

Parent Judgment Podcast

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hello, I'm Annmarie McMahill with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University. And this is the ParentingMontana.org Podcast.

I'm sure you've heard it too, the judgment that parents these days aren't doing a good job, that parents are out of touch or too soft, that they give in to their kids too easily, they're over involved helicopter parents or under involved don't care parents. Maybe you heard some unsolicited advice on your parenting choices, your birthing choice, your feeding practice or your sleep routines.

In this ParentingMontana.org podcast, we'll be talking about parent judgment.

BARB HOPKIN:

I really feel that this is such an important topic for community and for parents to support each other and understand each other on our unique path is so critical to avoiding judgment. And you know, parenting is not easy, and there's definitely not a right way to handle challenges or even to celebrate successes. So knowing that we have the ability to confidently navigate judgment from others, while still being very mindful of differences in parenting so as not to pass judgment will not only help us grow as parents and do the best for our children, but also create that supportive parenting community that can be so healthy for parents and their children.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Parent judgment can manifest in different ways including overt criticism, unsolicited advice, subtle disapproval, gossip, or even silent disapproving glances.

Parent judgment can have a significant impact on the well-being and confidence of parents who experience it. It can lead to feelings of self-doubt, guilt, shame or frustration. And it can also create a sense of isolation and make parents hesitate to seek support or share their challenges for fear of being judged.

BARB HOPKIN:

We all have the power to define our worth as a parent. So really focusing on what's most important, our child's happiness, trusting our instincts, and having that supportive network or reaching out for professional help when needed.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I'd like to introduce our guests for today's podcast, Barbara Hopkin. Barb earned her master's degree in counseling from the University of Wyoming. She's worked with children and families as a community mental health counselor and as a school counselor. More recently, she's played a critical role developing the tools and resources that are found on Parenting Montana.org. So welcome, Barb.

BARB HOPKIN:

Thank you, Annmarie. I'm so excited to be here. Parent judgment is such an important topic for parents who feel judged as well as parents who find themselves judging. As parents, we always tend to be our own harshest critic, so knowing how to deal with judgment is really important to growing our confidence. And oftentimes, the times when judgment comes up, parents need support more than ever.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So parents judge each other in a lot of situations and on a range of parenting choices and behaviors. Let's just talk about some of those situations where parents tend to judge each other.

BARB HOPKIN:

There are quite a few situations where judgment comes up, ranging from parenting styles when it comes to different disciplinary approaches, attachment parenting, free range parenting, authoritative parenting versus permissive parenting. A lot of judgment can come up when it comes to feeding and nutrition, breastfeeding versus formula feeding, when to introduce solid foods and then dietary choices as kids grow. Screen time and technology use can definitely be a topic that brings judgment, varying limits on screen time, what's age appropriate content wise, electronic device use it can all have very different approaches from different parents, which leads to judgment. When it comes to education, the choice between home school and public school, private school and unschooling, there's so many choices. Judgment also definitely comes up when it comes to sleeping practices, co-sleeping, different sleep training methods, bedtimes, bedtime routines.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So when I started prepping for this podcast, I just thought this isn't, this isn't me or you know, but then when you start listing all of these scenarios, I started having this like cringe-y feeling because I remember that time of breastfeeding versus formula feeding, or am I going to home school or public school so that brings up a lot of old memories just when my kids are little. What are some others? Are there some more common scenarios?

BARB HOPKIN:

I think there's so many. When it comes to child care arrangements, being a stay at home parent versus working parents, daycare versus having a nanny, parent involvement when it comes to balancing work and family and then school activities and extracurricular participation, things get really busy and different approaches come up on how to handle that. Sports and activity involvement, there's a push to keep kids busy and active and involved. And there's also a push to be unbusy and have weekends and evenings free.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I'm dealing with that right now, I think as a parent.

BARB HOPKIN:

Yes, it gets to be a lot and everyone has strong feelings and different ideas.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

What else?

BARB HOPKIN:

I think when it comes to safety measures and car seat use and childproofing your home, outdoor supervision, what's safe and what's not safe is different between parents. Another big topic would definitely be discipline and consequences. How do you approach discipline? Is timeout okay? What kind of positive reinforcement is appropriate? What about spanking? There's lots of different ideas out there that can bring strong emotions from parents.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hmm, that's a hot topic for sure.

