

**Tips for Parents** by Susie Kohl

## *The Magic of Grace and Courtesy*

**I**S THERE ANYTHING MORE HEARTWARMING than hearing a child say “please” and “thank you” or “Hello, my name is ...”? I vividly remember a situation when children’s lack of manners caused embarrassment. Years ago when I worked on the Navajo reservation, I felt privileged to attend sacred Hopi dances high on a mesa. People watching stood in respectful silence, except for some tourist children who ran among the dancers, creating their own steps and songs. These interruptions of the ceremony were viewed by the children’s parents as cute. However, the Hopis thought of the tourists who treated the situation so lightly as having bad manners. It was the ’60s and the children were trying to “do their own thing.”

It’s easy to assume that children can’t learn the same courtesies adults have, though when they are taught manners in ways that engage them, even the youngest children are eager to learn. The “magic” of teaching manners lies in breaking each of them into understandable steps, practicing those behaviors outside the situation where they will be performed, then praising children when they attempt to show those courtesies to others.

Because we live in an area where manners are less formal, we usually allow children to be themselves in social situations. However, many parents have confided feelings of chagrin when a child doesn’t respond to an adult’s greeting.

Yet chiding children who feel shy talking to an adult only makes them feel more vulnerable in the situation. As with so many social skills, the act of greeting someone can be broken into steps and tried out for fun at home. First, decide what behaviors you want your child to exhibit during a greeting, and think about the steps involved. Do you want your child to shake hands? To look in the person’s eyes? To say “How are you?” Just talking about what she “should do” won’t usually be enough.

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Practicing each step at home in a lighthearted way is like rehearsing a play. Make a game of it. When an actor has said his lines hundreds of times without an audience, he feels safe with a full house. However, your child should get applause for even trying out her new manners with someone she doesn’t know.

We can also teach manners by making up new song lyrics. For example, concentrate on one “manner” at a time and sing to the tune of “This Is the Way We Wash Our Clothes.” Sing, “This is the way we hold the door, hold the door, hold the door...” “This is the way we say ‘Excuse me,’ say ‘Excuse me,’ say ‘Excuse me...’”

The Montessori curriculum includes a whole section called “Grace and Courtesy” that focuses on teaching students to have the highest consideration and respect for others through patiently demonstrated lessons presented for students to practice. Many visitors to Maria Montessori’s classrooms in Italy would be astounded by the meticulous ways a young child would silently pull out a chair or greet visitors to the class. Look online to find Montessori lessons on teaching children everything from table manners to sitting down gracefully in a chair.

The time to teach children courtesy isn’t when they are being discourteous or upset about a situation. Adults at school or home can set aside time to teach particular manners and reward children

with specific praise. We needn't instruct children by criticizing other people's manners, but concentrating on "the way we like to be considerate in our family." In *The Secret Language of Childhood*, Dr. Lawrence E. Shapiro points out that people often have higher expectations for other people's children than their own. Whatever our perceptions are, the more thoughtful and considerate a child learns to be, the more social acceptance and self-confidence he will feel.

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