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Minding their manners, if you please

An El Dorado Hills school offers a four-day etiquette class.

By Walter Yost -- Bee Staff Writer

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Beyond some slight social embarrassment, not knowing where to place the bread dish in a dinner setting likely won't harm a young person's future. (The dish goes above the forks, by the way).

But an inability to show respect and consideration to other people can prove far more damaging.

That's one reason a K-8 private school in El Dorado Hills is offering middle school students a four-day class in manners and etiquette.

"In an increasingly crass and less-mannered society, we believe that a class like this one can help students learn positive and respectful behavior," Geoff Kauppinen, development director at Golden Hills School, said in an e-mail.

"Good etiquette is always important," said Hillary Coughlin, an eighth-grader who completed the pilot course last week.

Like the majority of those in the class, Coughlin enrolled at her mother's request. But now that they've completed the course, most of the students said they found it helpful in their daily lives.

"I didn't know how to greet people," admitted sixth-grader Chase Masten. He now understands the four basic rules of introducing yourself: stand up, look the person in the eye, extend your hand in greeting and say "It's nice to meet you."

Educational programs in manners and etiquette and developing children's social skills are surfacing nationwide, as evidenced by the success of The PoliteChild Inc., created by a parent in Washington state in 2001.

"People always commented on how well-mannered my children were," said founder Corinne Gregory. "I started seeing that children frequently are not raised with the social skills for success in life."

Since its creation, PoliteChild has grown to include schools in California. While such programs are often associated with private schools, Kathleen Felci, principal at a public elementary school in Indio with 70 percent of its students eligible for Title 1 poverty assistance and 60

percent second-language learners, said PoliteChild has been a good fit.

"We wanted a character program that had the ability to help students cross over into different socioeconomic levels," Felci said.

Knowing how to set a table, for instance, may not seem important, but Felci said that, for her students, "it levels the playing field and helps them not feel uncomfortable in social situations."

Gregory, who said PoliteChild has yet to establish a foothold in Northern California, cites numerous benefits from such programs including improved test scores, less bullying and cost savings.

"Teachers are spending more time on behavior and discipline than on instruction," Gregory said.

At Golden Hills School, where students wear uniforms and are taught to never refer to teachers by their first names, counselor Shaaron McFadden said she and a parent presented a manners class several years ago. Looking to expand on that, school officials contacted Mary Kay Brancheau, who teaches a class titled "Proud to be Polite" with the El Dorado Hills Community Services District and the Placerville Recreation Department.

Brancheau, whose résumé includes stints as a model, ballet instructor and beauty pageant director, originally taught finishing classes for teenagers and adults.

Teaching etiquette classes for children seemed "a natural," she said. When McFadden sent out a flier to Golden Hills parents, the class filled up immediately.

"Most parents said, 'It's a great idea. It would be good for my child to be more comfortable in certain settings,' " McFadden said.

Golden Hills, she said, also offers a ballroom dance class to help students become more comfortable with the opposite sex.

Brancheau's four-day class covered topics such as introductions, the art of conversation, respect for others, correspondence, everyday manners, and etiquette at the table and on the telephone.

On the final day, Brancheau reviewed some of the lessons.

"Firm, but you're not trying to break someone's hand," she told a student practicing a handshake.

"We didn't talk about smiling. Etiquette is important, but it's not supposed to be stiff, it's supposed to be you," she told them.

At one point, several students set a holiday dinner table, using some of Brancheau's family china. As one student hesitated about which side to properly place the silverware, Brancheau reminded them, "Everything on the left side has four letters, everything on the right side has five letters."

Afterwards, sixth-grader Meagan Musilli called the course "a nice refresher class." She took a

similar class when she was a student at Phoenix School.

To seventh-grader Madeeha Ghori, the amount of dinner silverware seemed superfluous. "We don't really use forks," she said of her culture, which is from India. But learning proper introductions and the art of conversation were skills Ghori intends to put to good use.

"I want to be the first woman president," she said. "I need to meet people."

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