



The Role of Etiquette in Social Skill Development of Preschoolers

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Manners often are considered a lost art in today's society but they are a topic of great interest to parents. This article presents a developmentally appropriate approach to teaching etiquette that was used with preschoolers at a university laboratory school. The authors present teaching methods that help children understand and use good manners.

Twenty-two children sat quietly at their luncheon tables anticipating the upcoming meal of chicken, mashed potatoes, corn, rolls, cookies and milk. The tables were set with elegant formal place settings that included water goblets, silverware, china, linen tablecloths and matching napkins. The waitress approached each table asking children if they preferred

water or milk. The children replied please and thank you as they placed their orders. The water goblets made quite an impression and several children commented on the pretty glasses. Background music played by a harpist permeated the banquet room. The four- and five-year-olds from the West Virginia University Nursery School long had awaited this formal luncheon with their friends. They were dressed in their Sunday best and, more important, they remembered their manners.

The project began ten weeks earlier as a response to recurring parental concerns for politeness and good behavior. Children's social behavior has always been an issue for parents. At the university nursery school par-

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ent conferences, the question most frequently asked is, "Does my child behave?" Helping parents understand the normal repertoire of behaviors that are typical of young children and the type of guidance that is appropriate alleviates many of their anxieties.

With so many parents interested in social behavior, nursery school faculty believed table manners would be a topic that could be conducted as a curriculum area in preschool. Etiquette activities at the nursery school had always been integrated throughout the day's activities as teachers modeled and encouraged good manners. Conducting a project on manners in an appropriate way would involve a more concerted effort. Emily Post says that children are never too young to be taught the rudiments of good manners, and teaching cannot be too patiently or conscientiously carried out.¹

Rationale for the Project

Private foundations, books, schools and universities, commissions, think tanks and government agencies are focusing on the erosion of civility in our society.² A *U.S. News and World Report* poll reveals that 90 percent of Americans feel that incivility is a serious problem and 78 percent say the problem has worsened in the last ten years and is evidence of a "profound social breakdown" of our society. Eighty-five percent of respondents think that "incivility erodes healthy values such as respect for others."³

A study conducted by Public Agenda entitled, "Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation" revealed that 53 percent of respondents described children negatively in such terms as

"lacking discipline and spoiled."⁴ A survey of educators by the American Association of School Administrators showed that the need for teaching the "golden rule" was urgent. In addition, underlying concerns about incivility was a concern about school violence. Alabama State Representative Bill Fuller, who helped pass legislation instituting character education programs in Alabama schools, says that it is too late to begin teaching respect and courtesy to high schoolers. He believes that the work must begin earlier in the homes and elementary schools.⁵

"Manners... amount to the physical recognition of the dignity of the other person," says etiquette expert Marajabelle Young Stewart.⁶ This is especially important since adults are not always the polite role models of yesterday. For example, look at Baltimore Orioles infielder Roberto Alomar, who spit in the face of the umpire after a disputed call.⁷

A focus on manners is not about stuffy, outmoded protocol, but about considering others and contributing to an orderly, civil society. Manners and the rules of etiquette matter because "the underlying principles matter—principles such as kindness, integrity and respect."⁸

Judith Martin, better known as Ms. Manners, says that nothing in society can work unless everyone involved agrees to abide by certain standards of behavior.⁹ A recent Roper Starch survey found that a growing number of people believe that "good manners and politeness" are two of the most important qualities parents can instill in their children.¹⁰

Many college students have discovered that their lack of social skills will affect them as they progress

through the job search process. Since many corporations make a business lunch a mandatory part of the application process, students have enrolled in dining tutorials to enhance their professionalism and sharpen their social savvy.¹¹ It seems that the best approach to teaching etiquette and manners is to start at the preschool level with reinforcement through the secondary level and beyond.

Teachers have observed that violent words and deeds begin surfacing as early as kindergarten. More frightening, an average of 900 teachers are threatened every hour and an average of forty will be assaulted on school property.¹² Other teachers have reported five-year-old students losing their tempers and throwing chairs and tables because they did not get their way. For the sake of classroom management, more class time is being spent teaching children social skills that they used to learn at home, in churches or synagogues, or in neighborhoods.¹³ Time spent on classroom management takes time away from the educational process.

Etiquette expert Judith Martin says, "The absence of manners is a cause of some of our most serious social problems. For instance, our school systems have broken down from what is called a lack of discipline. It means that such etiquette rules as sitting still, listening to others, taking turns, and not hitting others have not been taught. A great deal of crime begins with the short tempers people develop from being treated rudely all the time, and from perceived forms of disrespect."¹⁴ Critics of manners training say that it inhibits children, thereby curtailing their spontaneity. In reality, it frees them by providing guidelines to fol-

low when adapting to a new school, meeting new friends, acing a job interview by relying on the tradition of courtesy.¹⁵

The Etiquette Project

The authors brainstormed to develop methods of teaching etiquette that would harmonize with the philosophy of the school. The approach of the university nursery school is to encourage children to make choices in an environment rich in play. We did not want to sacrifice our beliefs by adding something that might be perceived as too structured, although devising a methodology to teach etiquette would involve more structure than other curriculum areas in the program. We wanted the etiquette project to coincide with the existing curriculum in which children are encouraged to be involved actively. As with many other projects at the school, we decided that participating in the designed activities would be the choice of individual children.

