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Kindness of strangers

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The little boy in the grocery-store checkout lane was grabbing for the candy. His mom already had yelled at him in the produce section, and now she lost it. She screamed, "Put that down. I told you not to touch that!" and roughly jerked his arm.

Many of us have witnessed a similar scene. We might wince, but few would think to do what Donald Gault did.

"It was definitely escalating," recalled Gault, who was in line in front of the mother and child. "So, I turned and looked her in the eye, and I said, 'I think it makes it really hard the way stores put all the candy up here where you can't avoid it. It looks like you have your hands full. Would you mind if I took your 5-year-old and he helped me bag my groceries?' I just wanted to get him away from her for a minute."

The boy helped Gault. The mom relaxed. And a situation that might have turned ugly was diffused.

Gault is trying to get more people to intervene when they see a parent act harshly with a child in public.

As manager of the healthy communities section for St. Paul-Ramsey County Department of Public Health, Gault is working on the Wakanheza Project, sponsored by the Initiative for Violence Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County. The public-education campaign borrowed the Dakota word for child, which means "sacred being," in the hope it will remind people to treat children with respect and gentleness.

The group is distributing posters with the message "Lend a Hand to Children and Families" and a six-page booklet of tips on how to respond to parents who are struggling with their children in public. Training is being offered for health care providers, park and recreation workers, librarians and others whose work puts them in contact with the public.

"We're suggesting that simple gentle kindness can go a long way," said Rose Allen, an educator in family relationships with the University of Minnesota Extension Service who leads the trainings.

"When you see someone struggling, hold the door open. Say something like, 'Oh my kid used to do that. That's really normal.' It sounds simple, but it's really hard to do that because we think of the family as this private enclave that we shouldn't interfere with."

Often people are reluctant to get involved when they see a parent lose control for fear the parent might take it out on the child later. Or they simply don't know what to do.

Don't give the parent a disapproving stare or confront them directly, Allen said. This usually makes the situation worse. Instead, offer support, even just a smile.

Humor works, too, she said. "You can give someone a knowing look and say, 'Wow. Strong kid. He's going to go far someday.'"

The Wakanheza Project also is encouraging businesses to make life easier for parents. Allen admits it's a long shot, but she would love to see grocery stores offer one or two checkout lanes without candy tempting children at eye-level. Some businesses already offer child-friendly services, such as a child-sized cart or a few toys in a corner.

United Family Practices Clinic, a busy clinic on West Seventh Street, saw first-hand what a difference a simple step can make. When a harried parent starts clashing with a cranky child, the receptionist pulls out a bag with a toy, such as a mini Etch A Sketch or a coloring book and crayons. Staff members were trained in the importance of other simple gestures, and now it is not uncommon for someone to jump in and show a parent a quiet room to change a diaper or help a parent put on the children's cap and mittens.

"A parent still can say no," said community outreach worker Connie Walsh. "But it also says something to those kids that here is another person willing to help out."