

Teaching Politeness

Politeness is both a character trait and a social skill. Your preschooler learns politeness by identifying with and imitating you. Good manners are an important key to your child's social success, but no child is born with good manners. Teaching a child what behavior is expected is a daily process, and you'll have many opportunities each day to nudge your child in the right direction.

Teach, don't reprimand.

It's easy to assume that your child is purposely using bad manners. But your preschooler might just need a lesson or two. Be specific when you teach your child, and remember that many follow-up lessons will be necessary. Instead of saying, "Don't be so rude!" respond this way, "It's impolite to belch at the table, but if you do, it's proper to say 'excuse me'."

Rephrase.

When your child states feelings in a less-than-polite way, you can rephrase what is said in a way you find acceptable. So if your preschooler says, "Yuck! I hate this green stuff!" You can politely say, "I prefer if you say, 'I don't care for spinach'."

Tell what you DO want.

When your child is displaying bad manners avoid nagging about the problem. Instead of "Don't yell in the house!" teach what you DO want, "Please use a quiet voice."

Accept mistakes.

When kids are young they will spill and drop. It takes time to acquire the motor skills necessary to be neat and tidy. Children will make social blunders. It takes maturity to learn how to act in social situations.



Accept age-appropriate mistakes for what they are: simple childishness.

Correct privately.

As annoying as your child's lack of manners may be, resist the urge to reprimand him in front of other people. Making a scene as you attempt to teach your child proper manners, is, well, bad manners!

Prepare in advance.

Whether you are planning a visit to a friend's home, a night out at the movies or dinner at a restaurant, take time before you go to coach your child on the behavior you expect. Review the "rules" of good manners and you'll more likely experience a pleasant time.

Expect good manners.

When you know your child has learned the proper way to behave it's important to expect those good manners. For example, if you've reminded your five-year-old to say 'please' and 'thank-you' since the age of two, you should expect your child to comply. Require good manners every day. Remind gently.

Politeness must be taught politely.

When a child forgets to say "thank you," avoid pointing it out in front of other people, which is impolite, to say the least.

For example: A four-year-old has just been handed a wrapped gift. Full of curiosity, the child squeezes the box to find out what is in it.

Mother: *Stop it! You are spoiling the gift!*

What do you say when you get a present?

Child (angrily): *Thank you!*

Mother: *That's better.*

Mother could have taught this bit of politeness less rudely and more effectively. She could have said, "Thank you, Aunt Patricia, for the gift." The child might have followed with a thank-you. If the child failed to do so, mother could have dealt with social amenities later when they were by themselves. She could have said, "It was considerate of Aunt Patricia to think of you and get you a gift. Let's write her a thank-you note." This approach supports learning how to appropriately respond to a gift.

When children interrupt adult conversation, adults usually react angrily: "Don't be rude. It is impolite to interrupt." However, interrupting the interrupter is also impolite. Avoid being rude in the process of enforcing child politeness. It might be better to state, "I would like to finish telling my story."

No good purpose is served by telling children that they are rude. It does not steer them into politeness. The danger is that children will accept our evaluation and made it part of their self-image. Once they think of themselves as rude, they will continue to live up to this image.

Model politeness.

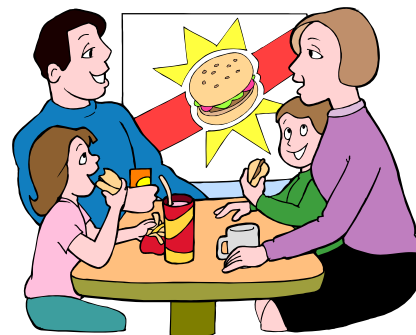
Because modeling good manners is essential, pay close attention to your own behavior. Do you encourage your child to play kindly with others? Do you and your spouse interact with respect, and do all family members get to talk and share attention? A child with poor or aggressive manners may be publicly playing the family's most negative behavior. If that's true, your child's actions probably won't change until your family's interactions change, starting with you. If, however, the adults in the family are courteous and your child is not, it's probably a question of time and maturity. Just try to stay patient and firm about your wishes.

As you work on interpersonal manners like politeness and sharing, you can also focus occasionally on table manners and public behavior. Practice with your child at home first by playing tea party or by setting the table and pretending that Big Bird is coming for dinner. It's fun, and the manners your child learns in a role-play helps your preschooler feel comfortable.

That's a crucial reason to teach manners. When your preschooler can say "please" and "thank you," shake hands, use a fork, and share a toy, it adds to your child's self-confidence. A comfortable code of manners can also help your child navigate the trickier grade-school social scene just around the corner.

Humor is a tool for teaching and discussing politeness.

In her article, "A Mouthful of Peas," Lisa Cohn suggests using humor to teach manners. In the "Bad Manners Game," the family participates in showing each other what NOT to do at the table--talk with your mouth full of food, speak out of turn, stand on your chair, burp loudly at the table, use bad words, etc. The whole family laughs and talks about the bad manners. The whole point of the Bad Manners Game is to learn when it's OK to break the rules and when it's not OK. Explain to your preschooler that it's OK to break the rules if you're all at home being silly playing the Bad Manners Game. But when Gramma comes to visit or if you're eating at a restaurant, ask your preschooler, "What do we do then?"



Sources:

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