

LAURA ON LIFE

Mortification Meter

Kids have no shame. It is the only possible reason why a fourth grader can “bust a grumpy” while sitting at the dining table, and then laugh uproariously when everyone gags and runs for cover.

So why don't kids have any shame? Well, it's not precisely that they have no shame, because they do tend to be embarrassed about things they shouldn't be. For example, they are embarrassed when their parent says something nice about them.

“My son just won MVP of his Pee Wee league.”

“Mo-om! Why do you have to tell people that?”

I think it's fair to say that most kids have a broken Mortification Meter and the manual for this particular device has gone missing.

If the meter was broken in the ON position, where everything was humiliating, parents could work it out with confidence-building tapes, a few months of therapy, and possibly shock treatment. If it was broken in the OFF position, nothing at all would faze the child and life would be good for him. That would not keep you from being mortified, though, when he did something for which he should be embarrassed.

No, the child's Mortification Meter is not stuck in the On or Off position. It was turned upside down, shaken (not stirred) like an Etch-a-Sketch and dropped into a fish tank... with water... and fish. Now it's just screwed up.

Here is a scenario that is probably somewhat familiar to anyone who has ever had children.

We went out for dinner

which, nowadays, is merely a way to showcase our kids' eccentric behavior to the rest of the world.

My nine-year old went to the salad bar and brought back, not a salad, but a plate that had little piles of fixings stacked on it. There was a pile of sunflower seeds, a pile of croutons, a pile of raisins, a pile of cheese and a stack of saltine crackers. He hit every food group – I was okay with it.

He grabbed a pinch of cheese between a thumb and forefinger, raised it above his head, and dropped it into his open mouth. I was not okay with that. I swear I did not teach him that.

I told him to use a fork. He picked up his fork and used it to smash his crackers into his raisins. I told him, “No more cracker-smashing.” He began sucking his

sunflower seeds through his straw. I snatched the straw away from him and he looked at me as if I had grown two heads. Just so we're clear, I did not teach him any of that and... I did not then, nor have I ever, had two heads.

Suddenly, blue lights outside the restaurant caught the boy's attention. He pointed and yelled “Police!” in the same voice one would use if one grew marijuana in one's basement. While other patrons stared at us, I tried to shush him by quietly telling him that the officer was giving a man a ticket, probably for speeding. Sometimes if you talk quietly, the child will match your voice.

Eyes wide, still staring out the window, he announced at 20 decibels, or however many decibels is

really, really loud, “I gotta pee!” and made a mad dash for the restroom. I put my sunglasses on, hoping that the staff would not recognize me the next time we dined there – which, I was sure, would not happen until the year two-thousand-and-never.

When my shameless child returned, he was rubbing his arms and shivering as if he had just driven his Huskies across the Alaskan tundra. Perhaps there was a portal to

Siberia in stall number 3. I offered him my jacket but – and I'm not kidding, here – he said, “I can't wear that. It's pink. I would be so embarrassed!”

...A clear case of a broken Mortification Meter.

I believe this defect occurs in adults as well. When we were finally making our getaway (it couldn't have happened soon enough), an older lady at the table next to us pulled my husband aside to tell him what well-be-

haved children we have. I tried to imagine what on earth her kids must've been like! Then I decided that her kids were probably no different from mine. It's simply that her Mortification Meter had sustained collateral damage.

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