



Raising 'em Right

Teaching kids traditional manners in a modern world
By ANNABEL JONES

As children, our parents ordered us to sit up straight, say 'yes sir' and 'no ma'am' and to always write thank-you notes. In fact, you've probably lectured your own kids to the same effect.

The question is: do the rules of etiquette matter anymore? And, if they do, which rules remain relevant and which are due for an update in today's modern, technological landscape?

This isn't Downton Abbey — and that's a good thing.

As the founder of the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette, Cynthia Grosso is often asked by parents and by her students whether or not manners are even important in today's society. (The answer? They are.)

According to Grosso, the first rule of etiquette is to never embarrass anyone. Contrary to what some may believe, manners have nothing to do with not slurping soup, dressing up for dinner or being snobby. Good manners are simply a means of demonstrating care and respect to those around you, two things that could never be unimportant.

“A lot of parents think manners are a punishment,” says Grosso, who cites writing thank-you notes as an example. Parents forget that they're not teaching their children to write thank-you notes; they're educating their children on the importance of expressing gratitude.

“You're not teaching children what to do but how to be,” she says, adding that manners are about confidence and self-respect.



“I wouldn't want to hang out with someone who didn't have good manners,” says Simon Aktar, 12, of Charleston, S.C. “I wish everyone my age knew about eye contact.”

Aktar, who plays team sports and attends cotillion classes, credits his parents with teaching him how to behave properly. He's noticed that his school classmates that “get in trouble a lot” are those that have the worst manners.

Ma'am is no longer the word

Ma'am, a colloquial shortening of the French word madame meaning Mrs., is something locals and tourists alike often hear throughout the South. Along with sir, it's a show of respect. Outside of sister cities Savannah and Charleston (the two have both held the title of “most mannerly city”), ma'am and sir are being used less and less, according to Grosso.

Thoroughly modern manners

Ironically, the things that are supposed to connect us — e-mail, smart phones and social media — have begun to separate us. As our inboxes become our mailboxes and texting becomes the new talking, how do we maintain our manners?

“The dining table is the single most important place you display your manners,” offers Cynthia, who has instituted a no-electronic-device dinnertime each night with her family, even when they're not at home.

Admittedly, if this rule isn't already in place with your kids you'll probably get some push-back. Once they realize how good it feels to genuinely connect with their family they'll be happy to put away technology during dinnertime.

The biggest etiquette obstacle Grosso witnesses in her child and adult classes? Smart phones.

“The cell phone isn't rude,” says Grosso, “it's when and how you use it.”

Grosso advises parents to educate their children about boundaries before handing them any electronic device. “If you pull that phone out, you're telling everyone around you that the phone is more important.”

Grosso points out that if you've never been taught as a child you won't know as an adult and, “No matter what you do as a profession, we're all in the people business.”