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). More recently, with health and wellness, vaccines, and when to vaccinate versus not, all holistic medicine, alternative medicine, medication choices, there's just so many different things out there because parenting is very complex.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So those I know are probably just a few examples and listening to those, they, more than one of them really, really hit home. And I think that parent judgment can occur in a lot of other areas and parenting as well. It's interesting, though, because judgment might come from strangers in public or maybe extended family and friends or folks just giving unsolicited feedback, or even people that are more vocal and you know, give some

negative comments about your parenting style or even your child. It's not always strangers. And this is what I always struggle with. You know, sometimes it's your own mom or your mother-in-law insisting they know what's best as you raise your kids. I remember being a new mom at the grocery store with my son being stopped by a stranger to say that I shouldn't allow him to use a pacifier. I know they probably meant well. But if you're already second guessing yourself as a parent, hearing judgment like that can be really hard to handle. Do you have any personal experiences where you felt judged as a parent? And how did you handle it?

BARB HOPKIN:

Yes, I can see how that would be hard to handle being approached by a stranger. I remember my very first day back to work after having my daughter, a co-worker approached me and made the comment that his wife would never be able to leave their babies in daycare or at home, and he didn't know how I was doing it.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Oh, gee.

BARB HOPKIN:

And I already really missed my daughter and felt guilty about leaving her. So it was not the comment I needed that day. Thinking back, I think I just took it with some grace and tried to get out of the conversation. I at the time didn't really know how to handle it other than feeling sad that he said that and guilty about not being with my daughter, but also being excited to be at work.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Parenting is just daunting in general. And it's deeply personal. It stirs up a lot of insecurities. And you know, maybe when I had my kids, I don't know if I was prepared to sort of handle all of those insecurities, but it really puts us in an incredibly vulnerable place. Seeing other parents do things differently with their children can trigger some of that insecurity that we have in ourselves and often, you know, we, to deflect that, we turn to judgment. What are some potential reasons behind the tendency to judge each other? I just think if we can get to that root, maybe we can start having some honest conversations about the tendency to judge.

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative), absolutely. I think judgment can stem from a lot of different places, personal beliefs, societal influences and individual insecurities. There are a lot of cultural and societal expectations out there. Society holds a certain expectation about parenting practices, and individuals may judge others based on how well they conform

to those in societal norms. Differences in parenting styles, choices or practices can be seen as deviating from the expected or accepted norms, and that leads to judgment.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Even in my own family, I remember just sort of our cultural norms of raising, you know, raising kids in my immediate family, and deviating from some of those was really, really hard. And I did feel that judgment. What else?

BARB HOPKIN:

I think personal biases and beliefs. We all bring our own set of beliefs and values and experiences to our parenting. And when encountering parents who have a different perspective or making different choices, individuals might judge based on their own biases and preconceptions viewing their own choices the right or superior one. It's hard not to stand up for what you do yourself.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Oh, and that just putting your -- that superiority or feeling superiority, that I definitely can identify with feeling that from, from other folks too.

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

What else?

BARB HOPKIN:

Yeah, I think fear and insecurity play into judgment too. Parenting can be so complex and challenging. We're all on our own journey. And some individuals may feel insecure about their own parenting choices or their own abilities. And so then when they're trying to validate their own decisions, they may judge and criticize others as a way to affirm their own sense of competence and alleviate their own anxieties they may have with parenting.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I mean, a lot of times it is just, you know, a lack of understanding or awareness. People judge what they don't understand, I think.

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And having really limited exposure to diverse parenting practices, or, or a lack of knowledge about different parenting approaches can contribute to that judgment. What else? What are some other reasons behind the tendency to judge?

BARB HOPKIN:

You know, I think the world can be such a competitive place and comparison plays into that. The culture of comparison and competition is prevalent all over. And so parents compare themselves to others and use judgment as a means to establish a sense of superiority or to feel better about their own choices as parents.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Oh, and I think that is reinforced from media and, and social platforms. We'll talk a little bit more about that later. But I think the way media portrays and social media portrays families can really perpetuate unrealistic standards for parenting. And then, you know, just watching someone's highlight reel of, of their life, and that's shared on a social platform can really distort perception of reality and, and really contribute to judgment.

BARB HOPKIN:

That's very true. It's such a part of the world now and changes the way that we think about things sometimes.

