

Here's what you can do to help a child — and a

COMMUNITY VOICES

By MARJORIE SHERTZ MENESTRES

As soon as I entered the store, I knew something was wrong. The shrill cries coming from a small boy sounded different from the "I want what I can't have" tantrum typical of 3-year-olds. What I witnessed that day was, unfortunately, not something out of the ordinary: the abuse of a child in public.

A mother with packages strewn around her feet was screaming at her small child to "shut up." I felt paralyzed. I wanted to do something to help the child, but I felt the same reservations many of us think when we witness similarly distressful scenarios: "If I try to help, maybe the mother will turn on me in her rage." I even began to rationalize that, "After all, what can I do? I'm just one person and besides it's their family. I do not have a right to intervene."

I did stop and ask the mother if I could help her carry some of her bundles to her car. To my surprise, she thanked me, said yes and we walked to her car. While she put her child in his car seat, I told her I remembered shopping with my boys when they were young and what a challenge that could be at times. She said next time she would leave her son home with his father. I complimented her on finding a solution so quickly.

Walking back into the store, I realized that if I could have such hesitations about intervening to help a child, me, a person who

spends most of her life working to prevent child abuse, what must it be like for people who witness such scenes and have few skills to deal with them.

There are a million rationalizations for "minding your own business," but no rationalization can take away the reality that children are our business. Children cannot speak for themselves and they cannot protect themselves from being abused and/or neglected. They need you to learn how to respond with confidence and competence. Responding appropriately benefits not only the child but also the parent or caregiver. Most parents want to be good parents, most are doing the best they can or know how to do, but sometimes that is not good enough.

No excuse exists for abusing a child, either verbally, physically or emotionally. Children deserve, as their birthright, to be raised in families in which their well-being and healthy development remain the primary focus. However, conditions do exist that sometimes create chaos for family members, and child abuse becomes part of the family dynamic. Substance or alcohol abuse, social isolation, inappropriate expectations of a child's developmental capacity, a lack of positive discipline techniques and a loss of control due to poor anger and stress-management skills are some of the conditions associated with

abuse and neglect. Whatever the reason for the abuse, there is no excuse for it.

When you witness a parent or caregiver inappropriately interacting with a child in public, you may want to consider the following:

- Start a conversation with the parent to divert the parent's attention from the child. You may ask a question: "I'm looking for the housewares department. Do you know where it is?"

- Empathize with the parent by saying, "She seems to be trying your patience." or "It looks as if it's been a long day for both of you." or "My child used to fall apart after five minutes in a store." "Children sure can wear you out. Is there anything I can do to help?"

- Try to get the parent to see something wonderful about his child. For example, "He has beautiful eyes." "I love her curly hair." "She has a great set of lungs."

- Compliment the parent and child at the first opportunity. "I am a parent and I know how hard it is to always have patience. I really see you struggling with yours and I compliment you on keeping your cool."

- If the child is in danger, offer assistance. For example, if you see a child left unattended in a grocery cart, stand by the child until the parent returns.

- If you cannot intervene for fear of your own safety, find the store manager immediately and ask the manager to call the police.

It takes practice to be able to intervene using these suggestions, and time to overcome old fears and rationalizations.

Unfortunately, most of us will have plenty of opportunities to practice.

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