

advice overload

If you're a new parent, prepare for an onslaught of unsolicited, not-so-helpful comments from others.

DONNA MACINTYRE, A MOM IN DARTMOUTH, NS, WAS out for a stroll with her newborn when a woman she didn't know stopped to admire the baby. At first, the encounter seemed innocent enough, but then took a turn for the worse.

"She started asking questions about whether he sleeps through the night, and if I'm nursing him. And then she went on for about 10 minutes telling me everything I should be doing," recalls MacIntyre. "I let her finish, and then I walked away feeling like I was doing everything wrong. I was just so down about myself and being a mom."

It's an experience many new parents can relate to. Once you have a baby, you're inundated with parenting advice, much of it out of the blue or unwanted. Perhaps even more surprising is when this guidance comes from complete strangers.

Sacha Coutu, who lives in Sarnia, Ont., remembers one incident in particular. She was grocery shopping while carrying her infant daughter in a baby sling when a fellow shopper voiced her disapproval. "She said, 'Your baby's never going to learn to be without you if you keep her wrapped up in that thing.'"

Coutu says she and her husband have also been criticized by acquaintances for co-sleeping. "People made us feel like we were making a really big mistake, that we were doing something dangerous, or that we were spoiling her. Really, we just wanted to get some sleep."

So what gives? Why do people feel entitled to dole out parenting advice, and worse, judge the choices of others when no one is asking?

"That is the question of the hour," says Kathy Lynn, a parenting speaker and author in New Westminster, BC. "I don't know why people think they can say some of the things they do, but the way to stay centred as a new mom is to understand that these people are – in their own way – just trying to be helpful." Lynn believes the best response in these situations is to smile, be polite, and don't listen to a word. "You're going to be a lot happier with this approach than trying to come up with a snarky reply," she adds.

While it's easy to dismiss a stranger in a grocery store,



it's far more complicated when the offenders giving out less-than-subtle gems of wisdom are your family members.

Karen Grant* says her laid-back parenting style is very different from that of her parents, who are prone to "criticizing, judging and correcting," with constant comments on how to parent her now-eight-year-old daughter. "It's something that's happened since the day she was born," says Grant, who lives in Nanaimo, BC. She feels that kids need to figure things out for themselves, while her parents believe children should be protected from all harm. Grant tries to bite her tongue most of the time, because speaking up about the unsolicited advice leads to fights.

Lynn advises new parents to open the lines of communication with family members, while deciding what is worth discussing and what to let slide. She also recommends writing down the five most contentious issues, putting these in order of priority, and either dealing with them one at a time, or discussing only the top two items. The act of listing what's bothering you may be therapeutic enough, and might help you realize that what felt like a blunt or harsh comment wasn't that bad after all.

Then there's the "let's agree to disagree" approach, which allows you to avoid conflict while still acknowledging you don't see eye to eye on all parenting decisions – and that's OK. Think of unwelcome advice as just another less-than-pleasant, but hopefully short-lived rite of early parenthood, like poopy diapers and sleepless nights. —STACEY STEIN

* NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

NEW PARENT POLL

We asked our readers whether they felt bombarded with advice during their baby's first few months.

42%
Yes, it drove me nuts.

40%
Yes, but you get used to it. It comes with the new-baby territory.

11%
I actually found all the advice helpful.

7%
No, people mostly kept their opinions to themselves.