BARB HOPKIN:

I think fear of the unknown can also really come up. Parenting involves navigating the unknown and facing uncertainties every day and all the time as new things come up. So when parents encounter approaches or choices that are unfamiliar or different from their own, it can really trigger a sense of unease or fear. And then in response, some people may judge what they perceive as unconventional or unfamiliar, in order to create a sense of certainty and control in their own world.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Parenting judgment can manifest in different ways, including overt and subtle criticism, silent disapproving glances, or even unsolicited advice. That unsolicited advice often plays a significant role in parent judgment. While advice can be really well intentioned, it can contribute to parent judgment when it's given without consideration to the individual circumstances, preferences or values of the recipient. What role do you see unsolicited advice play in parent judgment?

BARB HOPKIN:

You know, I think unsolicited advice really intersects with parent judgment. It involves imposing one's views on someone else. So it can be seen as an attempt to really impose one's own beliefs and values or parenting choices onto someone else. It really implies that there is a right or better way to parent and disregards the fact that each parent has unique circumstances and preferences within their family. And it's really undermining to parental autonomy. When unsolicited advice is given, it can undermine the parent's sense of autonomy and confidence in their own decision making. It implies that the person offering advice knows better or has superior knowledge and disregards the parents' own expertise and intuition.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

It can really amplify feelings of guilt and self-doubt that parents have too and make them question their own choices and abilities, really leading to anxiety and stress. This constant exposure to unsolicited advice can really erode a parent's self-confidence.

BARB HOPKIN:

Yes, that unsolicited advice arises from a place of compassion, where one person believes that their parenting is superior to others. But it can contribute to a judgmental attitude with the underlying assumption that if someone is not following the advice, they must be doing something wrong or inferior, and it ignores individual circumstances. So when unsolicited advice comes up, it tends to overlook that family's unique circumstance, their values and their, and the preferences of the recipient of the advice. So it fails to consider their child's specific needs and challenges.

So, when unsolicited advice is given, it tends to overlook the unique circumstances, values and preferences of the recipient. It doesn't consider the specific needs and challenges that each parent and child could be facing, leading to advice that may not be relevant or even suitable.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think it's important to note that not all advice is negative or judgmental. In some cases, unsolicited advice really could come from a place of genuine concern or a desire to help but it really becomes problematic when it lacks empathy or respect or consideration for, you know, autonomy or circumstances.

BARB HOPKIN:

I totally agree. And sometimes it's a function of not being aware of those circumstances. So knowing that we don't know everything going on in a family can be really important to pause and not pass judgment.

So it's really important to respect boundaries and offer advice only when requested. If you're unsure, it's okay to ask. You might say "*It sounds like you're working really hard on your bedtime routine. Would you like to try a new idea?*" It's equally important to approach conversations about parenting choices with empathy, openness and willingness to understand and validate different perspectives.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Let's talk a little bit more about media. So I think that media, even like traditional media outlets and social media platforms can really contribute to the perpetuation of parent judgment. So let's talk about the role you think media and social media play in that aspect of parent judgment and perpetuating parent judgment.

BARB HOPKIN:

I think as you were saying, when we see kind of the best version of someone's parenting online and in social media, it's easy not to feel like we don't have it together. We're, you know, not living up to that standard, when really, no one posts or rarely are there posts about the worst part of the day or the hardest moment that week. So it just can be really easy to feel like everyone else is maybe doing, doing it better or their kids are happier. And that can lead to a lot of self judgment, as well as judging some things that other parents might post that we don't agree with.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

There is that just unrealistic portrayal of, of parenting at times, and I think I've gotten better at, at sorting through the reality or trying not to let that affect me. But, but still, it is such a comparison culture right now. You know, watching those curated best moments, and I do it too. I mean, I don't post, you know, the bedtime struggle, but I definitely post the vacation pictures. And so, you know, thinking about how I contribute, contribute to that as well. What are other ways that you think media and social media contribute?

BARB HOPKIN:

You know, I think that there is a big lack of context sometimes. We don't see the necessary context behind parenting choices. We don't know the whole story. And without understanding a parent's reasoning and beliefs, or their very specific circumstances that inform their choices, people are more likely to pass quick judgments based on their own assumptions and biases.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think, too, that traditional media has a way of really sensationalizing stories. You know, when I turn on the news at night, it's, it's those highlighted extreme cases that parents see. Usually that's in the negative. But if we're not aware of that, that can really distort our perception of our typical parenting choices and really create a climate where

judgment is directed toward those people who make unconventional decisions. I think in Montana, you know, we pride ourselves on the freedom to be able to make decisions based on our own family. It's important to, I think, hold that close.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Is there anything else?

