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Etiquette exercises: being polite takes plenty of practice, so keep kids' manners sharp with these at-home activities - Family Friendly Manners

Judy Mandell

You take the children out to a nice restaurant and suddenly they're making rude noises and playing with their food. At church they can't stay in their seats. At the toy store or playground, they push other kids out of the way. In their zeal to get to the fun stuff.

Every parent experiences that moment when their children, instead of minding their manners, appear to have misplaced them. The thing is, your kids know better. You've instructed them on good manners at home. Why, then, do they forget?

"Being polite is like any other skill or good habit. It takes practice and encouragement," says Lauri Berkenkamp, coauthor of *Teaching Your Children Good Manners*. More than that, you need to watch your own manners. Children emulate what they see, so make courtesy a priority. Take every opportunity to teach good manners by using examples from other people's rude or polite behavior as teachable moments.

Carol McD. Wallace emphasizes the importance of consistency and drill. "Call it nagging," says the author of *Elbows Off the Table, Napkin in the Lap, No Video Games During Dinner*. "You have to believe that it's worth it: to insist on good behavior, to expect it, require it, and yes, reward it." And, like any other skill, you need to help your kids practice, practice, practice. Here are some etiquette exercises you and your family can do at home.

Make an early effort. Most experts agree that saying "please" and "thank you" to toddlers will not only have a profound impact on their developing speech, but also teach them to respond automatically with the appropriate words when they are given something.

"Each time your baby gives you a bottle, a sippie cup, or a toy, say 'thank you.' He will begin to imitate you and eventually say 'thank you' on his own," says Sally Goldberg, author of *Constructive Parenting*.

Goldberg also suggests making a game of passing objects back and forth, using those magic words while encouraging the child to do the same.

Tune in to the "Manners Channel." Pay attention to the programs your children are watching, and you'll have an opportunity to improve their manners.

"TV has a tremendous impact on kids," says Steven C. Atkins, clinical associate and instructor of psychiatry at the Dartmouth Medical School in Hanover, New Hampshire. "Children are molded by what they observe and what their parents encourage, ignore, or object to."

Families should stay away from programs that portray kids with bad attitudes. "When it's unavoidable, ask your child if he has ever heard any of his friends act with the poor manners observed," says Goldberg. "Then explain how proud you are of your child's good manners." In this way, you can use negative events to reinforce your own style of manners. When a kid talks fresh to his TV morn, you can remark, "Wow, you'd never get away with that in this house."

Catch your kids doing right. Any time your children show good manners--which is at the heart of being considerate and kind--lavish praise on them. They'll remember. Besides, it's good manners on your part.

Robyn Spizman, author of *The Thank You Book*, would give her kids a high five when they did something terrific. In public, rather than embarrass them with verbal praise, she gave them a silent thumbs-up.

"We also left notes on their mirror in the morning, saying how proud of them we were for little acts of kindness and specifically spelled them out," says Spizman.

Do dress rehearsals. Next time you have an upcoming social situation, such as a wedding or large family get-together, turn it into an etiquette exercise by practicing for it. Help your kids plan for success by discussing what to expect--what they'll wear, if you'll be with them, details about the meal and table settings, if other children will be there, whether they'll be meeting new people, and what you expect from their behavior.

"Planning for big events is like prepping for the Big Game," says Berkenkamp. "Before you go somewhere you want your kids to shine, sit them down and say, 'Okay, we're going to Aunt Julie's wedding, and I expect you guys to sit through the service with no whispering and to stay in your seat for the whole twenty minutes. I know you can do it.'"

Of course, your expectations need to be age-appropriate--and achievable. After all, how many kindergartners can sit through a wedding completely silent? In that case, setting more achievable goals might be in order. Or you might give them an etiquette aid, such as a book or a bag of snacks, to help them through the situation.

For very young children, remember that their first outing to a restaurant can be a big event, and one worth rehearsing too. Try playing "restaurant" at home, which introduces children to the concepts of staying seated, speaking in a quiet voice, using utensils properly, and not throwing food on the floor.

Talk about everything. "Just have conversations, at meals or in the car," says Wallace. The more kids talk--and hear you talk--the more experience they'll gain in the manners of basic conversation.

Meals are an especially good time to encourage kids in their development of conversational skills.

"When people 'break bread' together, they experience a special closeness," says Goldberg. She advises using phrases such as "Tell me about ..." as a great opener. And "oh, I see" and "Tell me more about it" to encourage conversation. "Be careful not to start a conversation with a 'Yes' or 'No' question," advises Goldberg. "Use the words 'who,' 'what,' 'where,' 'when,' 'why,' and 'how' to help children elaborate."

Be a good role model and point out examples of good listening, not interrupting, and making eye contact. The more you do that at home, the better equipped your children will be and the less likely it is you'll experience a "manners-free" moment next time you're in public.

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