

“Non” Judgment Day in the Village

By Heather Ouida

My six-year-old son started first grade and my three-year-old son started pre-school this year. This considerable milestone has given me clarity to look back on the past six years, to reflect upon the mother I am today, and to truly grasp the scope and complexity of what not I, but we, together, have accomplished.

Prior to being a mother I thought I knew all there was to know about raising a child. After all, I had been a camp counselor, babysat, studied child psychology as an undergraduate, and had a master’s degree in child development. I knew I had many weaknesses, but child rearing? This one I figured I had in the bag. I promised myself that when I had children, my kids would never watch TV, stay up too late, eat junk food, scream in the supermarket, be fresh, throw sand in the sandbox, or not want to share. I was so judgmental that I didn’t even realize I was being so — that is, until I had my first child.

As a mom, I’ve learned that I don’t have all the answers, that there is no one right way to raise a child. I recognize that sometimes you can do everything right and your two-year-old may still flop on the ground and pound his feet in a full-blown, screaming tantrum in the check-out line. I admit that what I now profess to know only came about with the help of so many — mothers, friends, even strangers, who, in short, helped me be less judgmental of myself and of others.

I realize now the wisdom of “It takes a village...” and remember my friends in my London “village” away from home where our first son was born, and how they always made themselves available for my first-time mother questions and concerns. I think, too, about my grandmother and my mother, who rather than passing judgment on unfamiliar swaddling and soothing techniques prescribed by Dr. Karp, simply said “Teach us how to do it,” and quieted my colicky baby by tightly swaddling him and shushing loudly in his ear.

When my older son was going through a really difficult time and I would start a sentence by saying, “Why can’t he just... (eat like other children, go to Mommy and Me classes without crying, etc.),” it was my sister-in-law who would say, “Because he’s just himself.” This is a mantra from the Village that I continue to carry with me today.

In retrospect, so often it was the little things that I treasured most, easy everyday connections and actions. I smile when I think about those favorite aunties, who always took the time to get down on the floor and play with my children. Just play. To be totally in the moment. No judgments. Or about other mothers and friends, non-judgmental, loving and kind role models, who never made me feel bad when my kiddies were eating pizza while theirs were eating broccoli and grilled fish.

Now that I've opened this Village door, I can see just how many have played a positive, non-judgmental role, from college friends to old and new friends (with and without kids). When my younger son for two years decided that getting up at 3:50 a.m. was a totally acceptable time to start his day (even though I had him on a schedule, tried sleep training, and even went to a sleep specialist), they never said, "This is what you're doing wrong...." Instead, they would call with suggestions, encouragement and empathy (and the occasional Cosmo when things got really rough!).

They reminded me, too, that just as I can't take credit for *all* of my kids' successes (as much as I would like to!), I also can't take the blame for all the things they sometimes do wrong. "Heather," they would say, "don't make this about you and your parenting. Just help them through it." Then there were my entrepreneur friends, who not only helped me build and launch my business, but never made me feel like a bad mom for wanting to be a great business woman *as well* as a great mother. Each, in her own way as a neighbor and a friend in this big Village of ours, has taught me what it means to be part of a community that watches each other's children, to accept that kids don't have to meet preconceived notions to be happy and healthy in life.

The Village, in today's world, cannot be a parochial or provincial place. On that note, I want to acknowledge all the strangers who have helped me out in airports, restaurants, and grocery stores over the years when I was having a hard time with my boys. I promise you and them that I will pay it forward. I will not give you a mean look when your child is screaming, I will not tell you that I can't understand why your child can't happily share because mine always does, I will not look at my watch when I see your child is up past what I consider to be too late. I will remember that I, too, have been there. I will remind myself what I have learned from so many others along the way. I will help you, offer you a hand, listen and be empathetic — I will not judge you.

Copyright © 2009 Heather Ouida. All rights reserved.