



“Ask Renatta”



July 2007

“Ask Renatta” is a quarterly feature of the Office of Child Care, answering real questions about early childhood, child development, and education. We invite parents and primary caregivers who are employees of the County of Los Angeles and the general public to pose your questions to “Ask Renatta”. Your question will be answered individually and posted on our Web site to share with others. If you would like to ask a question about your child, click on rcooper@ceo.lacounty.gov, enter “Ask Renatta” in the Subject line, and ask your question.

This issue:

- My friend brings her child to adult outings.
- What can you tell me about my son and daughter-in-law’s parenting style?

I have a good friend that used to work in the same division with me. To keep in touch, we meet for lunch one Saturday a month. My friend brings her five-year-old son with her. Am I wrong to expect that if she is going to bring him, she should also bring something for him to do while we have lunch and catch up?

It is not unrealistic to expect an adult who brings a child on an adult outing to bring activities for that child to do. It is not unrealistic to question why an adult would bring a child along on an outing that is adult-oriented as a regular practice. It might be better for all concerned if another arrangement were made for the child; a “play date” would be preferable to the child in most cases.

Many times, working parents feel conflicted about the number of hours they spend apart from their children. Out of this conflict grew the concept of quality time as opposed to quantity time, and many parents squeeze in extra time with their children by taking them places where one might not expect to see a child, such as restaurants that are not child-friendly, book club meetings, coffee houses, or inside church services instead of in the children’s programs. I had a toddler crying next to me during a recent evening ballet performance and she began to cry as soon as the house lights dimmed as I knew she would, to the irritation of every adult who was seated anywhere near the family. Just because a parent can take a child, we often do not stop to ask should we take a child to an activity where their typical behavior is not going to be appropriate.

Time is not quality if it is unpleasant and is spent being harsh, overly corrective or worse. A five-year-old who is attempting to be part of an adult conversation during a lunch date is going to wear out their welcome quickly. Even the presence of books, crayons, markers, and paper to draw on does not mean that the child will not want to participate in the adult conversation. To be human is to be social, and if the parent feels that she does not spend enough time with her child, chances are that the message has been communicated. Ambivalence sends a mixed message to a child. What do you do when all the things you would want to do are incorrect?

If a child has to accompany an adult on an outing, can the child’s interests and activity level be accommodated? Can lunch be deli on a park bench while the child plays nearby,



checking in from time to time for a bite of food and or a hug? Can a couple of hours of child care be exchanged with the mother of a school friend? Can an adult receive a “spiritual fix” in Children’s Chapel until your child is comfortable enough to stay in the children’s program without you?

If in spite of any suggestion your friend still brings her five-year-old to lunch with you, bring a couple of things with you to surprise him with at key points during the meal. A simple book, a puzzle with very few pieces, something small and self-directed that will entertain for a few minutes may give you a chance to talk.

I am a grandmother who is fortunate to live close to my son and his family. This means that I am able to see my grandchildren several times a week, which is delightful. They are a two-year-old girl and a five-year-old boy. For the most part they are well-behaved children. I notice that my daughter-in-law and my son talk to their children all the time. The children are given constant choices, they are just not told what to do, even the two-year-old! I am an “old school” parent, I guess, and I believe that children are supposed to do what they are told. With all the questions, it seems to me that the children in the family are calling the shots! I have not said anything yet, but I am hoping you can shed some light on this “parenting style”.

How lucky your son and his family are to have such a respectful grandparent close by! I do not know your family, so I cannot speak specifically to your son and daughter-in-law’s parenting style. However, I believe I can give you some ideas on why they may be asking so many questions of their children.

Engaging children in conversation is believed to be important for their intellectual development as well as a means of strengthening their language development. Open-ended questions encourage children to think and problem solve. Progressive educators believe that it is important for children to develop these skills. Discussing issues with children as opposed to directing them is viewed as a superior means of discipline in many educational circles because it encourages them to think about “why” they should or should not engage in certain behaviors. Children who are taught to be obedient in very strict households may never consider why they are obeying; they are simply doing what they are told. This type of behavior may not transfer to a school situation where the teacher is not perceived as strict. This is typically a misperception on the part of the child. As adults we know that all teachers have their rules which must be obeyed, but children have to learn this fact.

Children and adults interact differently across cultures. A child who understands the ‘why’ of acceptable behavior is more apt to pick up on cultural nuances and exhibit the expected behavior, wherever they are. Ultimately this is what your grandchildren are learning. They are not “calling the shots”, rather they are learning to negotiate the many parts of their world. Try and be supportive of this process, you may be pleased with the results. You could have a much more open relationship with your grandchildren and your son and daughter-in-law will surely appreciate your efforts.