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LETTERS FROM MAINE

Unhappy Meals

A restaurant owner in Pennsylvania recently stopped allowing children younger than 6 years to dine at his establishment. As you might imagine, this change in policy touched off a flurry of

comments. What might surprise you (but shouldn't) is that he reports that his e-mails, which number more than 2,000, are running 11-1 in favor of his restrictive policy. In a local television station survey of more than 10,000 respondents, 64% supported his decision. And he seems to be busier than before he stopped seating young children.

Is this scenario simply a reflection of

one of our shifting demographics, as millions of baby boomers age into grumpy old men and women who don't want their dinners disturbed? Or is it a statement by a larger silent majority who believe that American parents have dropped the ball when it comes to discipline?

As with most societal hot buttons, the answer lies somewhere in the middle. De-

mographics certainly play a role, but it's not just the growing population of older folks, some of whom can be irritated by even the normal buzz that radiates from well-behaved children. The other growing segment of the population is that of families in which both parents work out of the home. When our children were young, we didn't take them to restaurants. We couldn't afford it. A stop at a hot-dog cart or an ice cream stand was about it for extramural dining experiences.

Modern two-income families have fewer meals at home and, in some cases, have more disposable income to spend at restaurants. Dining has become another opportunity for young families to snatch some precious time together, and this often means dining at an hour when my children would have been in bed. The result can be an uncomfortable clash of cultures at a restaurant.

Compounding the collision of dining expectations has been the unfortunate emergence of the notion that meals must include some stimulating amusement. When I was young, we were entertained by each other's reports of how our days had gone. But today, the television has won a place at the dinner table in many homes. More and more restaurants (and not just fast-food places) have recreation areas and video-game consoles to fill those awkward moments of silence that can occur between bites.

However, I suspect that the response that surfaced at that small Pennsylvania restaurant also reflects a broader discontent by those who see the unruly behavior of young children in restaurants as just the tip of the iceberg of parents who have not mastered the skill of saying no to their children.

It's clear from my experiences in the office that most parents realize they need help with discipline, and they are eager to learn. The fact that of the four books I've written, the one that has been translated into two foreign languages (Polish and Italian) is titled "How to Say No to Your Toddler" suggests that this appetite for help is not limited to North American parents.

While the American Academy of Pediatrics should probably avoid setting age guidelines for dining establishments, the issue of unruly young children in restaurants is one that often bounces into our court as primary care pediatricians. Helping parents to set age-appropriate limits and develop humane and effective consequences is primarily about safety, but it is also the cornerstone in the development of civility. A healthy society is one in which all age groups can coexist, but sometimes that just can't happen in a nice restaurant at 7:30 in the evening.

I am interested in what you all think about this issue. If you respond, please include your age. ■

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