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The odd couple podcast time

Emily Yoffe, aka Dear Prudence, is online weekly to chat live with readers. An edited transcript of the chat is below. (Sign up here to get Dear Prudence delivered to your inbox each week. Read Prudie's Slate columns here. Send questions to Prudence at prudence@slate.com.) Emily Yoffe: Happy Columbus Day. It's wonderful that Christopher Columbus set sail six centuries ago so that one day we could get mattresses on sale in his honor. Q. My Son Can't Keep His Hands Off Himself: I am a single mother with a 14-year-old son. I knew this time was coming but now I fear I am close to my wit's end. I have seen evidence in his bedroom, the laundry room, and the kitchen. I know this is normal, but how much is too much? Things escalated last week when his hockey coach called me in for a conference. I have noticed my son has been taking a lot of penalties this season. It turns out he has been intentionally going to the penalty box to please himself. I lashed out at him when about this and things have been awkward around the house this weekend. Am I overreacting? I know I have to talk about this with him in a calm setting, but I always find the thought of this type of discussion horrifying. I am losing sleep and I don't want to succumb to letting his father deal with this, but what should I do? A: First, watch the coming of age movie, *The Squid and the Whale*, then read Portnoy's Complaint for some background on teenage boys wanking their way through these difficult years. The evidence in the sheets and towels is normal, and I don't want to know what your son is doing to the groceries. Playing sports is tense, but what's not normal is for him to forfeit the game in order to relieve some of the pressure. It's also not normal that you are undone at the thought of having a serious talk with your boy, and that there's something so wrong with your ex (or your son's relationship with him) that the idea of a father-son talk is worse. Lashing out at a 14-year-old because he's displaying troubling symptoms does not speak well for you, Mom. You need to apologize to your son, tell him this is a very hard conversation for you two to have, but you are concerned that he is not understanding the boundaries between public and private behavior. Say you know you aren't good at talking about these things, and neither is his father, so you're going to find him someone who is. Your son should see a male therapist—he needs intervention with someone who can be a trusted, calm, helpful adult. Q. Stranger in a Strange Land: A few weeks ago I moved to a foreign country to work for the local chapter of "Wonderful Amazing Non-Profit." I worked for WANP in my hometown and thrived on the combination of challenging work, a supportive community, and a commitment to its cause. I never anticipated that many of my co-workers would bicker with and gossip about each other or that I would hear homophobic, racist, and sexist comments on a daily basis. My bosses encourage us to come to them with concerns about the job, but I'm not sure how to do that without straight up tattling. I love the city enough to stick it out for my yearlong contract, but a year sometimes feels like a long time. Do you have any advice? A: I believe you are hearing offensive comments daily, but you may be in a culture where these kinds of comments reflect the prevailing views—obnoxious though they may be. Unless people are saying things that are in direct violation of the work of your group, and since you are the new person and a short-timer, I think you should let most of this roll off you. If there are particularly egregious remarks, you could privately go to the offender's office and say you wanted to talk about something that concerned you. But keep in mind that if you do that, you'll likely get a quick reputation as the office scold. Part of what you're going to learn this year is something about the difficulty of enacting change—it is slow, full of setbacks, and unlikely to be accomplished through a stranger's lecturing. Q. Old Mom: I am a mother of three young children, and I am not a young mother. In the area I live the majority of the jobs are high tech, and most people put off childbearing until later. The hospital where I gave birth has the highest maternal age in the country. However, it is a different story when I visit my parents in my hometown. Most people I went to school with had children right out of high school, and when I run into them, which happens a lot, I am bombarded with questions, from the innocent "Are these your grandkids?" to the lecturing "Do you know the problems associated with advanced maternal age?" to the rude "Did you go get your kids from another country?" What do I say? A: How about, "Not our grandkids, they're our great-grandkids." Or, "Yes, they're from another country. My husband and I were on vacation in France, saw this bunch on the playground and took them. Please don't tell Interpol." Surely, if your hometown is that small these dodos already know you and your husband are Sarah- and Abraham-aged parents. So just don't answer the questions. Smile and say, "It's good to see you, too. Kids, we've got to go!" Q. Last Week's "Want to Go Alone": I'm the woman from last week's chat who took a promotion and transfer without telling my husband. My husband is a big fan of yours, and he correctly guessed who had written that question. He's upset, but our marriage has been shaky for so long that I think we're both relieved. I wanted to mention that I did get help and a diagnosis of post-partum depression after our daughter was born. The meds I took only numbed my dark thoughts toward the baby. Even though I continued therapy after my maternity leave finally ended, I was still unable to develop positive feelings for her. I feel that my moving will be good for us all. A: Well, that's one way to let your husband know you're out of the marriage and done with motherhood. Post-partum depression can be insidious and debilitating. It is good you got a diagnosis, but there's no magic bullet for treating serious mental illness. If you weren't making progress with your therapist, you needed to find another one. I still think you need to find one. You are taking the geographic solution for a profound problem that is now going to echo through your child's life. Before you go, you owe your family another serious go at therapy. I think you and your husband should go as a couple so that at the least the two of you can communicate about what is going on and help put a plan in place so that your daughter's pain is minimized. Q. Recycled Ring: My boyfriend and I are talking about getting married. He was bequeathed the ring of his grandmother, and