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Family Focus Caring What Others Think

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One advantage of getting older is being able to care less what others may think of us. When we're children and teens, however, there is almost nothing that matters more. At that age, we're forming our identities and our place in the social strata, and we are preoccupied with others' opinions of us, real or imagined.

Recently, I thought more about this subject when I received questions about my relationship to another columnist in this newspaper who happens to have the same last name. He alluded to having a difficult relationship with his parents. Some readers who don't know me well wondered if I was, by any chance, his mother. It seemed ironic to me that, while I write about improving family relationships, someone with my last name wrote about his strained relationship with his parents. And it also made me care more than usual about what others might think.

For the record, Ken Ryerson and I are not related. I'm not sure if I'm old enough to be his mother because I don't know how old he is (Of course, he must be quite young for me to qualify!)

Some people in our community struggle with this issue on a regular basis. I see a twenty-three year old woman for therapy who thinks that she always needs to come across as nice and happy in order to please others, and this makes her feel fake and superficial. Instead of adding to her happiness, she feels worse about herself. She can't say "no" when friends ask her to borrow money or clothes, or when co-workers ask her to fill in for them at work. She is prone to depression, anxiety, and has a history of emotional abuse by boyfriends.

Parents can address this self-conscious feeling of being on display and the fear of displeasing others when children are young. You can help your child realize that others are not always looking at her, and that typically they are more concerned with how they are being perceived.

You can allow your child to be in a bad mood, or to withdraw from social contact occasionally (and respectfully) when she is with you in public. You can give the strong message to your child that everyone has ups and downs, and that it is okay to be herself. She does not have to plaster on a smile or put on an act. You can explain to others, while she is listening, that she is just in a temporary bad mood. Let her hear you reassure others that it is nothing to do with them. And by being sure to say the word "temporary," your child will know that you're not labeling her as a cranky, difficult person, but rather that you are supporting her need to be true to herself.

Needless to say, it helps if parents can be as genuine as possible, since we are our children's role-model. Children often say how much it bothers them when a parent is in a bad mood, yelling and complaining, and then becomes Sally Sunshine the minute the phone or doorbell rings. It's human nature to seek acceptance and approval from others. But we can help our children find a

healthy balance by not letting ourselves place too much emphasis on what others may think.

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