

Golden rule of teaching kids manners: Make them comfortable

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Good manners are all about making other people feel comfortable. So, if your children place their elbows on the Thanksgiving table but engage the relatives in lively conversation, they're doing just fine, says Marilyn Pentel, founder of Mannerly Manners in Minnetrista. The business offers manners courses for children around the Twin Cities.



The approaching holidays give parents ample opportunity to help their children practice both the golden rule and brush up on etiquette. To navigate introductions, table manners and thank-you notes, we asked Pentel for advice. We figure anyone who teaches posture with a plastic skeleton knows how to get kids on board.

Marilyn Pentel

Q. So, what are good manners?

A. I want to get away from the finishing-school idea of what manners are, the idea that manners are about what fork to use. So, I coined the three rules: Help others feel comfortable. Help others feel comfortable. Help others feel comfortable.

My core philosophy is that when we treat others the way we wish to be treated, we really are acting mannerly. The golden rule is the No. 1 rule. It's the rule that all the others come from. And the worst display of manners is to hurt someone's feelings.

Q. How do you teach that to a child?

A. I show the child respect. I ask questions. I teach in discussion format. I never say to them, "This is what you need to do." Typically, that's the way

manners have been taught — here are the rules. But we all know that you can memorize every one of those rules and still not be a mannerly person. Take an insincere greeting. The words may be right, but you know right away it's cursory. That person isn't really excited about meeting you.

So, if we're passing food around the table and a child asks me, "How much can I take?" I say, "Look around you. Who else is at the table? How much do you think you can take and leave enough for everyone else?"

Q. Let's say you've been invited to someone's house for Thanksgiving, and you introduce your child to an adult he has never met. He looks down, mumbles "hello" into his shirt and dashes off to find the Wii. How can you avoid that?

A. If you help your child prepare, you won't get the grudging hello. Understand where the child is coming from. Before you even get to the house, tell the child who he might meet and ask, "How are you feeling about meeting this person? How do you think we should approach this?"

Then give suggestions. Tell your child the goal is to make the people you're meeting feel comfortable, and that if he can do that, he's going to feel comfortable, too.

As the parent you might say, this is my child so-and-so, and you want to say a little thing about your child, an accomplishment or something they feel good about. That information you share should be something you agree on with your child prior to that introduction. Some kids don't want people to know they're the star football player!

Then, you want to give the child some information about the people you'll be introducing him to. Who is Aunt Mary? Well, you've never met Aunt Mary because she has been living in England your entire life. Let me tell you a few stories about Aunt Mary. Then they have some knowledge about that person. Discomfort comes from lack of knowledge.

There are five steps to greeting someone: Stand up. Make eye contact. Shake hands. Express a greeting. Converse. And, attached to each of these steps is a smile. And that smile needs to be a sincere smile. You need to be happy to meet them.

Q. What basic table manners should a child know to get through Thanksgiving without mortifying her parents?

A. I think one of the most basic is that when you're at a dinner table, you stay at the table until everyone is finished. If Aunt Mary is slow and likes to tell stories, that means you all sit there until she is finished. And you show your child by example what it means to listen and stay interested.

You need to think where are you going for that Thanksgiving family dinner. Some traditions are casual. Some tables are formal, and you might have a bread plate. Then practice at home.

I used to have a family meal once a week on Sundays where we took the china out and put the linens on and used all the good silverware. My kids said why are we doing this? And I said because once I've determined you're ready, I'm going to take you to a formal restaurant! That was the carrot. You see, I was getting them comfortable with a formal setting.

Q. My kids never use napkins without a reminder. They think pants serve that purpose. Every night I intercept a fork as someone starts eating before everyone has been served. How can parents teach manners without being a nag?

A. You don't want to nag! They get mommy deaf. I've done it. I know what mommy deaf is. So you have to get creative. You may start as a game. You sit down and say, "What's the first thing we do?" And you say this with a smile on your face.

Q. Um ... what is the first thing?

A. You put the napkin in your lap! But you let them tell you. You don't tell them. Another thing I did once with my children was get a mirror with a stand. For two weeks we watched ourselves eat. Let me tell you, you learn some very interesting things about yourself and your eating habits that way. Now when I teach class, I serve the students Cheez-It crackers. I tell them to take four crackers. And I tell them to put all four in their mouth at the same time, look in the mirror and chew with their mouths open. The lesson sticks. It's fun, but it reinforces the rule.

Q. Let's say the holiday gathering is over. The family is leaving and dad turns to the kids and says pointedly, "What do you say to Grandma?" How can you get kids to remember a thank-you on their own?

A. Talk about it ahead of time and use the golden rule. Ask your child what should you do when you leave someone's house? How would you feel if you threw a party for your friends and they just disappeared? Let them think it through.

They want to please. And if you give them ownership, a whole world opens up to them. Let them have a conversation about it. Then give them the rules.

Q. Let's skip ahead to Christmas, Hanukkah and gifts. Should children write a thank-you note if they already said thank you in person?

A. Absolutely. I call thank-you notes the lost art. You're saying thank you for the gift at the moment you get it, but it becomes personal when you write a note and the person who gave you the gift opens the note. You're going to be remembered. It's a conversation on paper. You don't just say "thank you for the gift." You express your feelings.

As a parent, you can help your child by asking what did they first think about when they opened the gift? How did they feel? Pull information out and engage them in a conversation about that gift. Then, they'll have tons of stuff they can write, and they can tell Grandma all about it.

I also encourage kids to write thank-you notes when they go to stay overnight at someone else's house. Think about all the work that mom and dad did to make your stay so pleasant! Wouldn't it be great to thank them with a note to say, "I enjoyed the pancakes you made for breakfast."

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On MinnMoms.com: Have a question about manners? Log on to MinnMoms.com and ask Marilyn Pentel, founder of Mannerly Manners. Check back on Friday, Nov. 20, for her responses.