

Teaching Children Good Manners

Young children do not automatically use manners. Like apologizing and sharing, learning to use manners is part of a child's social development and is best learned through modeling and coaching, not by force. Young children are very egocentric, meaning they automatically see things from their own perspective and find it difficult to see the world from another's point of view. Because young children have a natural desire to emulate the adults who care for them, these children easily adapt to new habits when they experience good modeling and witness firsthand examples.

Teaching children about manners requires actively taking opportunities to point out good examples on television, in public, or situations created by the caregiver. I remember being with my son at the mall and noticing a man being very kind to his female companion. I stopped my son, got down to his eye level, and discretely pointed out the man's kind behavior. My son acknowledged what he witnessed and we went on with our shopping trip. These teachable moments of proactive parenting carry more weight than any lecturing or scolding.

Your own behavior will teach your child a great deal, so avoid ordering them to "say they're sorry" or getting angry and punishing them when they don't share or say thank you. Be patient as they learn, and acknowledge with excitement when you see your child demonstrate desirable behaviors. I noticed a great example modeling respectful behavior when I was at the playground with my grandchildren. Two small children were being mean to another child – calling him names and intentionally making him feel inadequate. Instead of stepping into the situation and admonishing her children in front of the other child, the mother calmly knelt down to the children's eye level. She told the other child that she was sorry that the kids were being mean to him. She then announced that her children's playtime was over for the day and they could come back and play another day. As she walked away, she calmly told her children that she was disappointed in the way they treated the little boy. She also asked them how they might have felt if someone was treating them the way they treated the other little boy.

Here is a recap on the most important concepts for teaching children manners:

1. Avoid demanding, lecturing, or punishing a child into using manners
2. Regularly demonstrate kind behavior
3. To create teachable moments, bring attention to examples around your child
4. Make a big deal when you see them using manners
5. If you see them being unkind, apologize to the victim and end any play or activities
6. Let your child know that you are disappointed in unkind behaviors; do it calmly, at their eye level, and then let it go

The steps described above can be used for older children as well, except for situations when you see manners demonstrated appropriately. Because not all older children react well to praise or encouragement, it is best to suppress your pleasure and simply offer a low-key "nice job" or thank you to reinforce the positive behavior.

If you have older children who occasionally or suddenly demonstrate poor manners, they may be doing it to “try on” new behaviors as they continue to experiment with their changing and maturing identity. When this occurs, speak to them privately to share your disappointment in the rude behavior and calmly remind them of the behavior that is more appropriate. Avoid drama and keep the coaching moment brief. If you handle the situation this way, they will feel respected and will be more inclined to drop the rude behavior.

Another reason for the sudden change in their behavior could be the need to express anger or revenge for something that occurred earlier. A feeling of being overpowered, not valued, or hurt could cause them to act rudely on purpose. If children know that good manners are important to you, they may be trying to get you to take notice. If this is the case, see if you can determine what may have occurred that would cause them to act out this way. Reconnect with them privately and check in with them to determine if some relationship damage control is necessary.

Whether it's using good manners, following rules, or just cooperating, your child's behavior is communication and offers valuable clues about how they are feeling. Often defiance or a lack of cooperation is an indication that the child feels she has lost her place in the family. Child psychologist Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs wrote in his book, *The Challenge of Parenthood* (1948; Duell, Sloan, Pearce Publishing), "Obstinate children use their behavior as a means of provoking people to fight them. And most parents fall neatly into the trap. Stubbornness is one of the many devices by which children who feel abused or neglected try to attract attention and to demonstrate their strength." If this is the case with your child, go back to developing a relationship before demanding they use manners. They will never willingly be courteous and kind while they are feeling less than respected themselves. Remember, rules without relationship result in rebellion.

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