

ALL THINGS MATERNAL – A THERAPIST’S PERSPECTIVE

By Deena Solwren, LCSW

Q: A good friend who does not have children has a close friendship with my toddler. They spend at least two afternoons together a week – it is when I get “me time” and is a real life saver. The problem is this: my friend has a very different caretaking style than my husband and I. They spend time watching TV (even Oprah!), eating sweets, and making HUGE messes in the house. It would be one thing if this were only an occasional “treat”, but I am worried that my 2 year old is picking up some bad habits. *What should I do?*

How great to have a friend who is willing and able to watch your child for a few hours twice a week and provide you with a much needed break – and how frustrating to worry about what’s going on when you’re away.

There are a number of things you *could* do:

- You could do nothing and continue to feel conflicted, or
- You could do nothing and come to feel at peace with the situation, or
- End the arrangement, lose your “me time”, but no longer worry about what your toddler is being exposed to, or
- Talk with your friend about your concerns, and/or
- Talk with your child about your values and work on reinforcing behaviors you prefer.

Before deciding which option to pursue, there are a number of questions I have about the situation:

What bad habits have you noticed your 2 year old picking up? When did these behaviors first begin to manifest themselves? When does your child exhibit them? ...all the time or just after spending time with this friend? How long does it take for your child to resume behaving in ways you want? Could it be that your baby is now a toddler and moving into the “terrific two’s” stage? Generally, two year olds tend to test limits more often, say “No”, and express more of their own interests and desires about what, when and how they want something to occur.

Whether the behavior problems are due to child care, the child’s development or a combination thereof, it’s important to address the questionable behaviors in a calm, loving and consistent way. It’s never too early to begin talking with and explaining to your child what is important to you, and what you expect from him/her. By two years of age, s/he’s likely to understand quite a significant amount of what you say when using clear, simple, and age appropriate language. Talk to your child about your values, the things you love about “auntie”, and the

things you disagree with. Explain that different people live with different rules in their homes. “And these are our rules... .” Continue to set clear, consistent limits with appropriate reminders about how you expect him to behave. Remember to “catch him being good.” Reinforce positive behaviors and not just point out and criticize misbehaviors.

How long has your friend been providing this help? What does she get out of it? Why does she keep doing it? What about it does she enjoy? What’s hard or frustrating for her? Why do you think she’s allowing your child to watch t.v., eat sweets, and make a mess? Since she’s not a parent herself, could she not know any better? Could she be overwhelmed, and tired? Does she not know what else to do? How might she respond to you talking with her about how it’s going for both of you? Is she open to suggestions? Are you afraid that voicing your concerns will come across as ungrateful, injurious, and cause you to lose this valued assistance or even threaten your friendship?

Reasonable people often disagree and can do so without threatening the relationship or causing conflict. I imagine you and your husband love one another, and that you also have disagreements about important issues. Yet, somehow you find a way to voice your concerns, work through your differences, and continue loving each other. If this person is a good friend, then I imagine you can find a productive way to discuss this matter.

One way to begin such a dialogue might be to ask how it’s going for her. What is working well? What does she wish could be different?

Another way to initiate this talk is by using an “I Statement” format. For example, “I’m so glad you spend time with Janey, but I’m concerned about her being exposed to so much adult t.v. Can we think of some other things you two can enjoy doing together?”

Yet another way to open this conversation is by identifying the positives – all the ways you appreciate her spending time with your child, giving you a much needed break, being part of the extended family, them developing their own relationship. Be sure to include what you really like about what she does well. What special traits does she bring to your child - creativity, playfulness, enthusiasm? Does she share an artistic ability that you lack such as drawing, dance or music? Then, identify the major concerns you have – t.v., sweets, and messes. Explain how these activities are creating behavior problems. **The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under two not watch t.v., at all.** Thirty minutes a day on the computer and 30 minutes of t.v. are reasonable for 2-3 year olds (0-3 website). Eating sweets interferes with dinner or gets her/him so wound up, it’s

difficult to go to bed at night. Let her know you realize how hard it is to play, entertain and clean up with children. Maybe the three of you could clean up together when you return and before she leaves?

Simply thinking through these questions may be sufficient to allow you to accept the situation as it is and thereby find peace and contentment with this issue. Or, they may help you realize how much you care for your friend, and still she may not be the right person to care for your child. You may decide to find a replacement childcare provider for those few hours each week. Or, they may offer a comfortable approach to speak with your friend about your concerns. If you chose to talk with her, clearly you'll want to show your appreciation of her efforts and get her to join you in finding a solution. The two of you can jointly, co-create a positive experience for your child, herself, and yourself while protecting the best interests of your child, your friendship, and your crucial "me time".

"All Things Maternal" is a trademark of Deena Solwren's. Deena is an experienced licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) and a mom who's been there. She has a private psychotherapy practice with offices in Rockridge and Pinole. She works with individuals and couples regarding infertility, pregnancy, post-partum adjustment, attachment parenting, changing roles & changing self image, balancing work & family life, and mother/daughter relationships. She is currently accepting new clients and may be reached at (510)594-8224.