BARB HOPKIN:

I think another place that judgment can definitely come up, the comment sections of different online forums and platforms can really be a breeding ground for judgment and criticism. You don't see the person. You don't see the hurt on their face when things are said. So opinions are shared without consequences and can really lead to some harsh judgment and comments that further perpetuate those negative attitudes towards parenting choices, and drive parents further apart.

So I think with all of those things in mind, it's really important to approach media and social media with a critical lens and be mindful of their potential impact on our own attitudes and perceptions. Being aware of the biases, and how everybody tends to portray this ideal version of parenting and limitations of media representations can help us challenge the judgmental narratives and cultivate a more empathetic and understanding approach to parenting. I think also, creating our own social media feeds to include diverse voices and perspectives can contribute to more balanced and inclusive representation of parenting experiences. So working to not, you know, inadvertently perpetuate those unrealistic images that come up over and over again.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That makes it look like I'm on a continuous vacation, because they are the only, those are the only pictures that I post.

I think, too, just being aware of the time that we spend on social media and how it affects our mood can help us guide our mindful choices - if scrolling is overwhelming, and leading to feelings of doubt, to really be aware of those and maybe turn to a friend or a family member for a conversation, rather than the, you know, jumping to conclusions as to what, what you would think as you're scrolling. I am thinking back and just thinking that you know, judgment can have really significant impacts not only on me, but on my kids as well. So, how do you think that judgment ultimately ripples down and affects the well-being of a parent and a child?

BARB HOPKIN:

I definitely believe that it does ripple down. And when there's this increased stress and pressure in the home and that parents are feeling, if they're feeling judged by others, they may experience more stress and pressure to meet these societal perceived

expectations. And this can really contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self doubt and an increased burden of parenting responsibilities. And so when parents are feeling all of those things and feeling overwhelmed, it's hard to be at their best emotionally and connecting as parents.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think too, for me, it can really strain our relationships, like I think about my relationship between myself and, and my mom, it really, judgment really creates tension and conflict and, and sort of this sense of division between the two of us. Especially when it comes from someone close to you, I, I think, you know, and overall, you know, I can just feel that that at times has a negative impact on our family dynamics.

BARB HOPKIN:

Absolutely, it can really put a lot of strain on family dynamics and kids pick up on those things. They can feel the tension, even if the adults feel like they're, you know, doing a good job of having those boundaries, and that separateness, kids can still feel the tension and, and know that something's up.

I think, you know, especially as you're talking about close relationships, the judgment can really lead to some emotional distress for parents and kids. Parents may feel hurt or angry or defensive when their choices or parenting practices are criticized. Children may also feel the effects of judgment directly or indirectly, which can impact everyone's self-esteem and, and well being.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think parent judgment can discourage parents from seeking or accepting support from others, due to fear of further judgment or criticism. That can really lead to isolation and limited access to the valuable resources we have here in Montana, and just lack of a supportive network.

BARB HOPKIN:

Absolutely. And parents really do need a supportive network in order to manage the challenges that come up daily in parenting. It is a very complex and rewarding yet difficult job to be a parent, and there are so many resources. If it feels as if parent judgment and parenting itself is very, is really getting overwhelming, and mental health of parents is being affected, this can really increase our levels of stress, anxiety and depression for both parents and children. So knowing how to reach out for help, professionally with mental health can also be extremely important for parents dealing with judgment and parenting in general.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think it's really important to recognize the potential negative consequences of parent judgment and, and work toward fostering a culture of empathy and understanding and support here in Montana. How can we develop empathy and understanding toward other parents' choices and approaches? Like I don't always have to agree with them, but how do I sort of create that space to just be more empathetic?

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's so important for community and parents all around to have support from each other and to develop that empathy. I think a great place to start is really working on active listening. So with your talking with other parents, really listen without judgment, give them your full attention, validate their own unique experiences, and go into it really trying to understand their perspectives. Avoid interrupting and interjecting your own opinions or assumptions, but truly listen to understand. That's a great place to start.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yeah, I think for me, I mean, you know, Montana's fairly rural and, and sometimes can feel a bit isolated. So actively seeking out diverse parenting perspectives whether that's you know, the books that I'm choosing or articles or blogs or just engaging in discussions with other parents who have different approaches mean ultimately, I think that strengthens my own parenting choices. It really broadens my understanding and challenges sort of preconceived notions that I have.

