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Parents get unwelcome comments from family, friends, strangers

BY CLAUDIA GRIVATZ COPQUIN / 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," recalls mom of two Susan Torney of Putnam County, N.Y., "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 strangers.

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"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," says Janene Mascarella, a mom of two and a freelance writer from Miller Place, N.Y.

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!"

Then there is the endless barrage of often-tactless personal questions: Is the baby adopted? Did you take fertility drugs? Has he been circumcised? Do you really plan on going back to work? When are you going to put her on a schedule? Did you have a C-section?

"When my daughter was 3 months old, I went to visit my husband's office. There must have been about 10 or 15 people standing around, and I'd never met them. One woman who is single and has no kids, said, "Did she come out of your vagina?" recalls Gabby Brennan of Sudbury, Mass. On another occasion, "I was feeding my daughter out of a bottle, when a complete stranger asked me what was in the bottle," she said.

Brennan 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"; "please don't ask my daddy if he's 'baby-sitting';" 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. "What is it about a baby that somehow relieves people from the courtesy of keeping their hands to themselves?" Brennan asked.

Indeed, people want to reach out and touch babies' feet, pat their heads, stroke their cheeks and perhaps worst offender of all, touch their hands, which babies invariably place into their own mouths, turning a grab-fest into a major germ-fest. That's bad because "when a baby is born, he has no immunity to diseases," says East Northport pediatrician Lana Valdmann. In the first months of life, babies' immune systems "are very immature, so they can easily catch infections from people."

"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. People behave differently and treat each other in a variety of ways, offers Locust Valley, N.Y., clinical psychologist and author Frances Cohen Praver. So 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 feet or ask a new mother how quickly after birth she started having sex with



Illustration by George Wright

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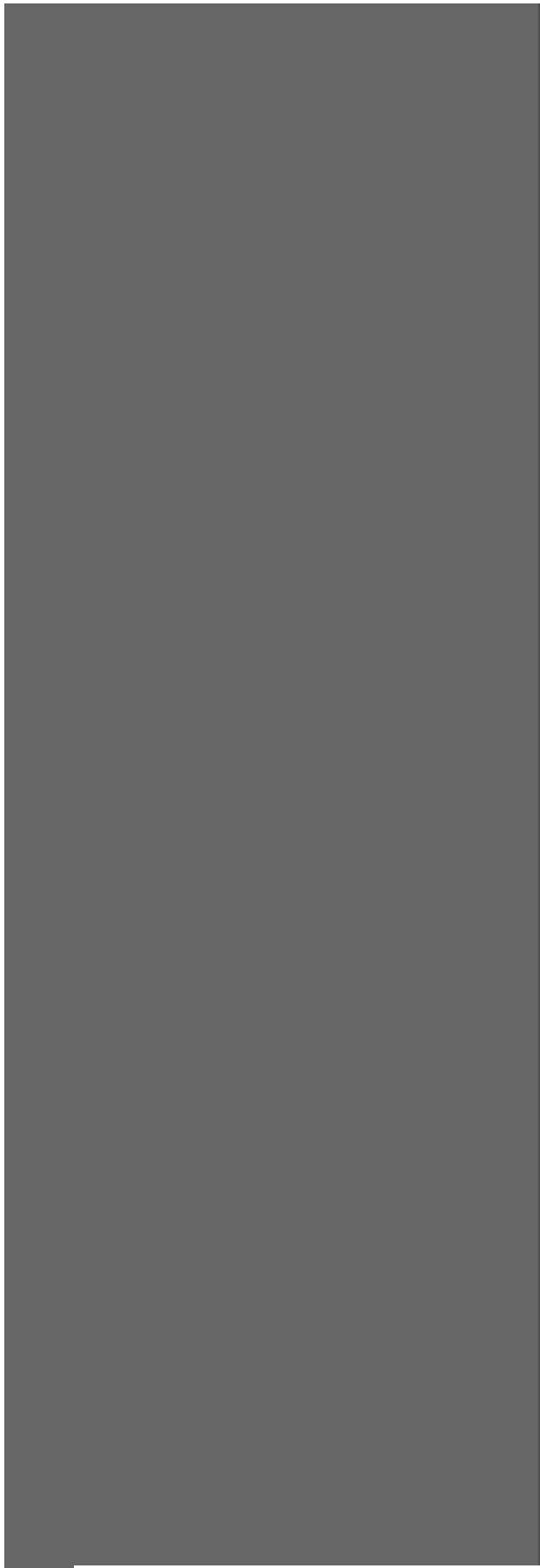
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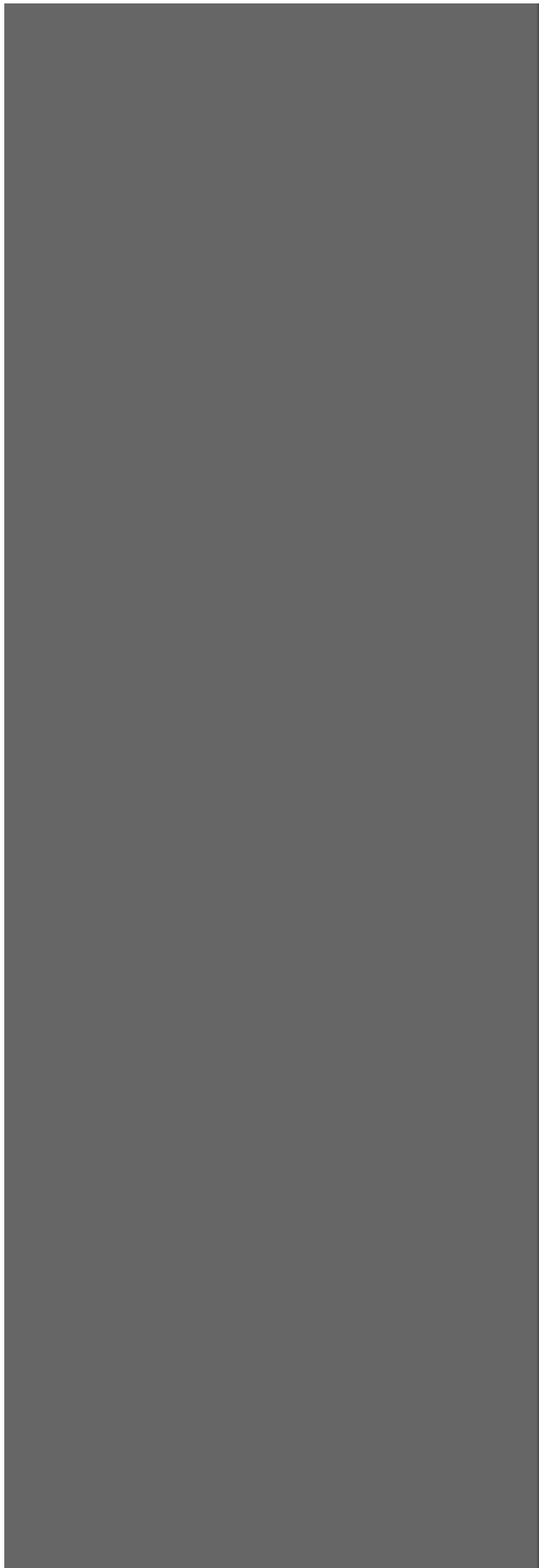
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