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MANNERS 101

CHARM SCHOOL



How to lay the groundwork for good manners from the get-go

My son Fletcher was 20 months old when he officially “got” the concept of trick-or-treating. Dressed as a penguin, he marched up to doors and grabbed as many treats as his pudgy fists could hold. Then, with nary a backward glance, he’d bolt down the sidewalk, ready to loot the next house.

“How adorable,” indulgent neighbors would say. But Fletcher’s grab-n’-go ‘tude became embarrassing. “For next Halloween,” I told my husband, “we’re teaching him to say thank you.”

Good manners: you don’t think much about them till you bump into someone who doesn’t have them. Then words like “Jerk!” and “Brat!” and other expletives you probably don’t want people associating with your child come to mind. Which is why manners rank up there with other important life skills, such as eating neatly, that kids need to learn. “There’s no gene for good manners,” says Lyudmila Bloch, coauthor of *The Golden Rules of Etiquette at The Plaza*. “Until they’re taught, children don’t know the concept.”

If you consider that well-mannered children come from well-mannered homes, you can lay the groundwork right out of the maternity ward. “Be the kind of person you want

your child to be, talk to others with respect, and develop a climate of respect and consideration in the home,” counsels Cindy Post Senning, a director of the Emily Post Institute. “Babies absorb that.”

Still, even if you’re Emily Post herself, your child is bound to do something at some point that will make you want to sink into the floor and cover the spot with deep-pile carpeting. The silver lining is that, provided you can swallow your own mortification, even the most embarrassing faux pas can become a teachable moment. Here’s how you can turn five wince-worthy situations into lessons about what is—and isn’t—socially acceptable.



➔ **Where are your manners?**

Kids don’t have an inner filter to stop them from blurting out everything that pops into their head. They’re

“Gosh, that man is really fat!”

curious about what makes other people different, and although their running commentary is innocent, your child will eventually say something that makes you squirm. Sonia Howman, of Tampa, recalls one such moment in the checkout line, when one of her twin



Kids have no filter. They speak their mind.

girls, then 3, announced, “Mommy, if that man didn’t buy so many groceries, he wouldn’t be so fat.” “Everyone was cracking up, except the guy in front of us,” she recalls. Fortunately, Howman was quick on her feet. “I said, ‘Honey, people come in all shapes and sizes, and everyone is beautiful in their own way.’ The guy still gave me the complete stink.”

★ **IN POLITE COMPANY** ★ Although most people will understand that a 2- or 3-year-old isn’t being mean, seize this moment to teach your child that we don’t always say what we’re thinking. “Help her understand why some remarks can be hurtful,” Post Senning encourages. “You can say, ‘Even though you don’t mean it in a bad way, it’s like name-calling, so we don’t make comments like that.’”

GAFFE No. 2

“Come out and say hello.”

➔ **Where are your manners?** You want to introduce your child to a friend. But when you do, she immediately dives behind your legs.

We want children to be wary of strangers. But we also want them to be comfortable greeting people when we say it’s okay. How easily your child grasps this skill has a lot to do with age and temperament, Post Senning says. Some kids are so outgoing, they could work a rope line at age 3 like a seasoned politician; others might plant themselves behind your knee until they’re 6.

★ **IN POLITE COMPANY** ★ To help your child get more comfortable with shaking hands and introducing herself, pretend with her favorite doll, Bloch suggests. Encourage her to practice with family and then with other people she knows, like her babysitter. “Practice in play, and chances are your child will be more comfortable when the situation actually comes up,” says Cathleen Hanson, director of the International School of Protocol, in Hunt Valley, Maryland.

GAFFE No. 3

“Say bye to your friend.”

➔ **Where are your manners?** At the end of a playdate, part of the ritual is seeing a friend to the door and thanking him for coming over to play. (Or if your child is the guest, he should say, “Thank you for having me.”)

Because we share a nanny with another family, Fletcher, now 3, has a playdate with his pal Ramsey every afternoon. So I’ve seen how tricky it can be to get a child to stop what he’s doing to bid his guest farewell. Inevitably, when Ramsey’s father picks him up at night, Fletcher is glued to the TV. “Bye,” he’d call from the couch, without looking away from the screen.