BARB HOPKIN:

Absolutely, there's so much amazing information out there, if you work to find it. I think it also helps to really try to put yourself in the shoes of others. So really try to imagine the circumstances and challenges that another parent might be facing. Think about the factors that influence their choices, such as their cultural background, their own personal beliefs or individual circumstances. So empathizing with their experience, by seeing things from their perspective, can really lead to less judgment.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And it helps you reflect on your own biases. Just spending some time to recognize and reflect on those judgments that you might hold towards certain parenting choices or approaches. I know I was at fault for that when you know, breastfeeding versus bottle feeding. I think I was pretty vocal when my kids were little about that, too. And just really spending some time examining the origins of, of those biases and, and questions whether it's, you know, fair or biased. So I think that developing self awareness really helps you approach conversations with an open mind.

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Absolutely, I agree. And I think learning about different parenting philosophies and methodologies, and research on child development can help as well. And understanding the underlying principles and evidence behind various approaches can really help to foster empathy, and appreciation for the diversity of parenting choices. Because it's easy to follow what we know, and really believe what we believe once we educate ourselves and know more about the other options might make sense why they make a good parenting choice for, for someone else.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think, too, you know, in Montana, we really do want what's best for our kids, and being able to sort of focus on those common goals and values that we all have. You know, I think we all have similar aspirations for our kids. We want them to be happy and have positive well-being. And spending time just emphasizing shared values and goals that I have with other parents, you know, like, we all want a nurturing and loving and supportive environment for our kids really helps me develop empathy.

BARB HOPKIN:

Absolutely. And I think empathy really goes beyond understanding. It really involves taking action to support and uplift others, and offer a helping hand and provide emotional support or share resources and information when appropriate. And really actively demonstrate empathy and understanding through your words and actions can make a big difference.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

It really is a practice in humility and opening yourself up to learn from others. I mean really, there's no single parenting approach that's universally superior. We're all, we're all on this path. We're all on these individual paths. But I think being able to embrace the opportunity to learn from other parents, even if their choices really differ from my own and value the wisdom and experiences that they're bringing to the table.

BARB HOPKIN:

Absolutely. And everyone has learned from their own experience and has different ideas to bring. And I think in order to do that, being able to create a safe and non-judgmental space for discussions about parenting is essential. So encouraging really open dialogues where parents can share their experiences and talk about their challenges and insights without fear of being judged or criticized, really can promote some respectful, respectful and constructive conversations. But these conversations happen in an intentional way.

And then I think it's also really important to work on self reflection and growth. So continuously reflecting on our own parenting choices and evaluating their effectiveness and being open to making adjustments, not getting stuck. And embracing a growth

mindset that allows for new learning and evolving and adapting our own approaches based on information and experiences and what we learned from others really results in the best parenting possible.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think yeah, I like this conversation about developing empathy and, and understanding and really actively cultivating empathy and understanding toward other parents. We're really working on building a more compassionate and supportive parenting community in the state, one that celebrates diversity and respects individual choices and the approach of every parent. One question I have is how do you strike a balance between advocating for my own parenting choice, and then respecting the rights of others? So if I, if I want to, there's a sense of like defending my choice, breastfeeding or bottle feeding. And, and I think sometimes that comes with a bit of advocacy. So any advice or any thoughts on, on just striking that balance of informing versus respecting other people's choice?

BARB HOPKIN:

It is a tough balance, because I think a lot of times, when we're trying to inform or share, it's coming from a good place. We're wanting to help and we feel passionate about our own beliefs and choices. I think really focusing on individual, individuality and recognizing that every parent and every child is unique, is so important. Embracing the idea that what works for one family really may not work for another, even within families, what works for one child may not work for another. So instead of seeking a kind of universal validation, or agreement, prioritize understanding and respecting the individuality of each family's circumstances, values and needs, because they're all very different.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think too, advocating for my own parenting choices with confidence, but humility, you know, based on my knowledge of myself, and my kids and research I've done and my own personal experiences, I may want to, you know, share that information with others or even share that information with my mom, because I, you know, I think I get a lot of judgment. I parent so differently than I think she did, but maintaining a sense of humility and openness to the fact that other parents may have, you know, equally valid reasons for their choices. Just being mindful of, you know, avoiding being dogmatic or imposing my views on someone else, it's important.

