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Minding Their Manners

A new breed of etiquette classes for the generation of kids raised on Bart Simpson and Britney Spears

By SONJA STEPTOE

The toughest problem of Kevin Hatamiya's brief elementary school career doesn't involve arithmetic. It's his hair-trigger emotions. Whenever life throws the 7-year-old second-grader a setback, his short fuse ignites, and he yells at the top of his voice. His mother Michele thought manners lessons might teach him to cope better, so she paid \$50 for three one-hour classes. "I'd like him to control himself more," says Michele, "not just with his temper but in lots of other ways."

Increasingly, it seems, the gray hairs that parents once got from fretting over why Johnny can't read are now just as likely to sprout from anxiety about why he can't behave. "When a lot of parents see how their kids interact with playmates and other adults, they're horrified," says Denise Honaker, who taught Kevin and 14 others in the Polite Is Right class she held after school at Cornerstone Elementary in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.

The concern helps account for a surge in enrollment in children's etiquette classes and is transforming the moribund manners trade. "I've been in this business for over 40 years, and I've never seen anything like the current hunger for this information," says Dorothea Johnson, who runs the Protocol School of Washington in the nation's capital. In the past three years, she says, the number of people signing up for her children's classes has quadrupled. But unlike the mini-finishing-school lessons of yore that dwelt on cutlery and curtsies, the curriculum nowadays stresses social skills and common courtesy. Honaker coaches kids on the proper way to greet adults ("Give me a firm handshake, look me in the eye, smile and say something nice") and quizzes them on how to be considerate ("Look. I just dropped my bag. Should you just keep walking or stop and help me pick it up?").

Such instruction is essential, say experts, for a generation raised on Bart Simpson and Britney Spears. "Kids are being encouraged by pop culture to be disrespectful and self-destructive, and their parents are frightened and looking for help," says Diane Diehl, whose quarterly Petite Protocol classes at the swank Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles last four hours and cost \$250 a session.

The alarm — and shame — is justified and long overdue, the manners gurus say. "We're reaping what we've been sowing for the past 20 to 30 years," says Corinne Gregory, founder of the PoliteChild. "Society has gotten increasingly callous and me-centered, and we're fed up with [the results]." Her firm, based in Woodinville, Wash., began in 2001 as an after-school program and is now a national enterprise with 2,000 alumni. Gregory's pupils are taught to mind their p's and q's and remember their three c's: caring, compassion and consideration.

While not prescribing the classes, noted psychologist John Gottman in his book *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting* encourages such "emotion coaching" because, his research shows, children who learn socially appropriate ways to solve problems and handle life's upsets are physically healthier and more attentive, have more empathy and more friends, and perform better in school. Lilly Streider, 9, who attends Kimberly Goddard's Proper Protocol classes in St. Petersburg, Fla., would agree. "I raise my hand [in school] now," says Streider. "And when I go to the board, I'm not as afraid."

Are parents derelict if they aren't the ones doing the etiquette training? Not necessarily, says psychologist and University of Washington professor Tona McGuire, who is on the advisory board of the PoliteChild. For one thing, she says, "it's hard for some parents to teach such things to their children because they weren't taught themselves." More significantly, she notes, youngsters are inclined to regard teachers rather than parents as authority figures on subjects like proper behavior. Indeed, Michele Hatamiya says Honaker's class was the perfect complement to her at-home admonishments. "When he hears it from me, he doesn't want to do it. But when the teacher says it, he gets it," she says. "All of a sudden, Mom's not just crazy and nagging anymore. Mom's making more sense." Or at least it's polite to pretend that she is.

With reporting by Dee Gill/St. Petersburg and Eli Sanders/Seattle



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