



Which twin is  
the smart one?

How much  
did your  
child cost?

Are you  
breast-feeding?

Do you plan  
to circumcise  
your son?

Did you  
have a  
C-section?

How to respond to  
those off base questions  
that leave you thinking ...

Why  
just the  
one child?

## Excuse me?!

Why  
did you  
adopt?

By Alandra Johnson • *The Bulletin*

Bend resident Meg Rozek recalls taking her daughter Anya on a trip to the grocery store not long after the 5-year-old had been diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. Anya brought along Rufus Bear, a special diabetic teddy bear. Rozek remembers Anya showing the bear to a fellow shopper and the woman telling Anya something to the effect of: "Oh yes, I have to be careful because if I have too many cookies, I get diabetes. Is that what happened to you? Did you eat too many cookies?"

Rozek was unnerved. Anya had done nothing to get diabetes, and it is a condition she will battle for the rest of her life. Rozek says that woman's remark was one of many insensitive comments or questions people have made about Anya's diabetes since the little girl was diagnosed in

May. Rozek says most people are familiar with type 2 diabetes, which is associated with childhood obesity.

## Questions

Continued from E1

Roski says people are sometimes shocked to hear Anya has diabetes, saying, "That she's so skinny?" Or they suggest that Anya start exercising.

Some people have told Roski that they could never stick their child with a needle. To which Roski replies, "Oh well, then your child would die."

Roski has become relatively good at responding to comments. She sees it as an opportunity to educate people about the different types of diabetes, making sure to tell them that Anya "did nothing to cause it, she did nothing to get it, and she will have it forever."

Roski understands that most people aren't trying to be rude when they say these things, even if the comments can be hurtful. She knows that most people are just curious.

Diabetes is just one of many, many things that can draw unwelcome comments. In fact, most parents have probably fielded an inappropriate comment or question, whether it's about a decision to return to work, use cloth diapers, home-school, have an only child or have a C-section.

Gestapo and psychology experts say most people asking such questions don't intend to be hurtful. But parents need to be prepared to respond in a way that discourages the behavior while also setting a good example for their kids.

### Inappropriate

"Are you breast-feeding?" Local mom Summer Holland says she couldn't believe it when she heard that question.

"It's such a private thing, yet people don't think twice to ask or give their opinion on the subject," wrote Holland via e-mail.

Susan Fitter, owner of Global Manners, believes most people are "incredibly insensitive" rather than judgmental.

"I really, really believe that 80 percent or more are simply not thinking," said Fitter.

Some remarks come from people's curiosity about something they know little about, such as home schooling, adoption or infertility.

Debi Yohn, a counseling psychologist, says she has drawn a number of uncomfortable comments. She says people have asked her how many times she has had sex and how many times she has had a miscarriage.

Yohn said via e-mail that she believes most people are "genuinely interested and caring," but the comments are becoming uncomfortable because her daughter is now old enough to be both



Debi residents Beth, left, and Anya Roski have prompted comments from strangers to their mother, Meg Roski. She has fielded some uncomfortable questions about both of her children.

that she doesn't like when strangers ask her so many questions," said Teklits.

Jenn Berman, a licensed marriage and family therapist and author of "The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy Confident Kids," says, "In general, people don't think before they speak."

She thinks people are naturally curious and feel the freedom to ask the questions or voice opinions.

"In the '90s, nobody would ask these questions," said Berman.

She believes people have become desensitized to some of these issues, such as infertility and breast-feeding and so on, because the topics are discussed so freely on television and the Internet.

"Nothing's off limits on TV," said Berman.

People then don't understand that these topics are still inappropriate to discuss with people they do not know well.

Berman, the mother of twins, says people have asked her which twin is the smart one. Other mothers of twins she knows have heard comments such as, "Oh, she's the pretty one" pointing to one of the twins.

Berman calls that "verbal diarrhea," and thinks people are not trying to make a judgment.

"It's important for parents to realize it's not personal," she said.

Still, some comments can be upsetting.

Several strangers, for instance, have mentioned to Roski that her son Seth's diaper looks really full and she should change it, not realizing that his diapers are cloth and therefore more poopy than disposable. She's also had people tell her that she's wasting her time making homemade baby food and diaper wipes.

"I don't get too fired up," said Roski, who usually responds in a "poking, sarcastic manner."

Roski is sure she has probably made a comment or two of her own that she probably shouldn't have. But for the most part, she says, "I probably err on the side

of being polite."

Associate professor of psychology at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, thinks some of the comments are more than just curiosity.

Some parents, she says, make comments "out of their own neediness." They may be self-conscious about their own child's behavior and want to justify it in some way. For instance, Bradley-Rosne has received comments that her well-behaved daughter had "no spontaneity" from parents whose children were running around.

