

# Why European Children Are Less Noisy Than American Children

The playgrounds weren't just beautiful. They were *quiet*. That was what struck me when I first moved to Vienna, Austria. Children there played and laughed, but rarely yelled across the park. Naturally, we Americans stood out. It wasn't just my young daughter yelling, "Hey Mom, look at me!" from atop the climbing gym. I was part of the problem: "Time to go home!" I'd thoughtlessly yell from my bench, and then feel other parents' eyes dart toward me in disapproval.

European parents' discipline about not shouting at their kids was all the more impressive since they also almost never followed their children from apparatus to apparatus, as is the habit of most of us hovering American parents. These parents sat at the edges of the sprawling playground, reading books, drinking coffee, and letting their tots explore on their own. When they had to talk to their kids, they got up and walked close enough that they could use a normal voice.

I was baffled at first, and I'd snicker with my fellow expats about the harsh disciplinary measures and lack of spirit that must explain the bizarre quiet. Yet now, nearly eight years later, I've come to see a logic behind our different cultures, and understand why Americans' reputation for being loud and boorish and the continental Europeans' reputation for being cold and standoffish exist, but are ultimately incomplete.

A root cause, it seems to me, is the very different roles that public spaces play in our lives and communities. Americans are less likely to [live in apartments](#) and generally have [bigger homes](#) and yards than [Europeans](#) do. That means American children typically play in backyards and parents enjoy quiet

and a bit of nature on their own properties. So when Americans seek out a playground, we are looking for company. Our children go to find other kids, and we parents are often also looking for conversation, rather than just an opportunity to sit peacefully under a tree. For city dwelling Europeans, the parks and playgrounds are their backyards. They go there to let their kids run around, but also to enjoy a natural setting themselves.

The differences in the use of public spaces explain behaviors outside of the playground too. Americans find it jarring when they are sitting at a European café or restaurant and someone takes the empty seat at their table. If someone is sharing our space, we assume we have to interact. Europeans presume that they and others will enjoy privacy even in close quarters. Just as American parents teach their children to look people in the eye and politely greet them, European children are taught how to interact quietly to avoid bothering people around them.

We learn these skills from a young age. My daughter's 5th grade class (at a public school in Berlin, Germany) practices what they call their "one meter" voices: students are expected to sit with a partner and engage in quiet conversation. They are supposed to be able to hear each other, but not be heard more than one meter away. This allows other conversations to take place around them, creating an expectation of privacy and personal space in a crowded room.

Americans often hear about how much more sophisticated Europe is: women nurse their babies openly, and people change their clothes in public parks or by swimming pools because they don't have our hang-ups about nudity. It may be that Europeans are just more comfortable with nudity, but this different relationship with public spaces also comes into play. In Europe, I may be in a public setting but the space around me is mine. I know that my neighbors at the playground, café, beach, or bus stop are going to do their best to ignore me

entirely and give me whatever privacy I may want or need.

At first, I mistook these customs—the failure to make eye contact or smile while passing on the street, the utter lack of chit-chat that’s the background buzz of American waiting rooms and checkout lines—as evidence of a core coldness. Yet I’ve come to see it not as a lack of friendliness or compassion, but an outgrowth of the Europeans’ respect for privacy in the public sphere.

And the good news is that—while of course I’ve heard European friends joke about the brash, guffawing Americans ruining the atmosphere of a restaurant or public garden—most of them also appreciate the upsides of Americans’ dispositions: our open faces and quick smiles, as well as our instinctive friendliness and willingness to talk and laugh with strangers. Just as I’ve come to understand their lack of smiles, they understand that Americans’ loudness isn’t intended to bother them (even if it sometimes does).

My children are still noisier than their European neighbors, and I occasionally slip and holler to my kids across the playground. But I’m trying to embrace these rituals of European public spaces, and not only because it’s good manners to respect the customs of your host country when you are a guest. I find I also enjoy the privacy and the quiet. Even at the playground.

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