

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Managing Awkward Social Situations

IN THE AWARD-WINNING TELEVISION MINISERIES *The Queen*, a young prime minister is trained to greet Queen Elizabeth. The ritual, which involves backing out of the room while continuing to gaze at the queen, seems surprisingly archaic and hard to manage. Seen through a child's eyes, adult "greeting behavior" can also seem intimidating. Parents often ask how to get their children to respond to other adults with more than a blank stare. They don't want them to appear rude.

We can probably all remember wanting to withdraw from situations when adults demand we "speak up" or show affection to a relative we hardly knew. Shudder! Parents today are more sensitive to children's discomfort, yet they want them to learn to respond politely.

It helps to think about social situations in which we feel awkward even as adults. How would it feel to have a friend point out on the spot that we're being rude or unfriendly? Calling attention to natural feelings of tentativeness at any age only increases them. Children try to scope out interactions with adults because it's not always clear what will happen if they initiate a conversation. Will the adult ask them questions? Rub their heads? Pick them up?

We want children to believe that they are progressing in social skills, and calling them out for their lack of responsiveness can have the opposite effect. Giving them positive recognition—"That made Grandma so happy when you gave her a big hug"—reinforces their confidence in initiating contact.

Role playing with children about saying hello or responding in polite ways supports their ability to feel safe in social situations, like an actor practicing his lines. Focusing on their positive energy or smile rather than what they should say also helps them feel less uncomfortably self-aware. We want them to realize that it's their good cheer, not the exact verbiage, that sends out little bursts of light into people's lives.

October 16, 2019

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