

**Teaching and Displaying Manners:
Just an Old-Fashioned Custom?
Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

At the conclusion of an evening presentation I gave for parents about "raising resilient children," I invited the audience to ask questions. The questions posed were very relevant to the topic I had addressed and ones that I am accustomed to hearing. They included:

"What do I do about sibling rivalry?"

"I have three children each with different kinds of temperament. How do I meet their unique needs, including having appropriate expectations for them, without each of them feeling I am not being fair?"

"My husband and I have very different discipline styles. He feels I don't set limits on our children and I let them get away with doing anything they want. I feel he's too strict. How do we resolve that problem?"

"How do I get my daughter to do her homework?"

"My kids never help out at home. They expect me to pick up their dirty clothes. What can I do so that they will be more cooperative?"

"My eight-year-old son is shy. He told me that sometimes he felt lonely. I keep telling him he has to make an effort to make friends, but he says he just doesn't care. I'm at a loss to know what to say."

It is not unusual after a Q&A period with the entire audience for parents to come up to speak with me privately. Understandably, some are hesitant to share concerns they have about their children in the presence of neighbors. Others have said to me that they tend to be shy and don't like to speak in public. Still others begin with the statement, "I didn't want to bring this up in front of other people because it might sound silly." In my experience these "silly" questions are not silly at all and are actually on the minds of most parents. Such was the case at a presentation I offered last year. A couple approached me. Since they were the last people on line I had a little more time to speak with them.

They told me that they were parents of a four-year-old daughter and a six-year-old son. The mother spoke first.

"This might seem like a silly question, but since you spoke about teaching kids to be respectful, do you think it's okay to expect a four-year-old to say words like 'please' and 'thank you'?"

I replied, "I certainly think it's okay." Then I smiled and said with some levity, "Without wishing to sound too much like a psychologist, I'm curious why you're asking."

The mother said once again, "I hope this doesn't sound silly, but we've noticed that some of our friends don't seem to ask their children to use polite words like 'please' or 'thank you' or 'excuse me.' As a matter of fact, one of the reasons I'm asking is the other day a friend was over with her five-year-old daughter. When my daughter asked for a glass of juice she didn't use the word 'please.' I said to my daughter in a nice way, 'How do we ask?' My daughter said, 'Mommy, can I have a glass of juice, please.' When our daughters were both out of the room, my friend said something that surprised me."

I asked, "What's that?"

"She said that she didn't insist her daughter say 'please' or 'thank you' since young kids really don't understand what that means."

I wondered, "What do you think?"

The father said, "My wife and I discussed it and we both think that it's important for kids to be polite and respectful. But we wondered if we're being overbearing when we remind our kids to say these words. We're also wondering if our kids are just saying those words out of rote and don't understand what the words really mean. Also, we notice that a number of our friends' children rarely say 'please' or 'thank you' or similar words."

I responded, "You've brought up some good questions. There are several things I want to say, but I have a question first. You used the word 'overbearing.' I wasn't certain what you meant by that. Have your kids said or done something after you remind them to say 'please' or 'thank you' that makes you feel you've been overbearing?"

The mother responded, "Not really, but we find that we have to remind them from time to time. After my friend said that young kids don't understand what these words mean it got us to thinking that perhaps we shouldn't insist they use these words."

"From your description, it doesn't sound like you're being overbearing," I replied. "All kids have to be reminded from time to time to use words that have to do with being

polite and respectful. I think we can begin to teach them these words at an early age, certainly by the time most kids are three. However, when we do teach them these words we should explain what the words mean and why it's important to use them. This will lessen the likelihood that our kids just use them in a rote way without appreciating their significance. I think that we can explain even to young children that these words are a way of being nice to other people and that when the words are used, other people will be nicer and more responsive to them."

I added, "I wouldn't be worried if at first kids use the words in a rote way. Our responsibility as parents is to explain important ideas so that our children learn to appreciate the relevance of these ideas."

Both parents thanked me, saying my comments validated their own beliefs as parents.

As I drove home that night I was pleased that this mother and father found my remarks validating, but I also found it interesting that a parental responsibility as basic as nurturing in young children their social and emotional intelligence and reinforcing their ability to act with respect and kindness aroused doubts. I thought of my delight in observing my son Rich and his wife Cybele skillfully beginning to teach my granddaughter Maya the importance of being polite when she was about three-years-old. I am certain they will do the same with their younger daughter Sophia.

