

Conscious Parenting



Sweet Journeys and the Grocery Checkout

By Bernadette S. Kovach, Ph.D.

A mother and her toddler began their journey through the market around the same time as I did. I was immediately impressed at the mother's ability to negotiate the competing needs of her toddler's wish for attention and the task of shopping as they walked up and down the aisles. The mother talked to her

toddler, pointing out the various labels and reading the ingredients in such a compelling way that I found myself interested in what she was reading. What seemed like a wonderful solution was the beginning of an interaction we have all seen or taken part in.

Nearing the third or fourth aisle, the toddler's interest in the boxes began to oscillate rapidly between disinterest and a desire to hold the objects. "Have that?" was a frequent refrain to which the mother answered, "No, we don't need that." The mother, beginning to look a little frazzled, offered her child a toy and some snacks, redirecting the toddler's attention to what they had with them. For a time, the offers of toys and snacks contained the emotional overload, and mother and child marshaled on. As I continued my shopping, I occasionally heard the mother directing her child to notice something on one of the shelves by inquiring if her toddler could find the red can or the blue box.

As luck would have it, they completed their journey around the same time as I did. It was at the checkout that the now fatigued mother and child began an easily recognizable interaction. The toddler wanted candy and, by this point, had become loud and insistent that her demands be met. Leaning toward the candy counter, she was able to snag one of the chocolate bars, and so took matters into her own hands. She wanted something and at that moment the something she wanted looked like candy. The toddler could no longer look at all the shelves of colorful items without taking action.

The mother, looking more frazzled and slightly embarrassed, asked the toddler to give up the candy, reminding her they have candy at home and snacks with them. Holding tight to the candy, the toddler insisted that she found what she wanted and became even more distraught when her mother put the candy back.

Remembering how it felt when you were little can help bring the focus back to what you want to offer your child and what works for both of you.

In retrospect, it appears the mother's desire to complete her own task left her vulnerable to forgetting that her method would set up a desire in the toddler to have what she saw. It is easy in shopping centers or groceries for both adults and children to become overwhelmed and feel needy because everything in the store is set up to entice. Although the mother read the labels with enthusiasm to entertain her child, it likely increased the toddler's desire to have what was outside of the cart. Then in the checkout line, when the toddler asserted an independent and creative solution to wanting something outside of what she and her mother could supply, the mother was unable to empathize with her daughter's solution. I also wondered if the toddler wanted to shop and put things in the basket, as mommy had.

Watching the interaction, I was reminded of news articles I have read debating if grocery stores should remove candy from the checkout counters or place the candy at a level not visible to a child in a

shopping cart. While these can be valuable solutions that take into consideration how difficult it is for children to see something and not touch, it is also worth considering what the child and mother are really in need of, desiring, and what has led up to it.

We can all identify with a parent who wants a few more minutes to finish a task. A parent's competing desires can result in an over estimation of what can be emotionally tolerated by a child at any age. In this, and similar instances, remembering the child's capacity to wait, the stimulation of a grocery store, particularly a store that sells items other than groceries, and the number of invitations to reach out and explore are important considerations to keep in mind when embarking on the adventure. Remembering that toddlers and even older children enjoy exploring their world through tactile means, as well as moving about freely and being part of the excitement, can help us consider ways to make shopping adventures remain fun.

Remembering how it felt when you were little can help bring the focus back to what you want to offer your child and what works for both of you. Sometimes taking a few minutes to play with a familiar toy or redirecting the child's attention to his or her own pretty clothes or something they share with you can help decrease the external stimulation. Asking the toddler to help you place items in the basket keeps them engaged while satisfying the need to touch. Taking a few moments to rest or ending the trip before you would like can also be a good enough solution. It may also be in the best interest of both mother and child for mother to take a shopping trip alone. This gives both mother and child a time to do something different and come back together with renewed enthusiasm.

The toddler could no longer look at all the shelves of colorful items without taking action.

Even with planning, it is at times impossible to predict how your child might react on any given day. A child's capacity to self-soothe or be soothed depends on many factors related to the child's changing developmental capacities and your own emotional state and awareness. The parent's ability to maintain a sense of calm and use a child's actions as a form of communication is influenced and complicated by how the parent was parented. Recalling how our parents handled these situations is part of remembering what led up to our solutions and our automatic responses.

Some parents are also more prone to becoming anxious or angry when they feel helpless or incapable of helping their child. Talking with friends, being involved with toddler groups and caring preschools, or seeking an outside consultation can assist parents in becoming more aware and accepting of the constitutional and historical factors that will help make the adventures of parenting sweeter for everyone.

Bernadette S. Kovach, Ph.D., is a Fully Licensed Clinical Psychologist, Adult Psychoanalyst, and Advanced Child Candidate at the Michigan Psychoanalytic Institute. Dr. Kovach is affiliated with Allen Creek Preschool, Wayne State University, University of Detroit-Mercy, and Madonna University. Her clinical practice serving all age groups is located in Plymouth, Michigan. Dr. Kovach can be reached at 734-812-1157 or by email at bkovach@sbcglobal.net.

