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Thursday, October 18, 2007

## Oh, Just Hush! Unsolicited 'advice' from strangers can drive new parents crazy

By Claudia Gryvatz Copquin  
SPECIAL TO NEWSDAY

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MELVILLE, N.Y. - When your baby has a diaper rash, let puppies lick her bottom.

Yes, folks, that was truly advice for new parents, dispensed by Rosie O'Donnell while she was still on *The View*. And while this may be the grossest baby advice ever in the history of broadcasting, parents of newborns can attest that it's certainly not the most outrageous.

"My daughter was going through a phase where she was biting people," recalled Susan Torney, a mother of two. "And somebody said to me, 'When my brother was biting my mother, my mother just bit him back, and he never bit again.' She told me to bite my daughter back!"

It's not just unsolicited advice, weird or otherwise, that parents of newborns complain about. They are also the recipients of unwelcome comments and scoldings from family, friends and even complete

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strangers.

"At the mall, I was carrying my daughter through the exit doors to go outside, and an older woman stopped me and asked where my daughter's hat was," said Janene Mascarella, a Long Island mom of two and freelance writer. Another time, "Some strange woman gave me an earful after I whipped out Nutter Butter cookies and gave them to my kids. She asked me if I knew what was in there and actually snatched the package out of my hands to read the label to me!"

Gabby Brennan of Sudbury, Mass., has experienced so many unwarranted remarks from people that she created a line of baby apparel that gently but pointedly "talks" back to strangers. Onesies and T-shirts in the gabbybaby line read, for example, "please resist the urge to give advice, my parents are doing a great job" and "please don't ask my daddy if he's babysitting," and "please don't touch my hands - I put them in my mouth."

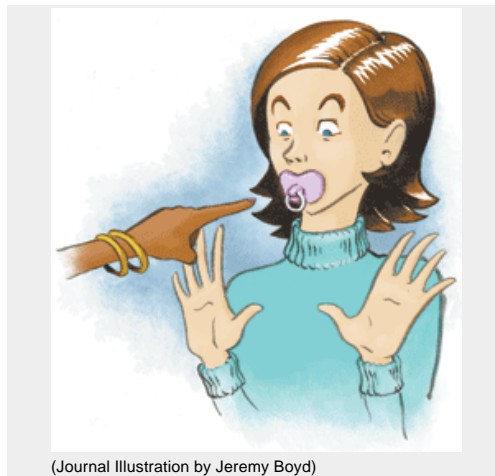
That last one is a whopper, for new parents are quite touchy about people touching their babies. And with good reason: It seems there are no personal space boundaries when it comes to infants in public places, with people assuming an adorable baby in a stroller is a free-for-all.

"Getting an earful about what you should or should not do is, for better or, mostly, worse, a fact of life for parents ... as common as swings in a playground," say Rebecca Odes and Ceridwen Morris, authors of *From the Hips: A Comprehensive, Open-Minded, Uncensored, Totally Honest Guide to Pregnancy, Birth and Becoming a Parent*. And some people will simply never resist the impulse to touch a cute baby.

But while strangers can be intrusive, for the most part, they're not malicious. Keeping that in mind is one way to handle the sticky situations that come with being a new parent.

Another is to try to step back and consider the offending, albeit well-meaning, stranger, in-law or friend. It's a good idea not to take unwarranted actions and questions personally. Instead, try to keep in mind that, while you would never kiss a strange baby's foot or ask a new mother how quickly after birth she started having sex with her husband, others might not have that kind of mental filter.

Remember, too, when it comes to raising children, there are no absolutes. "Here are few right and wrong ways to do things. If you put the baby's diaper on his head instead of his tush - that is wrong. If you change him while you stand sideways instead of in front of him - that is not wrong," Brennan said.



(Journal Illustration by Jeremy Boyd)

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It's true that new parents face myriad hurdles, and one great way to handle them is by maintaining a sense of humor. Some of these issues begin way before the baby is even born. People you don't know will not only ask your due date and if it's your first, but also ask if you had trouble conceiving, if you know the baby's gender and, if so, for goodness' sake, didn't you want it to be a surprise? And then there's the touching. Oh, the touching, the poking, the patting! Anyone who's ever had a protruding belly can attest to these wholly undesirable gestures.

"Once, when I was pregnant, a complete stranger walked up to me and grabbed my stomach," Brennan recalled. "I grabbed her back. She said, 'What are you doing?' and I said, 'What are you doing?' Then she ran away."

It's a funny story she'll no doubt one day repeat to her children. In the meantime, laughter can be a great salve for the rash of surplus input from people. Oh, and as for your own infant's rash ... better to take advice from your pediatrician rather than flaky comedian and mom of four Rosie O'Donnell, who was apparently not at all joking about puppy tongues and baby bottoms.

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## Crossing the line

People are generally well meaning, but often thoughtless about their comments to new mommies and daddies, who may be exhausted, insecure about their skills as parents and overly sensitive.

Authors Rebecca Odes and Ceridwen Morris suggest that you avoid making the following comments to a new parent:

- Is she sleeping through the night yet?
- You look so tired.
- Your baby seems hungry/sleepy/fussy.
- Is he a good baby?
- You'll spoil him!
- That baby is not eating enough (or is eating too much).
- She just misses her working mommy.

Also, do not ask a new mom why her baby is crying. Babies cry.

Source: *Newsday*

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