



by Karen Stephens

Everyday Ways to Teach Children Manners & Social Skills

Being mannerly is a social skill parents help children master — it's an important one. The knack of cordially getting along with others opens doors of opportunity, which stay closed to kids who act inconsiderate or in offensive ways.

Mannerly kids are preferred playmates; and they're more often invited to homes of friends, relatives, and neighbors. Children need a caring community of people to build self esteem and a sense of belonging.

At the heart of children's social relationships is their ability to maintain self-respect, while at the same time extending respect to others. It's fundamental. Only when respect is demonstrated through acts does it make a difference.

Teaching manners gives children a way to put respect into action. These manners must be sincere, heartfelt, and well-intentioned. Authentic respect involves far more than superficial words that children hurriedly spout off to appease an adult's upraised eyebrow.

An insincere, unfeeling "please" or "thank you" or "I'm sorry" rings hollow. Commanding children to apologize on cue teaches unthinking compliance and hypocrisy, not true respect. Even if children use the "magic word," the word is only magic when it's authentic and sincerely felt. Honest manners and genuine acts of respect build integrity and more easily reach another person's heart.

To develop respect for others, children must learn to consider and value others' viewpoints as well as their own. Being able to take another's perspective is a skill children gradually acquire. As brain development progresses, and children gain social experience through play and daily routines, they develop a remarkable capacity to consider other peoples' needs, wants, and desires.

We best teach manners by our own consistent example. Only if we practice what we preach can we be credible role models. Here's a revealing example:

I was running errands with a four year old I'll call Veronica. I quickly noticed shopkeepers greeted Veronica by name. At each stop, she ended up in a friendly conversation. Her comfort with these people, and their pleasure in chatting with her, was unmistakable.

As we progressed, a pattern emerged. A shopkeeper looked up and said "hello." Veronica returned the look and brightly responded, "Hi, How ya doin'?" in an engaging, neighborly lilt that was hard to resist.

Veronica had learned how to exchange greetings. And she learned to be thoughtful and courteous by asking about others' welfare. Her openness invited shopkeepers' interest, and thus friendships bloomed. As a result, Veronica felt safe and accepted. She came to trust that adults liked her and had her best interests at heart — a luxury for kids these days.

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How did this four year old develop such polite social skills? A few days later I ran into her grandmother downtown. We both walked into the same store. As we entered, the first thing grandma did was call out to the shopkeeper, "Hi, How ya doin'?" She had the exact neighborly inflection as Veronica.

Yes, a socially skilled elder had shown the mannerly way by example. This helped Veronica participate more fully in her community. And yes, her good manners were commented upon. Respectful behavior is rarely taken for granted, especially in children.

There are many other ways to nurture kids' manners. When you invite children over to play with your child, provide enough toys to share easily; too few fuels conflict. If tug-of-wars do erupt, be on hand to help children problem solve. That may mean breaking a crayon in half to share or finding a new way to play the same game. Of course, it's normal for children to have spats from time to time. After the tense feelings subside, help children think of ways to make amends. Perhaps that is saying they are sorry, but not always. Actions can speak louder than words. Sometimes amends can be made by drawing a friend a picture, or giving them a flower — or even a hug. And if a toy has been broken, repairing or replacing the toy is a very mannerly, responsible gesture.

Reinforcement and encouragement are valuable teaching tools.

Whenever children are helped by someone, coach them in politeness. Remind them that people feel appreciated when thanked, whether with gestures or gifts. Social graces also take root when children send thank you pictures and cards to those who have been kind to them.

Teach children to respect neighbors' property. If a child wants an apple from the tree next door, require them to ask for permission. Before they cut through a neighbor's yard, have them ask if it's okay.

Home celebrations for relatives or friends provide teachable moments for manners, too. Children can easily learn to be gracious hosts. Explain that people feel welcomed when we make preparations ahead of time for them. What kinds of preparations would the kids like to make? Help children anticipate their guests' needs. For instance, who should greet guests? How will guests know where to put their coats? What kind of food or games might their guests like?

The routine of meals together around a table provides many opportunities for kids to practice social graces. Create a meal-time atmosphere that allows conversation. It strengthens family relationships and develops manners children will put to good use when dining at a restaurant or friend's house.

Of course, teaching basic table manners is an ongoing experience at meals. Calmly remind kids you'll listen when they don't have food in their mouths. If your child points and grunts at food, matter-of-factly say, "Please tell me what you'd like and I'll pass it." If a child demands peas by yelling, candidly reply you're more eager to help when asked to pass food in a courteous voice.

Reinforcement and encouragement are valuable teaching tools. When a child is mannerly, comment on the specific behavior you want to encourage. When your child gives a helping hand, compliment their cooperation: "How courteous of you to hold the door open when I bring in groceries. Thanks, hon."

When children help with household chores, such as fixing supper, acknowledge their contribution. Express your appreciation when your child waits patiently after you've asked them not to interrupt a conversation.

Through these everyday experiences, children will gradually learn respectful manners — and many other wonderful traits will surface as well such as: kindness, helpfulness, patience, cooperation, thoughtfulness, politeness, consideration, honesty, altruism, graciousness, compassion, empathy, and gentleness. Together they'll combine to give your child the skills necessary to participate more easily in family life and the life of the larger community.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.