

Front Porch Moment

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This is one of those stories that sounds too good to be true, but I assure you it happened and an experience similar to this one can happen to you too, the opportunities are everywhere you look.

A few weeks ago my family decided to have pictures taken at the local photo center. You know the place, two hours later and with a few hundred bucks less in your checking account you leave with more pictures than you ever dreamed? Our appointment was the last one on a Saturday night and at ages twenty and twenty-one, we had the oldest “children” in the room. In fact, the waiting area was packed with little boys in shiny shoes and girls in pink, yellow and white dresses and exhausted parents who just wanted the entire event to be finished.

As we sat reviewing our pictures on the computer after our photo shoot, one little guy, who looked to be about four years old was running and jumping on all of the furniture. When he grew tired of that he began fighting with the other children. The noise level was reaching unbearable and his father had extended all of his patience. He had swatted the boy’s bottom a few times, pulled him by the arm and put him on the chair. Things were going from bad to worse.

I’m a bit embarrassed to admit it, but I really just wanted to get out of there. I wanted to leave my day job behind and go home to comfortable clothes, maybe a nice cup of tea. But my youngest daughter would have no part of it. She looked at me and said, “Mom, you know what to do, would you please forget about our pictures and go help that kid?” And to further make her point, she looked at our photographer and said, “My mom has worked in child abuse prevention most of her life, she knows what to do when this kind of thing happens.” No pressure, right?

I walked up to the dad and while chuckling said, “You poor guy, when my kids were little, pictures were done at Sears and only lasted 15 minutes. Do you mind if I bring your son over to look at our pictures and give you a bit of a break?” He was a bit uncertain and maybe a little embarrassed at first, but my family was just across the room in clear view and he agreed. The little guy took quite a shine to my two daughters and happily bounced on my knee looking at our crazy family.

We barely walked through the door at home when my cell phone rang and a voice on the other end said, “Excuse me for calling, but I’m the photographer who worked with your family tonight.” I instantly thought we had left something behind. Not so. I will not soon forget his words, “I grew up as an abused child and in more foster homes than I can count. I always make it a point to say thank you to anyone who I know works in parenting and abuse prevention. I loved how you stopped that dad from being mean to his son tonight and I just wanted to say thank you.”

I was speechless, literally. I was also embarrassed. It's not always comfortable to intervene and it's not always convenient. I am far from an expert on the subject, but I have learned a few things over the years, the most important being, if I don't intervene when I see a child being mistreated, who will?

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You are attending a religious service and watch as Dwayne, the father sitting in front of you, is struggling to keep his son, Andre, quiet during the service. You watch Dwayne get "rougher" with Andre until he finally grabs his son by the arm and quickly leaves the room. You are concerned about what might be happening out in the hallway. What do you do?



PFSA's new program initiative, The Front Porch Project (FPP), can help you to think through just such a scenario and decide how – and whether – to get involved when you are concerned about a child in your community, neighborhood or a public place. Developed by the American Humane Association (AHA), FPP is sponsored in Pennsylvania by PFSA; two-day trainings are now being scheduled across the state.

"Front Porch Moments" are what we call those **times when a little interaction can make a big impact** on a parent who is struggling or a child who needs some extra supervision or attention. The moment when you, as a neighbor, community member, friend, or family member, step forward to help a child (or a parent) is important in helping the parent feel supported and the child feel safe.

There are many ways you might respond to the Front Porch Moment described above:

- You might head for the rest room and casually observe what's going on. Once you check it out, you might not be concerned and just keep walking.
- Maybe you'd spend a few minutes with Dwayne and Andre in the hallway, perhaps telling Andre that you also needed to get up and stretch a little.
- Dwayne might appreciate an offer to take Andre outside for a few minutes while he takes a break, or you might offer to walk Andre to the child care room.
- Does the religious organization have quiet toys or games for children during the service? If not, you might suggest a basket of such items be placed in the back of the room for families.

Share your Front Porch Moments! When you come across a situation similar to the one above, and you find a solution that works for you, contact PFSA and we'll pass your ideas on to others. An easy way to do this is to visit our blog at www.protectpakids.org.

To learn more about the Front Porch Project, and sponsor or attend a local training, visit our website at www.pa-fsa.org or call (800) 448-4906. ❖