Other parents, Bradley-Rosne says, have right ideas about parenting and are "constantly offering advice." These parents, she says, probably mean well, but have poor timing and poor execution. Some parents also feel a sense of competition, she says.

"In general, it's really helpful to remember parents have different styles," said Bradley-Rosne.

And when thinking about offering advice, remember that your friends are more likely to take your advice than strangers.

### How to respond

Appropriate responses to inappropriate comments can be tricky, and what works for one parent might not work for another.

Some parents, for instance, use humor to deflect a question, without really answering it. Replies might include, "If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

One company that calls itself gollywobbly has capitalized on this humorous approach to unwanted comments, making baby onesies and T-shirts with funny sayings such as "please don't give my parents unsolicited advice," "please don't ask my mommy if she's working," "please don't touch my hands; I put them in my mouth," and "please be nice to my parents; they don't get a lot of sleep, thank you so much."

Other parents try a more direct approach.

time. As the mother of twins, Fitter had to decide early on how should would respond when people asked her if she used fertility treatments.

"You have to decide what's comfortable for you," said Fitter. She decided early on that she "wouldn't overdisclose."

When someone asked her about how she ended up with twins, Fitter might respond with something like, "I know you mean well, but I feel uncomfortable talking about that."

Fitter outlines two basic guidelines for responding to inappropriate questions. The first is for parents to avoid reinforcing the rude behaviors. This means parents should not thank them for unsolicited advice and should not apologize for feeling uncomfortable and refusing to answer.

"You do not owe them an overly nice response," said Fitter. Being overly nice or apologetic will likely lead to more unwelcome comments or questions.

Fitter's other guideline is for parents to avoid being as inappropriate as the intruder. Parents' natural, protective response may be to become angry, but acting on this emotion is not a good idea.

"There is nothing productive about being angry," said Fitter. In addition, Fitter says acting out of anger creates a poor example for children.

Berman believes that, above all, parents need to protect their children. If a stranger insults the children (such as saying one twin is the "pretty one") parents need to make sure to correct that. Berman says parents might respond by saying, "That's not a very nice thing to say" or asking the person why they would say such a thing.

After the person leaves, Berman says parents may need to address the issue with children. For instance, they might say, "Wow, that was a very insensitive woman" or, in the "pretty twin" example, "both of you are really beautiful."

"If someone hurts you, you have to say, 'Ouch,'" said Berman.

Debi Yohn, a counseling psychologist, agrees that parents should not go along with rude questions or comments.

"When we smile, nod or respond in any way we give permission for the person to continue or feel like they have permission to offer the opinion we did not ask for," she wrote in an e-mail. "So do not reinforce bad behavior. Do not respond or, my

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## TIPS FOR RESPONDING TO UNWELCOME COMMENTS OR QUESTIONS

These potential responses and techniques come from local parents as well as clinical psychologist and owner of Global Manners Susan Fitter, marriage and family therapist Jenn Berman and associate professor of psychology Kerri Bradley-Rosne.

- Use humor to deflect the question without answering it. Example: "If I told you, I'd have to kill you."
- Go for the straightforward response. Example: "I know you mean well, but I feel uncomfortable talking about that."
- Turn the tables. Examples: "Why do you want to know that?" If a person tries to touch a pregnant woman's belly, she can reach out and touch their stomach in response.
- When insulted, say so. Examples: "That's not a very nice thing to say." "Why would you say that?"

### Approaches to avoid:

- Getting angry. This only models bad behavior to children.
- Being overly nice. Don't apologize for refusing to answer an inappropriate question. Don't thank someone for making a rude comment.

## QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS YOU SHOULD THINK TWICE BEFORE ASKING

The following list of questions may be appropriate to ask close friends or family members, but, according to experts and local moms, you may want to think carefully before directing these questions and remarks to people you don't know well.

- Are you pregnant? (What if the answer is no?)
- Are you breast-feeding?
- Why aren't you going back to work?
- Why aren't you staying home with the kids? (Or when are you going back to work.)
- Did you have a C-section?
- Which twin is the smart one?
- Where did your child's red hair/blive complexion/blue eyes come from? (The answer could be from a sperm donor or from the child's birth parent.)
- Are you circumcising your son?
- Why did you adopt?
- How much did your child cost?
- Why just the one child?
- (Referring to a pregnancy) How did this happen?
- You can always have another child.
- You're pretty old to be a mom. Or you're pretty young to be a mom.

favorite, use the question, "Why is this important to you?"

She believes that this may spare some people to reflect on their question.

"Some people are just rude and they get away with it because we allow it," said Yohn.

So, how should people know if they are asking an inappropriate question?

Fitter says the bottom line is to think about the potential to offend. If you are coming from a place of empathy or kindness "then you've

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