

BY MEGAN AULT

**I'm** writing a check for groceries with my 3-year-old son, Dylan, at my side when I hear familiar words from yet another stranger: "What's that thumb doing in your mouth?"

This time, it's a man who's actually pulled Dylan's thumb out of his mouth and is shaking it playfully in the air. "Is that good? What flavor is it?" he asks.

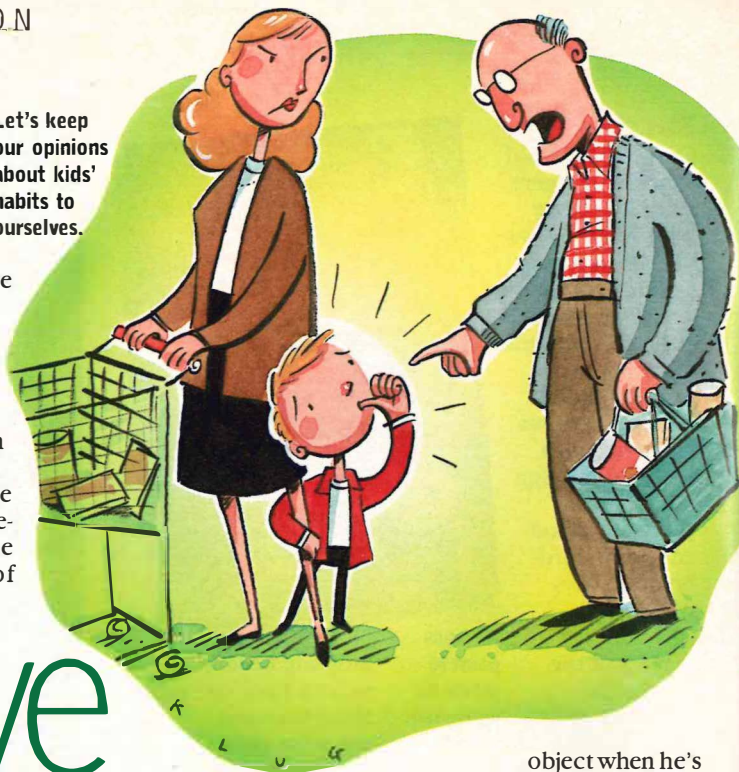
Dylan shrugs, a small, embarrassed smile tugging at his mouth as he buries

his face against my thighs. The cashier smiles at us and gives me a look that says, What a poor, shy little guy.

mouth?" I'd say with a smile. I'd give him a few jovial belly pokes, then turn to his wife, shaking my head. "You know, I've had similar problems with my husband, and I've found that a little smack on his hand each time it goes for his mouth works wonders."

The only difference between the two scenarios is that in the latter one, instead of

Let's keep our opinions about kids' habits to ourselves.



# Kids have feelings too

his face against my thighs. The cashier smiles at us and gives me a look that says, What a poor, shy little guy.

But my son is usually quite outgoing. It's only when people tease him or offer unsolicited advice about how to get him to quit sucking his thumb that he pulls away. We've heard every suggestion imaginable: wrapping his thumb in bandages, dipping it in something foul-tasting, swatting his hand when his thumb is in his mouth, even having a dentist insert a pointed, painful thumb rake behind his teeth.

Who can blame him for wanting to hide from all of this? We treat children in ways we wouldn't dream of treating adults when it comes to such habits. Imagine how the man in the checkout line, whose midsection hung amply over his pants, would feel if I walked up to him in a restaurant and playfully yanked a forkful of cheesecake out of his mouth.

"What's that fattening dessert doing in your

**Why do strangers think it's okay to criticize my son's habits?**

hiding behind his wife, the man probably would have threatened to punch my lights out.

Then there are our friends at playgroup. "What are you going to do about his thumb?" one mother asks in a concerned hush that's still loud enough for Dylan to hear. I fumble for a response. I know it's not the best habit for his developing

teeth, but you'd think he was a hopeless alcoholic by the way some people react.

"I guess it doesn't really bother me the way it does certain people," I tell her. She raises her eyebrows as I continue. "But I have told Dylan that as he gets older, he might want to stop sucking his thumb because it can hurt his teeth, and because it's not something that the big kids do."

The women who have gathered nod, and I hear one say to another, "I'm so glad Becca doesn't suck her thumb. I was worried she would, but she doesn't."

I feel a stab of hurt, but it's not until we're driving home that I recognize what these comments are: a way to make ourselves feel that we've done something right as parents. As in "She's not so insecure she needs to suck her thumb; I must be doing a good job."

But to me, whether a child gives up his comfort

object when he's 2 or 5 is of little concern. Better to worry about the bigger things in life, like instilling kindness, sensitivity, and acceptance in

our kids—the very things many people *don't* offer a 3-year-old with his thumb in his mouth.

I have seen, in myself and other parents, the rush to convince our children to relinquish their baby ways. Then we wake up one day and they are free of the blanky, pacifier, bottle, diaper, and thumb, and we lament that they've grown up so fast. When we see child rearing as a race or contest, we're the losers.

I know I'll never be able to completely stop comparing my children with others, no matter how hard I try. But the next time I start to question or offer advice to another parent on society's developmental deadlines—especially when her child is present—perhaps I'll remember how it feels and hold my tongue. □

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