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HOME

IN THIS ISSUE

CALENDAR

FAMILY DIRECTORY

EVERYCHILD

BABYMAP

PATHWAYS

PAST ISSUES

CLASSIFIEDS

Find An Event!

April 2006

S M T W T F S

						<u>1</u>
<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>
<u>9</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>16</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>23</u>	<u>24</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>27</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>29</u>
<u>30</u>						

On best behavior for birthdays

Ages & Stages: 6-10
By Paula Becker

"How was the party?" a Seattle mom recounts asking her 5-year-old as he climbed into the back seat of the family car, goody bag from his friend's birthday celebration in hand. After a pause, he replied, "Well, when Josh opened my present he said he didn't really like Thomas trains... and Alex cried because he didn't get to sit by Josh."

While most Puget Sound kids have jettisoned the outer signs of party manners -- starchy dresses and white tights, shorts and little bow ties -- manners are deeper than what we wear. Kids can learn the party rules and rituals designed to help both guests and hosts feel appreciated and at ease.

Birthday parties are "one of most kids' first public social situations," says Corinne A. Gregory, founder and president of Woodinville-based manners training organization The PoliteChild. Party manners, she adds, "are really just an extension of what we do every day."

Encouraging good manners means "equipping children with motivators -- not just telling them 'here's how to act,' but 'here's why we act this way,'" Gregory says. "The Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have others do unto you) will take kids through 90 percent of party etiquette."

Children who enroll in The PoliteChild's Party Manners or Holiday Manners classes are encouraged to think through how they would want guests to behave at their own party, and to apply their conclusions to their own behavior as guests.

Gregory's message to young birthday boys and girls is that "even though it is your party, you're responsible for your guest's good time," adding that a fundamental aim at PoliteChild is to teach children "outside thinking -- that means thinking outside themselves."

Gregory offers these specific suggestions:

- Help child guests know what to expect by removing ambiguity from the invitation. Specify any clothing suggestions and an end time for the party.
- Let kids know that, unless the party requires mess-friendly clothes, it is OK to dress up a bit more for the party. This honors the occasion.
- Parents of young hosts and young guests should be specific with their children about expectations. "Don't say, 'be on your best behavior.' Say 'I expect you to greet your guests at the door and thank them for coming,'" Gregory recommends. "Role-play various possible situations with them, making it funny."
- Don't invite more children than you can manage. This will help you retain the grace and stamina to encourage continued good party manners throughout the event. Of the invite-every-classmate rule specified or implicit at some schools, Gregory says, "That is ridiculous! It is prohibitively expensive, RSVPs will not work with such a large guest list and finding a large-enough location becomes very difficult." The rationale to include

everyone is to avoid hurt feelings, something Gregory calls "unrealistic. Life isn't always fair, and children know this."

- If gifts are given, they should be opened at the party and parents should plan time for it. "Part of the joy we have in giving gifts is seeing the look of joy on the recipient's face. The person giving the gift is trying to please you," she explains. Don't be afraid to specify "No Gifts" on the invitation if you don't want to open gifts at the party.
- Help kids practice receiving gifts graciously. Remind them to focus on the giver's motivation. Role-play situations such what they should say if they open a duplicate gift.
- Kids of all ages should write thank-you notes, not just for the gift but to thank the guest for being part of the occasion. "The biggest present," Gregory says, "is the presence of each other."

Kids at birthday parties are practicing the intricate dance of social interaction. Teaching them to be good guests and hosts will give them the skills to manage it with grace and style.

Paula Becker is a Seattle freelance writer and has three children.

Resources:

- **The PoliteChild** (www.politechild.com) offers classes for schools, scout troops and other groups as well as a "*Party Manners Worth Celebrating*" guide, downloadable for \$4.95
- **Final Touch Finishing School**, www.finaltouchschool.com

Books:

- *Emily Post's The Guide To Good Manners For Kids*, by Peggy Post and Cindy Post Senning, ED.D.
- *Miss Manners' Guide To Rearing Perfect Children*, by Judith Martin (older but widely available used or from libraries)

[↑ back to top](#)

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