BARB HOPKIN:

It's so important. And it's, it's tricky. It's not easy to be mindful of those things, because we all have the opinions we have, because they're important to us. I think really taking a step back and acknowledging that parents have the right to make decisions for their own children, helps promote that autonomy and informed decision making by giving

access to information, resources, and the research that's out there and really encouraging parents to make choices that align with their own values and priorities that may be different than our own.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And there's really sort of the right time and place for advocacy too, isn't there?

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I mean, you know, having someone approach me when my kids having a meltdown in the grocery store, and telling me that I shouldn't be using a pacifier didn't really feel like, like the right time or the place. But can you talk more, more about that?

BARB HOPKIN:

Yes, absolutely. I think, really, really thinking about the context and setting of what's going on, so not in the middle of the grocery store and seeking those appropriate opportunities, such as a parenting support group or discussion, specifically focusing on sharing diverse perspectives can be an appropriate place, and really engaging in respectful and constructive conversations that initiate dialogue rather than confrontation. So not going in, going into it to win or be right. But to really have an open conversation and learn from each other.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think that's my, my favorite point so far, is engaging in dialogue, you know, and an invitation to dialogue rather than a confrontation really puts things in a container for me that I can see when is it appropriate time to, to advocate for my choice, and, and maybe, maybe when it's not the right time. I like that. Anything else?

BARB HOPKIN:

I think really seeking some common ground can also be helpful, because in the end, emphasizing that we all have shared goals and values, such as our children being happy and being well, and highlighting the areas that we have in common, versus the ones that are different. So even if a very specific parenting choice may be very different. We have common goals for our children, and that can really help build bridges and foster understanding between parents.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So you really have to practice active listening and empathy, you know, listening to what, what others are saying and empathizing with their own parenting experiences, and then refraining from judgment and comparison. So you know, resting into that, that there's no one size fits all approach to parenting and what works for my mom's generation may not work for mine. But being able to share your experiences without imposing, you know, My own experiences or insights or the reasoning behind my choices, and doing that in a way that respects someone else's autonomy and decision making. I think too, like, I found that if I frame my experience as a personal anecdote than a universal truth of parenting that, you know, that is often more, better received.

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Absolutely, I think recognizing that there's always something to learn from other parents too, even if their choices are different from our own and being open to those new perspectives and ideas can be helpful. And then it leads to engaging in a collaborative discussion where both parties can benefit from the sharing and learning. And those anecdotes come out from both sides that aren't necessarily universal truth, but learn from each other. and I think another piece that's super important is just really leading by example, and modeling respectful and supportive behavior so we can demonstrate how to advocate for our own choices, while really still maintaining a respectful attitude towards others. So by being that positive role model, you can inspire others to approach discussions and interactions with respect and understanding, still follow their own choices, but allow grace and room for other choices as well.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I appreciate like, you've talked about a lot of strategies that parents can use to navigate that delicate balance of advocating for their own choice, and then respecting the choices of others. All of these really create a culture of acceptance and understanding and this culture of support around, around parenting. When I'm faced with judgment from someone however, I often find myself frozen or really unable to logically articulate what I'm thinking or feeling. What are some examples of how I respond when I'm being judged for my parenting choices?

BARB HOPKIN:

That is a tricky situation to be in, for sure. And I think taking a deep breath before responding can help and then really staying calm and confident. If you're able to maintain your own composure and confident when faced with judgment, you'll be able to handle it in a way that you feel good about later. So taking that deep breath and reminding yourself that you do have the right to your own choices and opinions, responding with poise can help defuse the situation rather than escalate it, and show that you are not easily affected by their judgment. Some examples might be a response,

"I appreciate your concern, but I'm confident in my decision. I thought it through and believe it's the right choice for me, my child and my family."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like that, just very clear and concise that. Yeah, oftentimes, I just feel paralyzed and just not able to think of anything, but I can stop and say, *"You know, I thank you, I hear your concern. But I've thought this through and this is the right choice."* I like that. I think too that it's really important to establish boundaries. And you know, let people know that they're, that you're not seeking their judgment or their comments. So how do I sort of politely but firmly express feelings and assert my autonomy?

