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Accentuate the positive to reinforce good manners

Follow the Golden Rule with children

by Lisa Tedrick Prejean

Begin with the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Corrine Gregory believes that's the first step in teaching manners to children.

"If you go back to the Golden Rule, you will be able to get through situations and not embarrass yourself or other people," says Gregory, founder and director of The PoliteChild in Seattle. "It's about making people feel special, how to leave a positive impression rather than a negative one."

A child who is taught to think of others' feelings will learn how to practice kindness, consideration and empathy, says Gregory, who teaches children, tweens and teens good behavior, manners and etiquette.

"Everyone can think, 'Me first,' but the world does not just revolve around you," says Gregory.

We need to return to a more civilized period of behavior, where people are responsible and accountable for their words and actions, Gregory explains on her Web site, www.politechild.com.

It's important to start early, with simple matters.

For instance, your child walks in the door, drops his coat on the floor and runs off to play.

What's your response?

Do you tell him to not drop his coat on the floor? Do you tell him to please come back and pick up the coat?

"It is more effective to tell them what you want them to do," Gregory says.

Do you talk to him about taking care of his belongings properly?

"What does that say to the person who gave you that item?" Gregory asks.

By teaching a child to think about the feelings of the clothes-buyer, he is being taught to think outside himself.

What about when you're on the phone?

Develop a signal you will use if your child needs something while you're talking. Teach this signal to him so if he sees you use it, he'll know to wait until you finish your conversation. Tell him not to interrupt unless there's an emergency.

If your child forgets and comes tugging on your shirt sleeve, be patient. He may not have noticed that you are on the phone. Hold up a hand or one finger and point to the phone. This tells the child that you acknowledge him but that he has to wait. If he persists and it is a non-emergency situation, turn your back and finish your conversation.

Don't get extreme by over-reacting. You'll just escalate matters, making them worse. You'll also be showing poor manners if you lose control.

"Remain calm when correcting your child," Gregory says.

What about in public? The same holds true.

Let's say your child burps loudly at a restaurant.

"Don't make a federal case about it," Gregory says.

Calmly look at him and say, "Please say, 'Excuse me,' the next time you burp in public."

Don't say, "Did you see how those people at the next table

looked at you when you burped? I'm so embarrassed. How could you do such a thing?"

Remember, it's more effective to tell him what he's supposed to do than to criticize what he did.

Going to a party or a wedding?

Role play good manners with your child. Tell him he will meet new people. Teach him how to shake hands, maintain eye contact and what to say, "My, your dress is pretty," or "What a nice wedding."

Many adults feel uncomfortable at formal occasions, so just imagine how children feel. Knowing what to do and say beforehand will ease some of that tension.

Catch your child doing things right. This is something parents don't do enough.

Even simple things - the time he got along with his sister for five minutes without a spat - should be rewarded. To multiply positive behavior, reinforce it.

"That is the quickest way to promote the behavior you want to see," Gregory says.

Tie privileges to behavior in a positive way.

Provide privileges based on kindness, how well they share, how helpful they are. Make the child responsible for earning privileges through good behavior. This can be accomplished with a progress or reward chart.

Don't take on too much too quickly. Work on one behavior issue at a time.

"You can't expect a perfect child," Gregory says. "But you should expect honor and respect to family members."

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