



Melissa Wear <melissa.wear@gmail.com>

Why Are We Always on Call for Our Kids?

2 messages

Kathryn Jezer-Morton <hello@e.thecut.com>
To: melissa.wear@gmail.com

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Illustration: Hannah Buckman

A few years ago, a beloved French bakery near my house closed and was replaced by a gym. So it goes with gentrification: Ease replaced by discipline. The new gym is part of the OrangeTheory chain, which is open only for classes, like a SoulCycle. It's expensive, and the people I see coming out of there always look flushed and satisfied post-workout. I won't make excuses or offer explanations. I'll just skip to the part where I ended up joining.

At these gyms, you wear a heart monitor on your arm that is linked to a screen at the front of the room on which everyone's heart rate is displayed. Your name appears in a box that changes color from green to orange to red as your heart rate increases. The lights in the room are orange, and the music is incredibly loud. Every detail has been optimized for maximum motivation-juicing purposes. Previously, I had thought gyms like this were evil because exercise is supposed to be loose and creative, or something. I've changed my mind about that. I don't have time for loose and creative workouts lately.

So there I was on a recent Saturday morning, having fully crossed over to the side I used to think I hated, and I was loving it. I was just getting into the second half of the class, my heart rate steady in the orange zone, when

the trainer approached my rowing machine: “Kathryn, right? There’s someone here to see you.”

I looked up, and through the glass doors to the lobby I saw ... my 13-year-old son. He was in shower slides and pajamas, and he was holding my debit card up to the glass, beseeching me. Through the glass door, he mouthed: *Can I use it?*

I gestured *no* with my whole body. I sent vibrational waves of no that, I was hoping, would be palpable to him through the glass door. I frantically waved my hands for him to leave. *GO*, I mouthed, *AWAY!* He stood there for a minute, taking it in, and then he left. I looked up at the screen, and my heart rate was in the red zone. I was molten with anger.

What part of my parenting had failed to erect and maintain a boundary between my basically teenage son and my workout time? Why was there *porousness* there?! Where did he get the idea that he could interrupt my exercise class with a request like that?

Unfortunately, I’m pretty sure it was mostly my own doing. I’ve always felt, at the level of instinct if not fully considered intention, that to be a responsible and good parent, I have to be available to my kids pretty much all the time. That doesn’t mean I’m hanging out with them or even interacting with them. But I am never really unavailable. Even when I’m working, I can be reached by text, and I always reply fast. This has been important to me. It seems like a reasonable expectation for a kid to have, right? Well, to be honest, I’d never thought about it until I saw my son through the glass door at OrangeTheory.

This was too much. I was humiliated in front of the OrangeTheory people — people to whom I, until very recently, considered myself superior! But the truth about me had been revealed, and it was too late to change the impression I’d made: that of a person with a child who seems not to understand basic boundaries. No wonder I’m so out of shape!

To my son’s credit, when I got home and told him he was never to set foot inside the OrangeTheory lobby ever again (unless it’s a medical emergency), he very calmly and reasonably agreed and apologized for

interrupting my workout. I think it was just a moment of preteen etiquette-glitching. But still, it bothered me.

My children can reach me at any time, and as a result of our constant contact, they rarely have to wait for their parents or for anyone else, for that matter. But my phone also prevents me from relating to them. Too much of my life and work happens through it, as is true for so many of us. It can be hard to give them my full attention in moments when they very reasonably would expect to have it. In the wake of the OrangeTheory Incident, I began to wonder if the “standing reserve” approach to parenting, in which we are always on call for our kids’ logistical needs, is a way of compensating for being too distracted to meet their need for actual connection. An unintended consequence of this act of compensation has been the erosion of boundaries that I suddenly feel the need to reinforce.

