

## LEARNING TO BE POLITE

One goal most of us (parents, caregivers and teachers) share is to be surrounded by polite children. But there are a variety of methods for achieving this goal. We hear adults demanding the 'magic word,' cajoling, insisting and scolding children in an effort to teach them to be polite. But, demanding polite forms of speech from young children may not achieve the desired goal. In fact, it may do just the opposite of what you hope.

We once knew a child named Luke. His parents wanted Luke to be polite. It is something they both considered vitally important. Luke was a sweet-natured and chatty little boy. He loved nothing more than to talk to adults. But conversation with Luke was difficult because both parents interrupted him constantly to remind him to say 'please, thank you or excuse me.' Because Luke was three, he sometimes struggled to say exactly what he wanted or had trouble explaining precisely what he needed. His struggle became truly untenable with his parents' constant interruptions and, in frustration, Luke would simply stop communicating.

Adults often admonish children for grabbing or snatching toys or food from other children. Snatching and grabbing can be effective but they are not socially acceptable. Before teaching alternatives, the adult must recognize that the need the child feels for the toy or the food is very real and often very urgent. A child may remember to say 'please' but still grab. The adult's role must be to reassure the child that the need will be met while helping the child to wait. The adult might say, "There are enough Duplo for everyone. I'll give these to you." Or, you might point out, "There are more graham crackers right here. I can get you your own." If there is only one of the desired toy, you might say, "I can see you really want a turn with that truck. When Ann is finished I'll make sure you get a turn."

Many adults teach children to say 'excuse me' before interrupting an adult conversation. How many of us have been interrupted by an insistent and demanding voice saying 'excuse me' louder and louder and more and more

rudely? At school, whether a child says excuse me or not when interrupting, we say, "I'm listening to David right now. I'll listen to you as soon as he is finished" or "I'm having a grown up conversation right now. I will listen to you as soon as we are finished talking."

What we have described so far are ways of supporting the child's ability to communicate and the child's ability to tolerate waiting. But, how can we teach children to be polite if not by telling them what to say? The first step is to model politeness. If you speak politely to other adults and treat children with respect, such behavior is likely to become the child's behavior too.

Elementary school children can better understand when adults explain how politeness may be an effective way to help create a positive work or play environment. Young children, on the other hand, really are egocentric. This is not an accusation; egocentrism is not a negative quality. Young children really do see themselves as the center of their world. And, in the moment, a young child's needs, whether for food or a toy or your attention, seem of the utmost importance and urgency. They can't see any other point of view. Learning to wait, to take turns or to ask before taking, are things that must be learned but which may take a long time to teach.

Of course it is the responsibility of parents to teach their children manners. But preaching them too early can backfire. Modeling manners is a simple way to begin. Social skills are learned over time through interactions with adults in the home and in the world outside the home. They are learned best when adults in the home have age-appropriate expectations for children and set clear and practical limits. As with any type of skill, social skills are best internalized when they are meaningful to the child and not simply learned by rote out of an expectation for reward or a fear of punishment. Our shared goal is for children to recognize the value of polite behavior, not as a means of getting what they want but as a genuine way of showing respect to others.

Kate and Meredith