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think those boundaries are so huge, because they will hopefully make the judgment decrease rather than have it be this cycle. So something you could say is, *"I understand that you have your perspective, but I would really appreciate it if you respected my choices. I value your input, but ultimately, this is my decision to make."*

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So sometimes judgment comes up from a lack of understanding or just completely differing perspectives. Engaging in an open and respectful conversation can help bridge gaps and foster empathy. Give me an example of how I would invite someone into a dialogue.

BARB HOPKIN:

I think slowing down to let them know you know, *"I understand that you have reservations about my choices"*. So acknowledging the judgment. *"Can we talk about it? I'd like to explain my reasoning, and maybe we can find some common ground"*. So that opens the door and deescalates things a little bit.

I think as you start this conversation, you can emphasize love and dedication, you know, respond with a reminder of your love and dedication to your child. And that can really help deflect judgment and highlight your commitment as a parent. So you could say, *"I love my child dearly, and I'm doing my best to provide them with nurturing and supportive environment. Parenting is such a continuous learning process, and I'm constantly growing and adapting to meet their needs"*.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like the idea of being able to sort of share your perspective and your choice as a parent. Sometimes I want to explain the rationale behind my parenting decisions and

some of the factors that I considered when making a certain choice for my children. How do I do that where I can help others understand that, you know, my decisions are well thought out and they're really based on what I believe is best for my child? Do you have any just example of conversation starters there?

BARB HOPKIN:

Yes, I think coming into it and just saying, you know, "*I've made this choice because I really believe it aligns with my child's unique personality and needs. I've done extensive research and consulted professionals in the field to ensure I'm making informed decisions*" and just that reminder that your child is unique, and you know them well and best.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think too, you know, I have, I have those people that I trust. I have my circle of friends and family members or, you know, folks in my parenting community that I seek advice and guidance from. So I think sometimes too being able to respond, you know, with the, the comment that, you know, "*I have my own network of supportive parents who I, you know, I rely on for advice. I feel really confident in the decisions I'm making, you know, thankful, thank you for your concern, but I, you know, I feel grateful for the support that I have and confident in the folks that I'm seeking it from*" can really help give that different rationale.

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Absolutely. And then I think if the judgment is persistent and unproductive, redirecting the conversation to more positive or constructive topics can be another way to handle it. This can really help steer the focus away from the judgment and towards a more productive, healthy conversation. So you could say, "*I understand that you have your opinions, but I prefer to focus on positive aspects of parenting or share stories about the joys and challenges of raising my child. Let's talk about something that uplifts us both.*" So if it feels like you're kind of stuck, deflecting the conversation can definitely be a way around it.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like all of these examples of how to respond and sometimes it just helps me hear what others would say, because sometimes I just don't know in the moment. I think what I really like is that all of these responses prioritize maintaining a healthy and respectful communication. So at no time, did you, you know, do you say just like mind your own business, but it really is that maintaining the relationship with the other person. It's so tricky. It just requires finding a balance between asserting my autonomy and maintaining a healthy relationship.

I often use my mom as an example in that. I want to maintain a relationship with her, but I do need to find ways that I can be clear and firm in my parenting choices. So those are all really great examples of how to respond that really aligns with my values and always prioritizes my child's well-being.

BARB HOPKIN:

Mm-hmm (affirmative), absolutely.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think still being judged by others, it can have a significant emotional impact on parents. How can a parent cope with and recover from the impact of being judged by others? Sometimes, you know, others' judgment feels greater and you know, when I hear something from my mom, sometimes I can really feel snowed under especially if I put a lot of thought into a parenting decision that I've made. So what advice can you give me for, for coping and recovering from that emotional impact?

BARB HOPKIN:

I think really validating your own emotions and recognizing that, that, that is a normal thing to feel heard or frustrated or even really angry when others criticize your parenting choice, allowing yourself to acknowledge these emotions without judging yourself for having them because they are valid response to judgments. And I think also, reaching out for support from trusted friends or family members or support groups who can really give you a safe space to express your feelings, and receive validation and understanding can be extremely helpful. Sharing your experience with others who can empathize can be comforting, and help alleviate the emotional burden that you may be carrying from the hurt from judgment.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And sometimes I think I just have to remind myself to just practice a little self compassion, you know, and be kind and compassionate with myself. I often have to remind myself that parenting is a really complex journey. No one's perfect. Even the differences between my two children make it feel like with my daughter, like I've never parented before, because nothing seems to apply that I applied with my son, and just being able to remind myself that I'm doing my best. My choices are based on what I believe is right for my child at the time, and, and that ability to just treat others with the same understanding and empathy, treating myself with the same understanding and empathy that I would offer to others.

