

## Remembering Pleases and Thank You's

Waiting in line at the grocery store on an early Saturday morning I observed two small girls, perhaps 2 and five years old, begging their father for some candy. He responded with a clear and concise, "No" following each of their repeated pleas. However, as the tag-team effort escalated, the exasperated father finally gave in. "Oh, all right," he sighed, grabbing the candy from the girls' hands and tossing it onto the conveyor belt. There hadn't been a please or thank you in sight, yet the children's demands were rewarded all the same.

Was this scene representative of the type of manners our children are learning today? "I feel basic niceties are not being taught in the home (these days)." says Karen Parks, third grade teacher at Totem Falls Elementary school in Snohomish, Washington. Parks, currently in her twenty fifth year of teaching elementary school, has witnessed a gradual decline in the expectations parents have of their children when it comes to social graces. Observing the child rearing styles of today's young parents, Parks has noticed a greater emphasis in self esteem boosting that often comes at the expense of instilling basic manners such as saying please and thank you. A routine part of her work as a teacher includes frequently reminding her students to be respectful of their peers and the greater school community around them.

"By age three or four, children should be able to say 'excuse me', 'please', and 'thank you' or at least be a *courteous* interrupter." says Shannon Johns, Director of Bozeman's Centennial Park Childhood Learning Center and mother of 6-year-old Ryan. One of the best ways to teach manners, suggests Johns, is to sit at the table with children during mealtimes. "It's a good opportunity to model language and table manners." adds Johns, who spends each lunch hour hunched down into a toddler-sized chair, encouraging her students to *politely* request more food, ask to be excused, and clear their dishes from the table. For children who do not have basic manners expected of them in the home setting, "...it's a re-learning process over and over again" says Johns. But she does see progress in her students' behavior with the consistency she and the other teachers and volunteers at Centennial Park provide. When her efforts are mirrored in a child's home environment, that's when she recognizes the greatest degree of improvement. "Parents are the first teacher in the child's life. (Children) learn through modeling."

Ceci Goodman, mother of four children ranging in ages from five to thirteen, says she began instilling good manners in her children from the time they began speaking. Even during their infant and toddler years, Goodman initiated the concept of using good manners by teaching her children sign language for 'please', 'more' and 'thank you'. "...it was to encourage civil language from the very beginning," she recalls.

Goodman can't say enough about the importance of consistency in teaching children how to engage with others in a polite, respectful way. "It has sometimes felt like a long, suffering process to make it stick," she laughs. But she also believes in making her and her husband John's expectations clear to their children. Reflecting on her own southern upbringing, she recalls that children as young as two were instructed to address adults as 'sir' or 'ma'am'. "It's just expected from the time children are literally capable of saying the words."

We certainly can't assume our children know how and when to use manners if we haven't made it extremely clear to them. 'It's easiest to start with emphasizing the type of manners that are expected within the family home,' says Marty Sanders, marriage and family therapist who also taught children ages preschool through third grade prior to entering the field of counseling. Like Johns, she too values family meal time as an opportunity for parents to model polite behavior for their children.

Beyond the examples of manners children witness from their parents and peers, the media also plays a significant role in how kids learn to behave in the world around them. "Shows like *The Simpson's* and *South Park* have had a huge impact." states Karen Parks, when considering the behavior of her elementary school students. Don't think those shows have any impact on your two or three year old? How about when his older sibling, or the next door neighbor's child repeats words or behaviors gleaned from the television, radio or movies? "In movies and on television, rudeness is often portrayed as being funny or cute." Parks adds. While older children may have a greater sense of whether or not the rudeness they may be mimicking is acceptable, a younger sibling who looks up to her older brother or sister may not. For this reason, including older kids in the modeling of basic manners for younger children can have a significant impact.

When children are learning about good manners, they also must be taught how and when to apologize for a wrong doing. "Don't force them to apologize immediately," cautions Sanders, "the child might not *actually* feel sorry for what he did." Instead, she suggests allowing the child some time to reflect on the situation and then suggesting he apologize when he is more likely to really mean it.

From an early age, children begin to recognize a lack of manners in their own peers. It doesn't take long for a child who shares poorly, hits frequently, or refuses to apologize when she ought to, to be ostracized from classmates and friends. "By the age of three, kids begin to recognize other kids as good or poor friends." suggests Johns, based on her observations of the preschoolers with whom she works.

So how can you effectively model good manners for your young children? Here are a few ideas to try:

- When out in the community: frequently use the terms, "excuse me", 'please' and 'thank you' when interacting with grocery store clerks, waiters, bank tellers and other strangers with whom you interact on a daily basis. Open doors for others and respect other people's personal space.
- At home: rather than preparing plates in the kitchen and bringing them to the table, set your family's meal in the center of the table and encourage your kids to (politely!) ask for food to be passed to them. Encourage polite conversation during the course of a meal. Encourage your children to thank and compliment the cook for the meal prepared for them.
- Anytime: teach children the basic components of a polite conversation: taking turns to share ideas and ask questions, *listening to* and *taking interest in* the other person.

We all want our children to be successful when they venture out into the world around them. As they develop friendships and increasingly take part in their surrounding community, displaying the social graces that are expected of them will improve that level of success.

For some fun ways to introduce polite words and concepts to your child, check out:

*Manners Can Be Fun* – Munro Leaf, Universe Publishing

*Time to Say Please!*” – Mo Willems, Hyperion Books