

In this age of vulgarity and rudeness, teaching kids manners is more important than ever

Rindy Ryan is the founder of Grace Etiquette Manners with her neighbor, Allie Clay.

Cindy Grosso is the founder of the Children's Manners Academy at the Charleston School of Protocol.

They can seem like a vestige of a simpler time, remnants from a more genteel world that no longer exists. But in an era where adults are always staring at their phone, when kids always seem to be wearing earbuds and when national leaders fling personal insults with frightening regularity,- well, no wonder some feel it's time we all minded our manners.

"We're sort of entering what I feel has become a bit of a crazy time in today's world in terms of manners," says Rindy Ryan, co-founder and instructor at Grace Etiquette Manners of Daniel Island. "They don't seem to be valued in the public eye anymore. When children are looking at the leaders of the world right now, they're not seeing a whole lot of that."

Cindy Grosso agrees. "The importance of (manners) is more than ever now," says the founder of the Children's Manners Academy at the Charleston School of Protocol. "I think we see a lot of incivility in the world. I think if you asked people whether the world is more civil or less civil, they'd say it's less civil."

All of which makes it crucial for manners to be instilled at a young age. It's not about being old-fashioned, but about reinforcing those timeless activities that help teach proper ways to behave: writing thank-you notes, gathering around the table as a family at mealtime, taking out the earphones when you're interacting with other people. At their essence, manners are about showing respect, both for yourself and the people you're around.

"How you treat others is important. Why? Because they're going to give you the same treatment back," Grosso says. "You approach them with an attitude, the first thing you're going to get back is an attitude. It comes full circle. It's not about rules. It's about self-confidence and respect."

Please and thank you

Instilling that starts early. "Sharing, give and take, all that needs to start as young as you possibly can," says Ryan, who founded Grace Etiquette Manners with her neighbor Allie Clay. Every child develops differently, and it's up to parents to understand what their kids can handle. But "there's no reason why as a parent you can't ask and expect your child to say 'Please.' At every meal, there's no reason why everyone at the table can't say 'Thank you' to the one who prepared it. That's just respect," she adds.

Some things, like using utensils at the table or the proper way to hold a spoon and fork, can depend on motor skill development. But even the acts of saying, 'Please' and 'Thank you' can reinforce in children that there's a right way to behave. 'When you teach a child to hold a spoon correctly, it's not the action of holding the spoon. It's the teaching, the attitude of self-respect, the attitude of confidence," Grosso says. "You're not teaching actions, you're teaching attitudes. That's really important. When they hold a spoon correctly, they can be proud of that. That's an attitude of self-respect. They're doing it right."

Since children often mimic the actions of adults, good manners have to be modeled by parents, Ryan says. And don't expect school, whether it be daycare, kindergarten or elementary school, to do all the work for you. Kids need to receive a consistent message, their behavior being reinforced by what they see at home as well as at school.

"If it's only being addressed in one aspect of a child's life, it becomes confusing and harder to teach those expectations of good manners," Ryan adds. "So if you can find environments that are consistent in their expectations, from home to school to social circles, certainly that's going to help in the teaching of good manners. But good manners have to become a habit. You don't want (children) to feel like manners are a special effort they have to make only in certain circumstances."

Rules with a reason

When Grosso was a child, her mother was always after her to sit up straight. "She said it a million times," she remembers, but the instruction struggled to take root. Why? "It was a rule without a reason," Grosso adds, "and so I just wasn't doing it."

One of the cornerstones of Grosso's course is giving children a reason why you want them to act a certain way. It can be as simple as reminding them that only babies hold a spoon the way they might be holding it, or telling them how happy parents, teachers or anyone else might be when they conduct themselves a certain way.

"There's got to be a value there. If my mom had said, 'Cindy, you may want to sit up straight because people with better posture are perceived as having good self-esteem and higher self-confidence,' then maybe I would have found a little value in it, and I would have done it," Grosso says.

"If you say to your child, 'You know what? It makes me so happy when you say please,' watch what happens. There's an emotion attached to that, because they see their mom and dad smiling and happy because they did something. They feel good about themselves. You've got to express that. You can't just say, 'Say please.' Instead, you have to say, 'When you say please, it makes me so happy.' And just look at the smile that comes across their face."

Lessons at the table

The centerpiece of manners instruction is the table, that place when people sit across from one another to share a meal. Table manners are so vital to the reinforcement of manners at large that Grace Etiquette Manners teaches its courses at a Daniel Island restaurant, where girls are expected to wear dresses and boys a coat and tie. Grosso preaches a campaign she calls "set the table Sunday" that urges parents and kids to sit down with each other at least once a week, with no distractions.

"It doesn't have to be Sunday, and it doesn't have to be a meal you cooked," she says. "But it's sitting down with your children and having a meal. To me, a very important part of parenting is transferring values to your children. But if you're not having conversations, and they're always distracted in some way, how are we able to transfer those values?"

Mealtime should mean just that, Ryan adds. "We're not going to have our phones at the table. We're not going to have the television on in the background. We're going to sit and enjoy the food someone has prepared," she says. "And there's nothing to say that small children can't place a napkin in their lap. Now it's not always going to stay in their tiny lap. But you're still teaching them those kinds of things."

Ideally, the teaching of manners is a gradual process, from the "please" and "thank you" of a toddler, to table manners, to etiquette and interpersonal interactions. One step builds on another. Children without a foundation of manners don't develop those early good habits, which can make it more difficult to alter their behavior at a later age.

"At any age, it's not too late," Ryan says. "I would never believe in throwing in the towel on a child or a young adult. We all have the capacity to change if we want to change ourselves. It does become harder the older the children become, because then you have to break the bad habits before you instill good ones. But is it impossible? Absolutely not." LCP

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