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Manners maketh a US brat bearable

JOHN HARLOW, LOS ANGELES

SOME say it is too late, but help is at hand for Americans in despair at their children's unruly behaviour. They are enrolling their offspring in "manners camp".

Depressed at the rowdy behaviour the young are learning from television and school, more and more Americans are seeking the services of companies such as Petite Protocol, a Los Angeles-based manners school for the young.

Tutoring takes place in the Bel-Air hotel, where Diane Diehl, an etiquette instructor for 20 years, puts children as young as six through their paces for a fee of £180 a day.

"Mostly they are sweet, but when their parents see how they behave at a formal occasion like a wedding, they reach for help," said this elegant instructor clad in green silk. "We show an alternative to the selfish and awkward children on TV."

This involves teaching them how to hold a fish knife; how to address an adult — "Look them in the eye, with respect" — and how to answer the phone: "Do not say 'Mummy is in the shower' — it's embarrassing." Boys are told to open doors and lift out chairs for women.

It seems to have an effect. "She is a little calmer at meal times," said Cynthia Hung, 41, of her nine-year-old daughter, Ingrid. The girl was one of 20,000 Americans returning to school last week after spending part of the summer at manners camp.

Ingrid has learnt not to say "yuck" at the dinner table and to answer the telephone with more than a "yeah", taking messages politely.

She no longer blows bubbles in her drinks and is even eager to learn ballroom dancing. Her mother is wondering how long it will last.

The pupils enjoy being treated like grown-ups. At one of Diehl's classes in social skills last week, they were sitting at a table drinking fruit juice out of champagne flutes.

They giggled as they proposed a toast to Samuel, whose face reddened slightly as he accepted the responsibility of hosting his first dinner party, aged six and three-quarters.

"I would like to do it again," he said afterwards. "But I want bigger hamburgers next time."

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One of the American manners gurus is Michele Borba, author of Don't Give Me That Attitude! 24 Rude, Selfish, Insensitive Things Kids Do and How to Stop Them. She is keen to point out that rude children are not a uniquely American problem but one found from "Birmingham to Beijing".

She added: "The biggest headache is parents refusing to see how much offence their children cause, although they are quick enough to see it in others. I call it the NMK syndrome: not my kid. My kid is perfect."

Dorothea Johnson, who founded the Protocol School of Washington, said the number of parents seeking aid had tripled since 2001. "I have been teaching for 40 years, but have never seen hunger like this," she said.

Corinne Gregory, founder of PoliteChild, another manners school, said America was "reaping the whirlwind" of 40 years of thoughtless behaviour encouraged by rough-mouthed politicians. "Now parents are trying to recapture the high ground, but it will be a long hard struggle."

Some argue that today's parents are less to blame than the previous generation of "baby boomers", who failed to teach manners to their young.

"Today's children look at their teachers rather than their parents as authority figures," says Tona McGuire, professor of psychology at the University of Washington. "While summer schools may seem artificial and expensive, if parents reinforce what the children pick up in etiquette classes, it can work."

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