★ **IN POLITE COMPANY** ★ Post Senning suggests you take your child by the hand and walk with him to the door to see his friend off. “It gives them practice at interrupting what they’re doing and putting their guest first,” she says. And that’s exactly what we did. It took some reminders and many trips to the door on my part, but now when it’s time for Ramsey (or any guest) to go home, Fletcher hops off the couch, walks his friend to the door, and sends him on his way with a hug. “It becomes a habit,” says Post Senning. “But like any other habit, it takes practice, practice, practice.”

GAFFE No. 4

“Aw! Why’d you get me that?”

➔ **Where are your manners?** Toddlers are wowed by anything that’s in a wrapped package and tied with a colorful bow. In fact, toddlers are generally more interested in the box than in the actual gift itself. But as children mature, they might remember that they already have that Thomas the Tank Engine set or that Pixar DVD and might not be shy about voicing their disappointment. So when you’re giving a birthday party for your child, have a talk before the guests arrive to explain the art of accepting gifts graciously.

WHAT DO WE SAY?

The secret to getting these magic words into heavy rotation in your child's vocabulary? Repetition, repetition, repetition.

✓ Please & thank you

As soon as your toddler's old enough to ask for a cookie, start prompting her to say "please" to get it and "thank you" after you give it to her. You can probably count on prompting her with "What's the magic word?" or "Now what do we say?" until it's almost a reflex.

✓ Excuse me & I'm

sorry Children need a little more emotional maturity before they'll fully grasp the sentiment behind these two phrases. Although you can drill and drill "Say you're sorry when you hit your friend," they'll only really begin to understand and mean it when they learn, around age 3, that their words or actions can hurt another person.

"Drill it in that even if your child gets something they have or don't like, they still need to say thank you," Hanson counsels.

★ **IN POLITE COMPANY** ★ You can help your child get the hang of saying thanks by making a game out of opening "presents" filled with boring things like socks. Of course, even if he loves the present, there's still one more step in the process: the handwritten thank-you note, still considered the gold standard of appreciation, even in the email age. As soon as a child can wield a crayon, he can help with thank-you notes, Post Senning says. Give your toddler a light-colored crayon and have him draw over your "thank you" or doodle a bit at the bottom. As your child learns the alphabet, you can have him sign at the bottom of the note with the first letter of his name or his full name if he's able.

GAFFE No. 5

"Please, don't interrupt!"

➔ Where are your manners?

Sure enough, you answer the phone and your toddler is at your elbow, demanding, "I say hi!" even if it's a telemarketer on the other end. Although there may be some justice in forcing phone marketers to listen to a toddler babble before they start their own spiel, you do want to teach that it's rude to interrupt when you're talking to someone else, whether you're on the phone or in person. Explain that real emergencies—someone's bleeding

or the house is on fire—are an exception. This is particularly important in the age of home-based businesses. Recently Bess Godin, of Doylestown, Pennsylvania, was on a conference call in her home office while her 4-year-old son, Quinn, watched a movie in the living room. "After a few minutes, he wanders into my office and stares in fascination as a woman's voice comes out of the speaker on my cell phone," says Bess. "He must have thought it was one of my sisters because he suddenly announced, 'I love you! I'm hungry!'" to the marketing executive on the other end. Thankfully, she thought it was a hoot."

★ **IN POLITE COMPANY** ★ Give young children a heads-up before getting on the phone so they can have your full attention before you make your call, suggests Barbara Gilmour, creative director of Tanner's Manners, in Ocean City, New Jersey. "If they start with 'Mommy! Mommy!' just look at them and hold your finger up to say 'Wait,'" says Gilmour. "Toddlers hate to wait, but they can learn that when you're talking, the finger means 'Wait.'" The key is not to halt your own conversation if you can avoid it. "You don't want your child to know that if they whine long enough, they can get you to stop talking."

Even when you think your kids have good etiquette, you'll still probably have to remind them to mind their manners well into the school-age years. Being polite is a constant work in progress. [aB](#)

A shy child needs practice meeting new people.

