

When Other Caring Adults are the De Facto Guardians

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Here is one of the most famous self-evaluating questions of all time: “How did I get into this mess?”

Very few people have gotten through life without asking themselves that question at least occasionally—and it can often revolve around a concept described by the phrase “de facto.” This is a legal term usually used to describe a situation wherein a situation/circumstance is recognized to exist regardless of any legal authority/definition for its existence. To put it in laymen’s terms, “Sometimes, that’s just the way it is.” Moreover, the euphemistic “mess” mentioned before comes about because someone found themselves in a situation that heaped a little bit of unexpected responsibility on them, whether they asked for it or not.

When it comes to children, especially children in public settings, almost every parent, teacher, and other caring adult automatically accepts responsibility for, among other things, the safety of their children (and sometimes children they have agreed to monitor). So, they take their child and a friend or two to the playground (or wherever) and responsibly go about the business of letting the kids have fun while simultaneously implementing a policy of managed mayhem. We are perfectly accepting of the responsibilities we have taken on with those in our charge.

Here is where the “de facto” issue comes in. It is not unusual for other kids, sometimes LOTS of other kids, to be in the same place as your own charges, which usually means there are also other parents and caring adults around as well. Because many public venues like the aforementioned playground, or the beach, the pool, the mall, etc. can provide enough space to spread the supervision over some sizeable geography, caring adults can find themselves in circumstances that require interactions with children that they not only did not bring, but might not even know. Perhaps for no other reason than the fact that, in a particular moment, you are the most qualified/expedient adult on the scene, you just became responsible for those kids. THAT, my friends, is a truly frightening thought for many people. Why am I responsible for some stranger’s child?!

Sometimes the nearest adult needs to move quickly. Sometimes a parent with a certain skill is paramount. Sometimes physical characteristics like strength or height set the priority. There may be many reasons, so let’s use a few examples. Perhaps a fight has broken out. Do you let the fight continue until you can identify the kids’ parents? Perhaps a child has been hurt. Wouldn’t it be prudent to let the adult most competent in first aid take the lead? You notice someone casually and randomly videotaping in the area. Do you just take your child and leave, or do you inform other parents of the activity? In each of the circumstances, you just became a de facto guardian of the children around you.

Don’t worry too much about this responsibility—such opportunities present themselves all the time. It is one of the major benefits of living in a community. We watch out for each other. The bigger trick is to realize that most other parents and caring adults are just as capable as you of being the de facto guardian. Sometimes it takes a breath or two to realize that this other parent was simply acting as your child’s de facto guardian, not trying to usurp your authority. With this realization, comes the very practical mindset that all caring adults, even those who do not know each other well, can work together to make communities safer; that as they wander about keeping an eye on their kids at play, they can also keep an eye on the bigger picture around them. So that when the need arises, we can all live up to our Christian vocation of guarding the welfare of our children... all of them.

