

Teaching Children Civility...Treating Others with Care and Consideration

By Amy Houts

"Could I please have one of your cookies?"
"May I have a turn on the swing?"
"Thank you!"

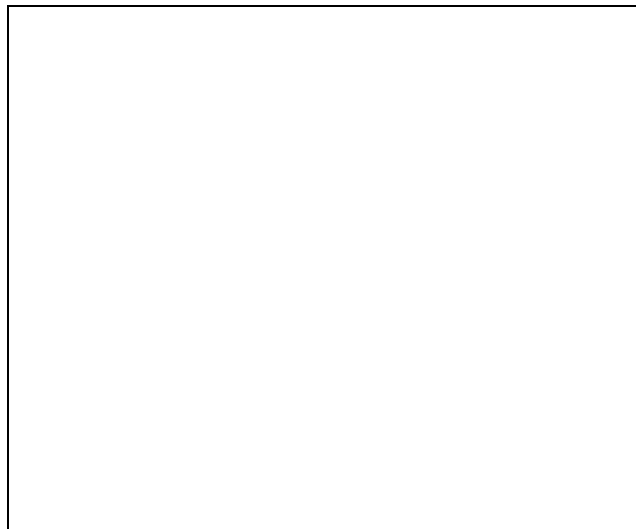
Hearing these polite phrases is an unexpected delight, rather than a rule. What is desperately needed today is the idea of treating others with care and consideration. At the very least, we need to teach children 'civility.' Civility, as defined by Webster's dictionary is the "bare minimum" of good manners. Being polite takes civility a step further, implying "polished manners and thoughtfulness."

In today's society, there is a lack of good manners. Often people don't seem to care about how they treat others in what they say or do. Mark Leibovich, in his article *Rude Awakening: Is Politeness a Lost Cause?* states, "It may seem naive to bemoan rudeness when massive problems [of] crime, disease, famine, and war confront the planet."

Why Teach Preschoolers Civility?

Civility is not a list of outdated rules for people to follow. Civility is a way of treating people. Preschoolers need to learn rules that will help them in their everyday life. There are rules in each household, in school, and in society that people need to live by. Learning how to be civil will help preschoolers in typical social situations, such as meeting new people, eating at a restaurant and going to a birthday party. Learning social manners and rules can help preschoolers feel more comfortable in a situation where they know what to say, what to do and how to act.

When a preschooler asks, "May I have a turn on the swing?" not only will he be very likely get a turn, he might also make a new friend. When a preschooler asks, "Could I please have one of your cookies?" she is taking a risk. The answer could be, "Yes!" or "No!" Good manners involve risks that are worth



taking. When they get a cookie or a turn on the swing and respond with a "Thank you," other children will appreciate their attitude -- and learn that politeness has its rewards.

Hopefully, teaching your preschooler good manners will go beyond the superficial act of saying or doing the right thing, and also teach the caring attitude that makes manners come naturally. In many cultures all over the world, there is a saying similar to the 'Golden Rule': Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. This simply means, treat other people as you would want to be treated. This is the basis for civility. Good manners makes life more pleasant for everyone involved.

Different Settings, Different Rules

Being civil relates to so many aspects of everyday life: home and family, meals, parties, introductions, invitations, guests. Your preschooler's world consists of home and community. Your youngster learns that different behaviors may apply in different situations. At home your preschooler can help pick up her toys after she plays. At the grocery store, she might help pick up a box of cereal that has fallen off the shelf. At home, your preschooler might have a special teddy bear she doesn't want to share with anyone. At daycare, all the toys are for sharing. When at home, your preschooler might talk about the show you are watching on TV, but at the movie theater, she will have to wait until the movie is over, or whisper quietly, so she does not disturb other people in the theater. When riding in the car, your preschooler should stay seatbelted in her car seat. However, on a train, all the seats might be taken so you might have to stand, or there might be someone who needs the seat more than you do.

Different settings call for different rules. It's a lot to learn. Before you go to a restaurant with your preschooler, you might tell him what to expect. "We all have to sit quietly while we are waiting for our food." "We all have to wait until we are finished eating before getting up from the table." These expectations are very different from what is expected at home, where the food may be on the table when he sits down for supper, and where he can get up and play when he is finished eating.

How Children Learn Civility

Preschoolers learn to be civil in much the same way they learn to do everything: by listening, watching, and modeling their behavior after parents and caregivers. Youngsters need to be treated with respect and good manners by the adults who take care of them.

Children very much want to please the adults they love. But manners do not come naturally. Manners need to be taught. Preschoolers are egocentric. (That is, they have trouble seeing a situation from an other person's viewpoint, or putting themselves in another person's place.) Sometimes it might not feel good to share, or to say "I'm sorry." It's best not to force your preschooler into being polite, because then while the outward actions will show correct behavior, the heart will be in the wrong place. If there is a special toy belonging to your preschooler and she really is not ready to share it, ask her to help her friend find one of her other toys to play with. If your preschooler is not ready to say "I'm sorry," don't force her. It will embarrass all the people involved. You can say "I'm sorry" for her.

Preschoolers are naturally curious. They might ask a question in front of someone that is not polite. For example (pointing to a pregnant lady) he might say loudly, "Why does she have a big tummy?" This situation can be uncomfortable for you. You can apologize on behalf of your preschooler. Children don't always know when they are being rude. "Our job as parents is to teach children acceptable ways of expressing themselves," point out authors Nancy Samalin and Patricia McCormick. Youngsters might also say words you don't want them to say, especially in public.

If you treat your preschooler politely, it is more likely he will treat you and other people politely, also. If you knock on his bedroom door before entering, if you don't scold him in front of his friends, if you show others you care about them, most likely he will reflect your good attitude and good manners.

What Prevents Preschoolers From Having Good Manners?

Several factors can prevent preschoolers from behaving politely. One is not feeling physically well. If she is tired, hungry, or sick, she might not have the energy or be in the right state of mind to use good manners. If your child is going through the stress of having a new sibling, or starting preschool, or the sadness of a friend moving away, or losing a pet, she might not be able to use her best manners. If an adult is not feeling well or is under stress, he may also say or do

something impolite.

Ten social manners preschoolers can learn.

1. Use the words "Please" and "Thank you."
2. Don't grab.
3. Use a quiet voice indoors.
4. Share a toy.
5. Take turns.
6. Greet with a "Hello."
7. Say "Sorry" if you cause an accident.
8. Don't tell secrets in front of others.
9. Knock before entering a closed room.
10. Help others.

Reprinted from Parent and Preschooler Newsletter, copyright, (February, 1996) Preschool Publications, Inc.

F:\pcs\chcare\r&r\handout\june96.par