BARB HOPKIN:

Yes, that is important and it's hard to do, and really reframing any negative self-talk and replacing it with positive affirmations about your choices and your parenting to reinforce

your confidence and self belief as a parent can help when those things come up. I think also really establishing those clear boundaries with people who are consistently judging or criticizing your parent choices limit your exposure to those negative influences, and you're surround yourself with people who are supportive and understanding. So this may include giving yourself some distance from toxic relationships or online communities that foster judgment.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That makes sense. I mean just keeping your energy focused on what really matters, the well-being and happiness of your kiddo and keeping your focus on your child's needs and values rather than, you know, seeking external validation or approval, really trusting your instincts as a parent and letting that guide your decisions. Often, I have to remind myself to just rest into that gut instinct that I have.

BARB HOPKIN:

And I think knowing that there are great places to gain knowledge and information about parenting topics that are important to you can also help you know that you made your decisions based on information that you trust. So really educating yourself on child development, different parenting philosophies and evidence-based practice can help you feel more confident about the choices that you make. Knowledge empowers you to make informed decisions and can provide a shield against unwarranted judgment so that you can trust your instincts, and know that you made a decision that you feel confident about.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I think, too, that I'm more able to cope and recover if I'm taking care of myself. So those times where I'm allowing myself to, you know, I've gotten some sleep. I've ate well. I'm, I'm meditating or exercising or whatever those things are, but when I'm practicing better self care, I'm better able to handle if judgment comes my way and, and figuring out how to cope with that. I think too relying on my network, you know, going for a walk with a friend and, and relying on them to, you know, help lift me up or maybe even listen to or validate my experiences that that network of supportive folks or my you know, people in my parenting community where I can share my challenges and triumphs, that really helps too. Is there anything else?

BARB HOPKIN:

I think also, we all have the power to define our worth as a parent. So really focusing on what's most important, our child's happiness, trusting our instincts, and, and having that supportive network or reaching out for professional help when needed if the emotional impact of judgment is getting to be big. You know, a mental health professional can provide guidance and coping strategies and just a space to talk about and process the

emotions. I think Tcan all lead to a lot of self compassion and resilience when it comes to parenting and parent judgment.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

When I was reflecting on this podcast and preparing for the podcast, I really recognized the impact that parent judgment has on me and so many other parents. And sometimes it's really direct and sometimes it is something like just a small comment that can really, you know, feel like it can really create a big crack in your confidence as a parent. And so I appreciate the time that you've given today just to kind of talk about the why behind parent judgment, and it helps me reflect on those times I'm judging others and like the opportunity to really think about how that impacts my parenting with my child and ways I can be healthier. And also, you know, ways I can stop perpetuating that sense of judgment in the community. So I really appreciate you being here today. So thanks for joining me.

BARB HOPKIN:

Thank you so much for having me. I really feel that this is such an important topic for community and for parents to support each other and understand each other on our unique path is so critical to avoiding judgment. And you know, parenting is not easy, and there's definitely not a right way to handle challenges or even to celebrate successes. So knowing that we have the ability to confidently navigate judgment from others, while still being very mindful of differences in parenting so as not to pass judgment will not only help us grow as parents and do the best for our children, but also create that supportive parenting community that can be so healthy for parents and their children.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

A key takeaway from what I've heard today is that the unbelievable amount of effort we devote to our children means that we can take parenting extremely personally and defend our choices passionately. That passion becomes problematic when it's accompanied by criticism, condemnation or lack of empathy towards other parents' choices and circumstances. Recognizing and understanding parent judgment is crucial for fostering a supportive parenting community. It really involves promoting empathy, respect for diverse parenting choices and acknowledging that each parent's journey is unique and valid.

For more information on topics related to parent judgment, check out the I Want to Know More resource titled "What do I do When Important People in my Life Have Different Ideas About Parenting my Child?", as well as "Navigating High Conflict with Important People in Your Child's Life." Both of those are found under the Relationships tab.

Thank you for joining us today. Keep checking back for additional podcasts, tools and resources being added to ParentingMontana.org.

VOICEOVER:

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Thanks for listening to the ParentingMontana.org podcast.

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