Other thoughts crossed my mind that had a different flavor, thoughts of young adults who received copies of my books as gifts and never conveyed a thank you via phone, card, or e-mail. I may be old-fashioned, but I believe that when someone receives a gift, a brief acknowledgement of appreciation is in order. In one instance, I had given a book to a friend whose son was doing graduate studies in the field of child development. The son was living out-of-town and my friend was going to see him. Several months later I still had not received a note from her son. When I asked my friend if he had received the book, she said yes and wondered why I had asked. I mentioned that I had not heard from him. Most likely she was embarrassed and offered as an excuse that he had been busy with his studies. Interestingly, I gave her and her husband a copy of the same book at the same time I gave her one for her son and she wrote me a lovely thank you note within a couple of days. I have yet to receive a note from her son.

I was reminded last week of the topic of "social graces" when I read an article by Barbara Meltz in *The Boston Globe*. The article described a practice at the Tobin School in Natick, a suburb of Boston, attended by children pre-kindergarten through second grade. As part of the "curriculum" the school teaches four-year-olds to say hello to their classmates using their names and avoiding any putdowns.

Meltz writes, "The lesson in greetings, all seven or so minutes of it, is part of an etiquette curriculum written by head of school Michelle Keating. It's not that she's a throwback to the '60s or wants to turn out robotic children. Rather, she sees manners as fundamental to character development, a way for even very young children to connect with others in positive, respectful ways, and as an antidote to an increasingly rude popular culture."

Meltz notes that Jill Rigby, author of *Raising Respectful Children in a Disrespectful World*, supports the kind of program offered at The Tobin School. Rigby, commenting on children using each other's name, observes, "Even four-year-olds get that there is an inherent need to have people call us by our name." Meltz writes, "Simply knowing each other's names gives children a new response. That not only reduces bullying but also helps children internalize behaviors that make for a more respectful society."

Dr. Ron Taffel, a New York City psychologist and friend who has written several books about parenting, views manners as the building blocks of empathy, "an enlightened attempt to familiarize kids with their impact on each other. It's part of the human condition to feel better about oneself if you treat others empathetically and are treated back in kind. That's true even for young children."

My colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein and I are just completing a book about raising self-disciplined children. It outlines effective forms of discipline that nurture resilience and respect rather than contempt, resentment, and anger. We emphasize that discipline should always be seen as a teaching process. When we teach manners, we have the opportunity to nurture such important qualities as empathy, caring, respect, and self-discipline -- all qualities that Daniel Goleman includes under the concept of emotional intelligence.

As parents we must model the behaviors we are trying to teach. If parents yell at each other or at their children, if they regularly use obscene language, if they tell racial, ethnic, or religious jokes, if they talk about others in a demeaning way, then it is difficult

for children to learn social skills and respect. Children learn far more from our actions than from what we preach.

In addition, as noted in the conversation I had with the parents at my presentation, we must help our children to understand why we should use words like "please" and "thank you" and refrain from uttering words that are hurtful. Conveying this kind of understanding is a process that is not learned in one lesson, but it can begin at an early age.

For some, the word "manners" conjures up images of children sitting with their hands folded rigidly in front of them and overly strict parents adhering to the belief that "children should be seen and not heard." Obviously, this is not the way that Ron Taffel, myself, or many others perceive manners. Rather, the word suggests a way of behaving that is characterized by empathy, caring, and respect for oneself and others. It is as important for children to learn these skills as it is for them to master skills associated with academic achievements.

One last observation. It can be fun to teach children to be respectful, even if they do not totally comprehend our lesson plan at the time. My two and 1/2 year-old grandson Teddy was visiting a few days ago. He saw the swivel chair in my study, took my hand, and gleefully said, "Play, Bob" (he has yet to master the word "grandpa"). He climbed on my chair and I knew that he wanted me to spin him around. I playfully said, "Play, please." I spun him around much to his and my delight. It is amazing the activities that delight a young child (or his grandfather).

An hour later Teddy took my hand again, brought me back into the study, and said, "Play, please." I smiled and replied, "Thanks for asking." I am certain Teddy doesn't know the meaning of "please" or "thanks" at this point, but these words have now been introduced and will be reinforced on many occasions in the future by his parents Doug and Suzanne and others. I believe that my grandchildren and all children can discover the satisfaction that derives from relationships in which politeness and respect shine.