family, may also make comments to us simply to engage us and find something to talk about

with us. Unfortunately, because we may not feel completely comfortable with each other, these conversations can inadvertently leave us feeling criticized. In the same way, a friend or family member trying to make conversation might say something in an attempt to connect and sometimes in a misguided attempt at teasing that can make us uncomfortable. These kinds of interactions say more about the social discomfort of the other person than they do about their views on our parenting, yet they can lead to a lifetime of dislike and mistrust.

There are many other reasons that a friend, family member, or acquaintance would >>



say things that *seem* critical. The truth is that sometimes they *are* being critical. If we aren't sure why someone is inquiring about a choice we've made, we can consider asking them a neutral follow-up question. Most people will respond positively to questions if they are intended to clarify and there is no judgmental or angry tone. It can be as simple as, "Is there something that you are wondering about?" Often, they will then expand upon their original comment, perhaps getting to the questions behind the question. Many people really like to get it all out if we seem to be inviting further discussion, and we may find that a few well-placed questions can help the other person work out whatever was bothering them without our needing to do much after all. And every now and then, we might find out that the other person really was just asking for information!

How can we respond peacefully when we are criticized?

The first question we might ask ourselves is if we want to respond at all. There may be certain situations when there isn't much of an advantage that can come from responding. Sometimes the best answer is none at all; a smile and a quick "I'll have to think about that" can work wonders when there isn't a clear way to handle things or when we just want to move on to something else. Yes, it can be difficult to rein in our gut responses, but taking a moment to think before reacting will allow us the time to consider our own mental state, needs, and desires, as well as giving the situation a chance to resolve itself on its own.

It can feel strange for a woman in today's society to decide not to speak her mind. However, when doing so is exhausting and possibly futile, it may be more of a triumph to

free ourselves from the stress of confrontation and realize that we don't need to explain ourselves to everyone who questions our choices. The need for approval from others can be a form of self-oppression and a source of great suffering. Many people find they are much happier without seeking such approval. We can take comfort in the fact that, by trusting our instincts and making our own decisions as parents, we are living what we believe and declaring our authority to do so.

When we aren't sure whether or not to respond to criticism, we can ask ourselves, "What is my goal for this relationship and for this moment?" In the book *Everyday Blessings*, Myla and John Kabat-Zinn discuss being in the moment with our children, setting aside history, expectations, and sometimes even rules in favor of what is truly important for the child and for our relationship with them. In this way, we free ourselves to experience new things and to meet our children where they are, not where we think they should be.

Of course, it is much easier to be "in the moment" with our children than with challenging adults! But we do have goals for our relationships—even the challenging ones—and we can certainly see that each moment adds up as resentments or bonds are formed. When we know we are going into a tricky situation, it may help us to identify these goals beforehand. For example, if we know we will be with a family member who is not proficient at stating his or her needs and can appear judgmental, we might decide that our goal is to have one peaceful afternoon with that family member and we can remind ourselves of this when we are with them.

It can be freeing to put aside our list of problems with a friend or family member and think of what is important in the moment. If a friend really needs to feel that you think she is a good mother, too, then perhaps the best response to "That's not how I did it!" might be to remind her that you respect her and avoid becoming defensive about your different choices. What can you say if a sister says, "Gosh, your kids are noisy! Can't you control them?" She might need a cup of tea and a listening ear more than a fight, even though we might be frustrated at her method of engaging.



Confronting Conflict Peacefully

Here are a few ideas for crafting responses that don't end up causing more conflict:

1. Use Nonviolent Communication:

Marshall Rosenberg, the originator of the Nonviolent Communication movement, created a series of basic steps that can be useful. Simplified, these consist of "observation, feelings, needs, and requests." The idea is to observe what is happening in the situation, state in simple terms our feelings, our needs, and any requests we feel might help to meet those needs. For example: "I see that you might be uncomfortable seeing me nurse my baby in the restaurant. I feel completely comfortable with it and I hope that you'll feel comfortable, too. I would like everyone to just feel free to go on with their conversations and their meal when I nurse." The idea is not to tell the person how much they have bothered or hurt you, but to tell them exactly what you need. Many women report that this method of communication works well when their spouse is the one that seems critical of them, perhaps because men often appreciate being told exactly what we need and what they can do about it.

2. **Use "I" or "We" statements:** Using "I" or "we" statements will focus on our own needs and/or feelings rather than on attacking the other person. Additionally, when we say "we"—meaning our partner and ourselves—it can subtly make the point to others that we are in agreement in our decisions.

