

**Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

## *The Fine Art of Saying “Hello”*

**I**N THE AWARD-WINNING 2006 movie *The Queen*, a young Tony Blair and his wife are trained to greet Queen Elizabeth. The ritual, which involves backing out of the room while continuing to gaze at her, seems surprisingly archaic and hard to manage. Seen through a child’s eyes, adult “greeting behavior” can also seem intimidating. Parents have often asked me about how to prompt their children to respond to others with more than a blank stare. It’s nice to think about ways we can help children feel at ease with greeting others.

We can probably all remember wanting to withdraw from situations when adults demanded that we “speak up” or show affection to a relative we hardly knew. Shudder! Parents today are more sensitive to their children’s discomfort, yet they wonder how to help their children respond politely. That process flows naturally with infants who smile at others with glee until they learn to discriminate faces they don’t know—an important milestone in their development. As they get older, this ability helps children heed our warnings about not talking to strangers when we or other familiar adults aren’t around.

At school we have long emphasized the benefits of positive greetings by starting the day with a warm handshake, even with our youngest students. The purpose of this routine goes far beyond instilling good manners or confidence. During morning handshake, teacher and child have the opportunity to look at each other, establishing their connection for the day and a free flow of love. Research tells us that shaking hands alerts the brain—a perfect awakening exercise to start the day. Saying hello to teachers is a predictable, nourishing routine.

Not surprisingly, young children often hide behind their parents, partly because they don’t know what an adult showering them with attention might do next. Parents are wise to shield children from unwanted hugs or pats on the head, bolstering their ability to keep a safe social distance.

Teaching children to feel confident during introductions or responding to someone saying “Hi!” begins with noticing their natural inclinations to reach out to familiar people. Saying “That was nice the way you ran to Grandma and gave her a hug” reinforces the idea that people like being welcomed.

We want children to believe that they are progressing in social skills, and reprimanding them may have the opposite effect. We can even make sticker charts to offer them incentives to show social courtesies and reflect their progress as maturing social beings. Role playing with children about how to shake hands and say hello gives them the kind of necessary practice actors use in rehearsing their lines. Pretty soon the process is automatic.

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