told me that it will be mine one day. However, he also volunteered that he had given this same ring to another woman in the past. I appreciate the honesty about its history, I can't help but feel very uneasy about the idea of wearing another fiancée's ring. I like the sentiment of a family ring, although I feel I'd be living with the ghost of a failed relationship with that ring, and frankly it's a little embarrassing that his friends know of it as a hand-me-down. Am I overreacting about this ring, or should I tell him I want to start a new family history when the time comes? A: I'm an anti-engagement-ring person. Not that I am against someone getting a lovely rock that symbolizes a couple's commitment. I'm against all the baggage that goes with it. Such as the idea a couple can't get married until a man proffers a rock; that the rock must be of a certain size and cost so that all her friends are suitably rocked back, etc. As far as this ring being recycled is concerned, if it's a diamond, it's already recycled coal, so don't worry about that. What's more important is whether the setting is something you like or the value of the ring is due to it being vintage. One easy solution is to take the stone and update it with a new setting. If that's not an option, keep in mind that the Lord of the Rings is a fantasy and the ring doesn't actually carry any bad relationship juju. That doesn't mean you can't perform some sort of cleansing ritual when the time comes to satisfy your own superstition. And if granny had a long, happy marriage, think of that as carrying more weight than the ring briefly alighting on the finger of an ex. Q. Doggie Advice: I'm currently unemployed and working a few babysitting jobs to make some money. One of the families has a filthy house and doesn't pay me well, but I keep going back for one reason: their dog. "Chester" is the sweetest, smartest, and most lovable animal I've ever met. It kills me he's not well cared for. He doesn't get proper food, exercise, grooming, or medical care, is not houstrained, and is alone all day. I want Chester. After I finish working for this family I'm considering asking if I can have or buy him from them. They don't seem very attached to Chester, and one of the kids even implied that he doesn't want him. Would it be OK for me to suggest I take him off their hands? And if so, how do I do that without sounding offensive? A: I hope you get the little guy. You can do it without saying, "You're horrible people and your dog is suffering." Just say, "I have become so attached to Chester that I wanted to see if I could adopt him or purchase him. He and I have really bonded, and I'd love to be able to be with him full-time." Let's hope they've long wished they could dump the dog and you have turned into the proverbial "home in the country" for an unwanted pet. Q. Re: Stranger in a Strange Land: I experienced this when I took a one-year assignment in Australia. There was definitely a homophobic and racist element in that office, but then I've heard similar things and worse in a large corporate office in Houston, Texas. I didn't have the political capital to call them out there, and I didn't in Australia. I did make a point not to be unpleasant, but never lunch and laugh with them. People who talked like that may seem to be in the majority at first, but are probably the vocal minority. I had a wonderful year abroad because of the educated and kind people with whom I became close friends. A: I agree with being pleasant but not laughing at the remarks. But I don't think you have to go so far as to write off getting to know people who say things that bother you. In the U.S., I think part of the reason for the sea change in the views on gay marriage is that as people started coming out, it changed the minds of homophobes about who was gay. They started to realize gay people were their delightful colleagues and family members. You are more likely to change minds if you get to know the colleagues whose casual remarks bother you. Then if you're friends, you can more easily say, "Rupert, I'm uncomfortable when you make gay jokes." Q. Catnapping From an Animal Hoarder: My family is about to move across the country. We live down the block from an animal hoarder. The authorities have tried to intervene several times, but the hoarder always manages to obtain more cats. She lets some of them roam, and my family has become attached to an orange tabby, Carmel, who visits us often. My husband and I want to bring Carmel with us when we move. We don't think the hoarder would miss her. I'm wondering: Would we be doing moral wrong if we brought Carmel with us, and would we be setting bad examples for our young daughters? A: Take Carmel! I think it's setting a worse example for your daughters to say you could have done something to save an animal's life, but you didn't. Your neighbor is out of compliance with the law. She is mentally ill and is endangering every animal in her home. Depending on how old your girls are you can explain in an age-appropriate way the difference between stealing and rescuing this animal who shouldn't be with your neighbor in the first place. And you're right, the hoarder will never notice Carmel is gone. Q. Should Teen Girlfriend Come on Trip?: My 16-year-old son would like to invite his girlfriend on a trip with us. Is this appropriate? We would have one hotel room and the teens would sleep in one king bed and we parents would sleep in the other king bed, all in the same room. I am confident they will behave themselves; I am just trying to either work past a mental block I have as a parent about this being wrong. We do like her and she would be fun to have along and the two of them are best friends. A: The work of sociologist Amy Schalet shows that if you were all Dutch, you would be going Dutch in a different way: You'd get a suite and let the kids shut the door and have a room to themselves. I think inviting the girlfriend along sounds lovely. But you might want to see if you can configure the room a little differently than you suggest. Maybe one king, one double, and one cot (for your son). In recent years on family vacations we have used Airbnb. The beauty of this is that for less than the cost of a hotel room we can get bedrooms for everyone. (It's also fun to be in a neighborhood and make your own breakfast in a real kitchen.) So if this is a possibility for where you're going, having the kids at least start the night in separate bedrooms—away from you—could reduce a lot of the tension. Click here to read Part 2 of this week's chat. Discuss this column with Emily Yoffe on her Facebook page. Check out Dear Prudence's book recommendations in the Slate Store.

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