3. **Practice simple statements that confirm our right to make our own choices without negating the other person's ideas:**

Following are several examples:

- a. "We feel very comfortable with all of our choices related to breastfeeding."
- b. "I am following the advice of my doctor about this issue." If you don't have a doctor you feel comfortable with, this could mean the American Academy of Pediatrics, the World Health Organization, or even pediatrician Dr. William Sears.
- c. "We all make different choices for different reasons, but the most important thing is that our children know we love them."
- d. "Even though you and I make different choices, I really respect you as a parent."

e. "Oh, we can discuss kids anytime. Right now, I would love to hear what is going on in your life."

4. **Evaluate each situation:** As well as considering the source of the comment, it is important to think about what is going on around us when we respond to criticism. For example, it is certainly easier to respond in a one-on-one situation than one in which a lot is going on, such as a family birthday party. Also, it may be impossible to have enough time, in certain conditions, to really get into what is being said and how we want to respond, and we may need to discuss it later. Consideration of each individual situation is as important as the consideration of each individual person when you are deciding how to respond.

5. **Remember that children look to us as examples of how to handle criticism:**

Of course, we may find that we don't want to get into certain discussions in front of our children, but when we do respond in their presence, how we do it can teach them a lot—good and bad. If we choose to respond with care, our children can learn the tools to handle criticism and friction with others. It is good to keep in mind that they are often watching and listening to our interactions, even when they don't seem to be, and that they usually understand much more than we give them credit for.

6. **Tailor responses to the person:** Some people react well to humor, some to information, and others to personal stories and feelings. It is worthwhile to think of what we know of the person as we respond.

7. **Try to maintain healthy boundaries:** It is possible to shape our responses in such a way that we are not inviting further comment. The statements above, in tip #3, don't end with a request for agreement or opinions; there is no "... don't you agree?" or "... wouldn't you?" in them. When we do this, we are tacitly saying that we are not looking

for either agreement or opinion and that we are ready to move on.

8. **Steer clear of arguments:** Some of us feel very secure in our parenting choices, no matter how unlike those of our friends and family, and yet still have a strong need for approval from those same people when we are with them. The source of this deep need may also be found in a lack of confidence and it can cause us to spend quite a bit of time trying to explain ourselves in such a way as to change the other person's mind or at least prove to them that we have good reasons for what we do.

Unfortunately, the fact is that people don't change their minds very easily and most of the time arguing only seems to solidify them in their point of view. A lot of energy is spent and much frustration and resentment is built up by trying to explain and change minds.

What about people outside of our friends and family?

If a casual acquaintance or stranger says something to us that seems truly critical rather than friendly, they may not need or deserve a response at all. ▷▷



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Sometimes, when a stranger or acquaintance makes a comment or asks a question, they are simply seeking a way to connect with us, to admire the baby, or to tell us about their experiences. If we feel we have the time and inclination to respond, we can. If we don't feel like responding, a smile and quick thanks or a friendly comment can suffice. This type of response can also work well with people we see quite often but don't consider as close friends or family, such as childcare workers.

Healthcare professionals can be a challenging group of people because they are not involved in our daily life, yet we do seem to care very much about what they think. Very few people can cause us to question ourselves more than doctors, partly because they usually feel very comfortable making direct comments about our parenting choices, especially about breastfeeding. While many doctors, including pediatricians, have become more educated about breastfeeding, some doctors still have very little knowledge of healthy breastfeeding practices. Because of this, they

sometimes offer personal opinions or outdated recommendations rather than current and correct information.

Familiarizing ourselves with the most recent recommendations regarding our children's health can help reinforce our confidence when speaking with doctors. If we don't feel comfortable enough sharing information with our doctor and cannot change providers, it may be enough to smile and nod or say something noncommittal. Many mothers find it easiest to respond to questions like, "Is he/she eating solids well or sleeping well?" with vague answers such as, "Yes, we're doing just fine with that." Many mothers opt for this approach rather than offering more details that they know will cause the health care professional to criticize.

Practice makes perfect.

Like anything else, the more we cultivate and practice healthy responses to criticism, the easier it will become. Keeping in mind the unique factors that make up a person's

viewpoint and situation, and making sure to nurture our self-esteem will help us to make the best decisions for ourselves and for our relationships. And peace, even in a relationship that we *have* to be in, rather than *choose* to be in, is worth pursuing because of how much it enriches our lives and connections with others. □

Resources

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