Abstract

Reflections on Judging Mothering

By Chris Gottlieb

The other day, a woman approached me on the subway to tell me that looking at print six inches from your face could cause eyestrain. I quickly learned she was not worried about me, she was concerned about my baby’s eyes because I was carrying him face out, where he was about six inches from the newspaper I was reading. Not long before, the driver of an ice cream truck leaned out to admonish me that the sling in which I was carrying my son was unsafe. An elderly man on the street told me the baby’s legs were cold. A saleswoman was more worried about his arms, but didn’t stop at commenting, she reached out to pull his sleeves down. More than one person I didn’t know “tsked tsked” me when they learned I had my son out of the house before he was six weeks old.

Thus I have begun to understand what I thought for years I understood standing beside my clients in Family Court: parenting is something we are inclined to judge harshly at the same time that it is impossible to do in anything but an extremely flawed way. Think about it, no one with any experience with children (no one with any sense for that matter) believes that parenting can be done perfectly. It is the quintessential sisyphusian task – you think it’s tough when they’re born, then they learn to walk. You finally figure out how to get them to nap and they’re done with napping. How to handle tantrums with equanimity? Ask a saint. How to avoid passing on the neuroses that have been bequeathed down your family tree over generations? Ask a shrink. Then after years of honing your skills with children, you realize you haven’t the slightest idea how to talk to the teenager living in your house. You can’t get it right. We all know this. We all strive for greater excellence than we have hope of achieving. Yet we couple this knowledge with severe intolerance for the shortcomings of other parents. The newspaper was too close to the baby’s eyes?!? Seems a bit extreme even if the woman who chastised me didn’t realize my baby was asleep at the time.

And not only do we judge, we impose our judgment. It is amazing how comfortable people feel telling complete strangers how they should care for their children and what they believe the parents are doing wrong. I am certain that over the years, many fellow subway riders and other observers have judged my fashion choices and found them wanting, or disapproved what I was eating (or that I was eating on the train). Yet no one has ever voiced such opinions to me. But the discretion of strangers disappears as soon as you have a child -- in fact, as soon as you are visibly pregnant. Heaven help you if you have a beer in public when expecting.

While there has been recognition that the “superwoman” ideal disserves actual women, the cultural aspiration to the “good mother” -- read perfect mother -- remains strong. Yet for all the recent hand-wringing over the intense pressures on yuppie
mothers, little attention has been paid to the much harsher consequences our culture of judging mothering imposes on poor and minority women. In this essay, the author connects her personal experience being judged as a mother with her professional experience representing poor women of color in Family Court. Drawing on specific examples, the essay explores how the culture of judgment that surrounds mothering plays out in the investigation and prosecution of child abuse and neglect. For in our concern to protect children from harm, we have authorized, indeed invited, state actors to impose their judgment on the parenting of the most disadvantaged women in our society. The essay explores the danger inherent in empowering this judgment and the abuses of power it has engendered.

One of the few unmitigated achievements of the pro-choice movement has been to articulate debates about reproductive freedom in the rhetoric of rights, and therefore to frame a shared interest that transcends class lines. The essay uses that success to illuminate the shared interest of advantaged and disadvantaged women in reconfiguring the culture of judging mothering and to press the thesis that notions of reproductive freedom must expand beyond a focus on the right to avoid parenthood to include the right to parent free of unjustified intrusion.