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### Sh-h-h-h!

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## Sh-h-h-h!

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

**A**s I approached the refrigerated section of Harding’s Market, she held up a carton of cottage cheese and in her toddler voice said, “Codage cheese, codage cheese!”

Her grandmother beamed brightly as I responded and showed her I was buying cottage cheese, too! The grandmother said, “I just don’t know why she likes cottage cheese, but she can’t get enough of it.” Then, as the grandmother turned away from the cart to reach for some yogurt, the toddler noticed quickly and expressed some frustration the way toddlers do. Adults generally define it as “whining.” Obviously unnerved, the grandmother quickly took the cart and headed toward another aisle shushing her granddaughter several times as they hurriedly disappeared down the next aisle. “Ouch!” I said to myself.

A couple of weeks ago as I sat in the semi-darkness of an auditorium waiting for a children’s program to begin, I noticed some parents sitting behind us. The dad held an infant, perhaps six months old. As we continued to wait, I noticed the dad just wasn’t paying attention to the increasing fussiness of his son. Finally, the mom took out a bottle and handed it to the dad. As he rather absentmindedly stuck the bottle in the baby’s mouth, the baby continued to fuss. He was held in his dad’s left arm and kind of hung over the dad’s arm, facing away from both his parents.

The mom and dad continued their conversation as the baby continued his distress, not being able to get a hold of the bottle’s nipple. Just as the program began, and the audience quieted, the dad changed the position of the baby by cradling him in his arms. Good move! As the baby tried to settle into the bottle, he still fussed. The mother turned towards the baby and loudly said, “Sh-h-h-h!” “Ouch, Ouch!” I said to myself.

In both instances, I would suggest these adults were exasperated and likely embarrassed by the noise these little ones made and their lack of control over it. While these isolated instances are not intended

to judge these adults, they illustrate messages I often hear parents give to their children. These messages say, “Don’t be who you are”; “You aren’t okay”; and “You don’t know what you know.” They are “Don’t Be” messages. The baby needed his needs met by attentive adults who focused on his needs before their own. What the toddler needed was engagement and then distraction. That takes planning, thinking, decision-making, and commitment.

There are many good ways to teach our children the social skills to help them be enjoyed by others and learn to enjoy the company of others. They can develop the skills of being good listeners and learn the importance of compassion. Children need to feel they are a valued part of their family, neighborhood, place of worship, school, community, and culture. They learn these things through the positive consistency of the important adults in their lives ... not by having someone important to them say, “Sh-h-h-h!”



Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and licensed marriage and family therapist.