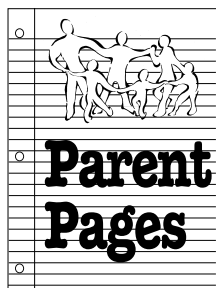


Learning Good Manners by Example



It's a familiar scene. The friend or relative gives a present to the small child. The parent, holding the young child, says "Say thank you for the gift." "Thank you," the child says, parrot-like. Cute. But is it the child really learning to express sincere gratitude? Not necessarily. Requiring children to display manners and courtesies that they are too young to understand gives the appearance of good manners, but the child may not develop the sincere concern for others that can make those manners a lifelong habit. Children learn more deeply from example and encouragement than from being told what to do.

Forcing the routine formalities of good manners onto children who don't understand the words or actions may eventually mean sacrificing a truer, slower development of the child in favor of quicker, less sincere results. Rather than encouraging meaningless mimicry, parents should teach their children manners by example.

Decide the courtesies you wish your children to display and then teach those courtesies by showing them to your child. Some parents automatically do this. When their baby hands them the pacifier, they are likely to say "thank you" when accepting it from the child. Such a child is likely to also voice "thank you" when he or she is old enough to talk.

Parents should think of themselves as role models for their children in the world of manners. In the long run, children are more likely to do what their parents do, than what their parents tell them to do. Children will imitate polite behavior their parents use, but it takes time. Learning acceptable and polite behavior is a long

process for children; it is part of the longer process of growing up.

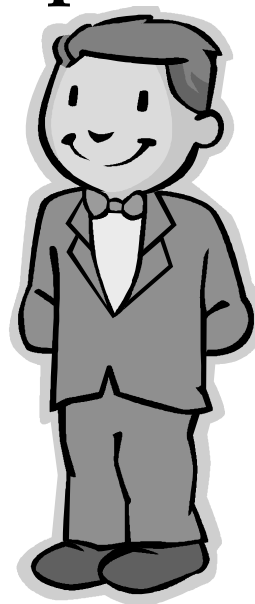
In addition to guiding their children with good example, parents should also remember to reinforce their children's good behavior with compliments. At least once a day, when the child has said 'please' or shown you some other polite consideration, hug the child and show how pleased you are with him or her. This kind of recognition makes a strong impression on children and will make them feel more positive about themselves and the behaviors they are learning.

To insure the development of sincere good manners in children, parents should be careful about how they correct bad manners and negative behavior. Children should be corrected without being ridiculed or suppressed. When a child does something upsetting, confront the child honestly with how you feel about such behavior. For example, a parent might say, "I'm unhappy that you're banging your dish on the table. That noise hurts my head. Please keep your dish on the table so I can hear what everyone is saying." Children, by their very youth and inexperience, may not be aware that making excessive noise at the table bothers other people. They may need to have such behavior pointed out to them before they can change it.

Children should also be held responsible for their behavior. If a child tips over her glass of milk, the mother may hand her a rag and say, "Please wipe up the milk. I'll help with this part over here and you do the puddle near you." Learning such responsibility is an important foundation for later good manners and concern for other people's time and feelings.

And even the best-behaved children have to be allowed time and space in which they can freely express their feelings.

Children have upsets and problems just like adults. Parents can expect their children to relapse occasionally into less desirable manners. At that point, it is important for parents to deal with the real issue at hand, which may be a problem in school or with a friend, or an illness coming on, rather than the issue of good manners.

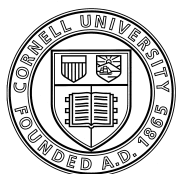


Teaching real respect and consideration for others can begin with parents' sincere concern for the child's view of the problem. Try to talk it through with the child, and when the emotion has been expressed, help the child work out ways to deal with the problem. Then the child may be able to return to his or her former good manners.

At what age should a child begin learning manners and the courtesies that should be a part of daily life? If children are learning from example, as they should, those examples should begin even when the child is still in the crib. Good manners should be a part of life, not something we put on for company, or something we expect from children but not ourselves.

Source: Suzanne West, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County

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