I had already been thinking a lot about parents and phones when the Incident occurred. I recently saw Doctor Becky Kennedy speak at an event, and she made some very insightful remarks about the impact parents’ phone addiction is likely having on young children. “Our phones rob us of our feeling of enoughness,” she told the audience. They make us feel like there’s always something more satisfying that we could be doing. But when it comes to raising kids, paying loving attention to them, even in a passive way like listening to them chatter on about something bewildering like Roblox, is absolutely the most important thing you can do – I don’t think it’s controversial for me to state this without an expert’s sign-off.

Doctor Becky went on to say that she anticipated an increasing incidence of emotional difficulties in children suffering from the “attachment wounds” of growing up around parents who are always on the other side of a screen. I think most of us are self-aware enough to already know this is a problem, but the indictment nonetheless felt scathing and accurate. It led me to think about the things I’ve done to feel like a good parent that are easier for me, and more convenient, than actually paying attention to my kids.



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By the time I was 10, I had become accustomed to waiting, sometimes for a long time, for my parents to pick me up from lessons, or practices, or friends' houses. The places I waited are significant sites of my childhood memory: The lobby of the music school where I had piano and choir, a place I memorized to the very last pushpin hole in the aging plaster walls. The curb in front of my middle school, where there was a black locust tree whose little yellow leaves would gather in drifts in the fall. The public library, where there weren't fast computers yet. I just waited and waited. It was a fact of life. My parents were conscientious, not at all the types to forget about picking me up. But they did not live on standing reserve for my every need. They would come pick me up when they finished up whatever they were doing. Whatever that was, it wasn't really my business nor my concern.

My children very rarely have to wait for anyone for very long. And by very rarely, I mean never. Waiting is not a feature of their lives in any meaningful way, unless you count "waiting for me to finish using my laptop so they can use it to play *Civilization VI*," in which case, fine, they sometimes wait.

The norms around letting kids wait, among middle- and upper-class parents, have coalesced into a rigid set of standards. Many parents, myself included, would be embarrassed to have their kids be the last ones waiting

after the other kids were picked up from something. My parents knew nothing of this embarrassment. And it's other adults who embarrass us, not our kids. The one time I recall picking my son up late from football practice, his coach gave me a stern look and a theatrical "HERE's mom!" as I appeared. It was obnoxious.

You could say that it's just parents and coaches and teachers looking out for the safety of the kids in their communities, but I'm not sure. I think we've chosen this particular form of vigilance as one we are going all in on because our phones make it convenient.

It shouldn't have surprised me that my son felt compelled to invade my little workout. I haven't defined any time when I am truly inaccessible. The more I have to work, the more I'm on my phone and distracted, the more eagerly I want to reassure my kids that I'm here for them. I'm not sure if any of us are getting a lot out of these circumstances. Perhaps in order to better reclaim more time as my own, I need to make more of my attention genuinely theirs.

5 Things I Thought About While Watching the *Loki* Movie (or Is It a Show? Who Cares) With My Children

(1) I have extended family in Israel, and I have been thinking of them and everyone else suffering once again through both sides of this senseless, useless, horrific violence. [Here's a guide to how to help.](#)

(2) A friend lent me **Norman Rush's 1991 novel, *Mating***, which I know [many people have revisited recently](#) and which I'd been meaning to read. 100 pages in, I am stunned by the quality of the writing.

(3) I love a man-behind-the-curtain exposé and [this story](#) about Leonard Leo's influence on the American legal system did not disappoint.

(4) My husband and I just finished watching the series *Perry Mason*, which was my favorite show we’ve watched together since *Station Eleven*. I loved every single character. I bet everyone has already seen it— I watch everything late. But anyway, if you haven’t seen it, I give it my highest recommendation.

(5) At home, I’ve been listening to LaForce’s gorgeous new album, *XO Skeleton*. Here is a perfect song for the moment, “October.”



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Melissa Wear <melissa.wear@gmail.com>
To: Michael Wear <michaelwear12@gmail.com>

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A wildly insightful article. It'll go in the Top 5 for the weekend.

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