

Growing Concerns
A parenting column with Dr. Martha Erickson of the
University of Minnesota

Question: Our next-door neighbor's child behaves very badly and seems to be unsupervised much of the time. We worry about his safety and about the bad influence he might have on our children, but we're not sure what to do since it's not really our place to discipline someone else's child. Do you have any suggestions?

Answer: Nearly everyone has encountered this kind of situation at some time, and it is a delicate one. The answer to your question will depend on many factors, including: how well you know the child and his parents, the severity of his behavior (especially whether it's potentially dangerous to others,) the child's age, and whether the lack of supervision is serious enough that it constitutes child neglect. Without knowing more details about the situation, I can only offer you general guidelines that might help you figure out how to proceed.

First, if the child is on your property, it is perfectly acceptable to tell him in plain and simple language what your house rules are and what the consequences will be if he chooses not to follow them. You can say, for example, "You can play here as long as you don't hit or swear. If you break those rules, I'll have to call your parents and take you home."

Also, let the boy's parents know your house rules and ask them to work with you in making sure he follows them. It will seem less personal and less threatening if you simply explain that these are the rules you ask your own children and all of their friends to follow. (You could also suggest that the parents let you know if they ever have concerns about your children's behavior.)

Away from your own property—at a neighborhood park, for example—you have less authority. But you still can express your concern about his behavior by using an "I" message rather than a "you" message. For example, you could say, "I really worry that you'll get hurt when you climb on that fence. How about if you climb on this jungle gym instead?" He might even appreciate that someone is concerned about his safety.

I also urge you to express your concerns directly to the boy's parents, but in a way that is supportive. For example, "It's hard to keep up with kids this age. Is there a way I can help? How would you like me to respond if I see him getting into trouble?"

Finally, let the boy and his parents know when you see him doing well. A simple message, like, "I really appreciated what a good sport he was when he played ball with the other kids today," can go a long way to encourage better behavior.

Taking a broader view, you might want to do what some other neighborhood groups have done. You can convene a block meeting to set guidelines for how everyone can work together to look out for the safety and well being of the neighborhood. In today's busy world, fortunate are the children who have adult neighbors who care enough to get involved.

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