

FIRST PERSON

Why Being Judgmental Comes Naturally and How to Curb It

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I just got back from an amazing trip to Alaska. That part of the country is so special and nothing like I have ever seen before. It's truly a different culture and way of life out there with small towns, minimal materialism, living off the grid, and very cold and wet weather.

Although I was in awe of the incredible nature we saw and the science and history we learned, I found myself having thoughts like, "How can anyone live here?" and "What do they do for fun in the middle of nowhere?" and "I could never stand that weather." Then I wondered why these judgmental thoughts were filling my head.

I'll be the first to admit that my biggest flaw in life is that I am too judgmental. Sadly, this attribute has gotten me into trouble in my relationships quite a bit over the years. Let's just say that I may have been too honest at times with friends regarding issues that did not sit well with them. I also tend to see the flaws in others before I see their positive traits.

How did I get this way? I can tell you without a doubt that I come from a long line of judgmental relatives. My grandparents passed it down to my parents and they passed their outlook on to me. Fortunately, I recognize this as a problem in my life, and am now concerned that I will pass the "judgmental gene" to my children. Because I know firsthand how being judgmental can hold us back

and cause stress and disappointment in our lives, I am trying very hard to do what I can to break this cycle and give my children an opportunity to see the world in a less judgmental way.

Why we judge others

We all make numerous judgments throughout our days, even if we don't always realize it. Judging is a natural instinct that humans formed a long time ago to defend ourselves from situations that could cause us harm. We needed to be able to make quick judgments based on our observations to decide how we should react.

However, over time this instinct became less necessary for survival and is now part of our social behavior. We now tend to judge other people and situations because we do not understand them. When we are not familiar with someone or something, we become fearful and our immediate reaction is to judge them in a negative way to "protect" ourselves. We want to feel safe, so we label others as right or wrong, good or bad. Many times this judgment is due to a lack of empathy and compassion based on behaviors we learned from our upbringing (yes, our parents!).

The problem with being so judgmental is that it can put a strain on our relationships and eat away at us internally. When children grow up learning to judge the world in a negative way, this can affect how successful and happy they are throughout their lives. According to Healthy Place, "snap judgments, arbitrary thinking, and social pigeon-holing become the customary methods of rejecting that which is different or disagreeable. This narrow mindedness has devastating consequences in the areas of interpersonal problem-solving and tolerance for authority, while it also sets up the child for a variety of social problems as they age."

In addition, psychology experts believe that being judgmental of others is actually a reflection of how we feel about ourselves. When we notice our children exemplifying this type of behavior, it can be a red flag to dig a little deeper to find out what is really going on with them. Your daughter may be complaining about the skinny girls at school because she is unsatisfied with her own weight. Your son may ridicule the math whiz in his class because he is struggling with math and feels inadequate.

What we can do about it

Children enter this world with compassion, a natural and automatic response that has allowed humans to survive throughout history. The human brain is wired to respond to others who are suffering because helping them makes us feel good. However, even though children have the instinct to help others and be open-minded, it is our job as parents to teach them about differences and how to approach life in a non-judgmental way. Here are some tips for raising less judgmental kids:

Avoid judgmental language

Our kids absorb everything we say and do. If we use judgmental language, they will too. If they hear racist, sexist, biased, and critical statements about others, that will become their norm, therefore it's important that we are mindful of the language we use.

Be careful not to make everything either right or wrong. Instead of saying "it's wrong," try saying, "I disagree." Consider using "It's socially unacceptable by some people," as opposed to stating that something is "right." Also, try to avoid labeling people as "good" or "bad." In most cases, what we think is bad is just new to us, so we are worried by it. You can have an open discussion about different issues to explore it from various angles and come to a conclusion together, or agree to disagree.

Travel to new places

Although I had some judgments about others on my trip to Alaska, overall this experience opened my eyes to how others live and my views about them. It also inspired me to dig deeper into my judgmental attitude with this article, so it worked! If you can, take your children with you on trips to other cities, states, and countries. Having these types of experiences will truly broaden their perspective.

Expose your children to diverse people and situations

Challenge yourself to get out of your comfort zone and take your kids to new places they're not familiar with. A wonderful way to do this is to volunteer as a family at a soup kitchen, hospital, retirement community, school for children with disabilities, or out in nature. Providing opportunities to interact with all types of people will give them a chance to see how other people live and make them feel good about helping others.

Use facts, not opinion

People become judgmental when they're unable to distinguish between facts and opinions. Avoid presenting your views and opinions about everything to your children. Instead, have a discussion based on facts and observations so that they have the chance to form their own ideas. When you do give an opinion, be sure to tell them that that's what it is.

Celebrate differences

Let your children know that everyone is unique and special in their own way. They will meet people who look and speak differently from them. Take the time to tell them that it's okay to be different and talk to them about the differences they observe. Explain that it's not okay to judge others based on things like race, speech, and clothing. Expose them to various religions, cultures, appearances, and illnesses. Some great ways to do this is by reading books, watching shows and movies, attending multi-cultural events, and trying new cuisines. The more they interact with other types of people, the more they will accept them.

Reflect

As I have learned, many times our judgments are actually about us, not them. Train your kids to question their own judgments so they can discover what the real issue behind their thinking is.

Find teachable moments

You won't have to look very far. Today the news is filled with examples of how judging others can get ugly. From bullying to nasty messages on social media to stereotypes and racism to hate rallies, we have endless opportunities to teach our children how to change course and be more open-minded to accept all people and experiences in the world. Do your best to keep an open and honest dialogue with your children at every age.



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