The activities would be conducted by the teacher with small groups of children so the opportunity for participation in the activities would be high. The nursery school uses a contract system in which children are given a pictorial contract of activities they can choose to do each day. Etiquette activities would be one of the eight choice activities on the contract two days a week. The various activities depicted on the contract are either child or teacher directed. The etiquette unit was conducted by a student teacher.

We carefully selected ten skills that seemed to be relevant for preschoolers:

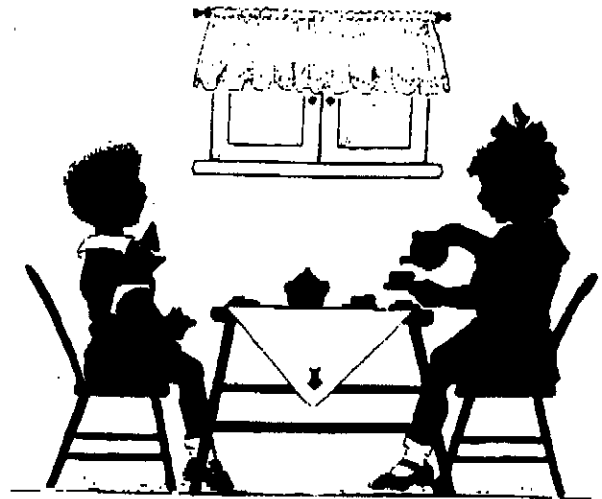
- washing hands before eating,
- sitting straight at the table,

- placing napkin on lap,
- properly holding utensils,
- using napkin frequently,
- saying please and thank you at appropriate times,
- returning the utensils to the plate when done,
- returning the napkin to the right of plate when done,
- replacing the chair under the table when leaving,
- remaining at the table until all are done or asking to be excused.

We also included activities that helped children learn how to set the table properly.

Teaching these competencies in a developmentally appropriate way was a challenge. Prior to conducting the project, we sent home a list of the skills we would be teaching and their coinciding weeks of practice. We encouraged parents to help their children practice these same skills at home. At the end of the ten weeks, the children would have the opportunity to go to a formal lunch with their friends. We had plenty of parent support for this project.

The children were very interested in learning to set the table properly. Many said they helped their parents at home. The student teacher initiated experiences where children could set the table for the dolls and the child-size stuffed puppets. The student teacher provided glass plates, silverware, a tablecloth, cloth napkins and glasses. Children who chose this center used the real materials in a play situation. The student teacher simply showed the children the proper way to set the table, and the children followed her example during their play. There also were materials available for the children to play act a restaurant. Menus, notepads and, of



course, the proper place settings were available to re-enact a restaurant scene.

In addition, the student teacher devised an etiquette booklet for each child. Each page of the booklet had a different heading for the skill they would be learning. The rest of the page was blank so children could draw, write, pretend write or dictate stories to the teacher for her to write. Children could illustrate their pages any way they wanted. The project was designed to encourage completion of one skill a week. In the process of conducting the etiquette unit, it was discovered that several skills were so closely related that it did not make sense to separate them. As behaviors were reviewed and practiced, they were incorporated into snack time.

The student teacher demonstrated many of the behaviors, such as sitting up straight and placing napkins on laps, holding utensils correctly and using napkins with the child-size puppets and incorporated role playing as the mechanism for practice. Using the child-size puppets was very effective because the children had made the puppets the prior semester and used them for various role-playing

activities. They often pretended to be the puppets' parents and had the puppets carry out the correct rules of etiquette. They also used the puppets as customers in their restaurant.

After several weeks of the etiquette project, snack time became more formal. The student teacher used real plates, utensils, cloth tablecloths and napkins at snack time. One of the most striking observations was that the noise level during snack time decreased when the table settings were more formal. Children began to talk to each other more quietly in a conversational tone. There were no loud voices. They sat very tall, placed their napkins on their laps and used very good manners. To see if the change in behavior was due to the table settings at snack time, the teacher reverted to the previous style of snack and used paper products. She noted that some children would still use good manners, but the noise level increased and there were more anecdotal incidents of showing off.

The student teacher decided to give them a choice of place settings at snack time. She set up one table with a cloth tablecloth, cloth napkins, silverware, glasses and flowers on the table. The other table was set with the routine paper products.

As the children came to the snack room, they could choose the table they wanted. The teacher expected a rush for the formal setting, but the children simply sat at an available chair. They did not appear to have a preference. The difference was in their behavior at the tables. The children at the table with the more casual setting were more boisterous and played more at the table. The children at the formal table were calmer and talked quietly. It was as if children were act-

ing as proper as the place setting they were given. The teacher tried this on subsequent occasions and found similar results.

Children were not expected to master all the behaviors associated with table manners, but practicing manners through role playing, devising etiquette games and using manners at snack time helped the children to execute these manners naturally.

As they learned new etiquette rules, the children would draw in their booklets, creating their own visual meaning of the different manners. The teacher also developed a chart that was visible to the children and parents. She put all the children's names on the side of the chart and listed the ten etiquette skills at the top. When children felt they had mastered a skill they placed a stamp by their name and the particular skill. In this way children were self-recording their own accomplishments. The chart was of great interest to the parents and a point of conversation for children and parents. Using self-recording as a mechanism to demonstrate progress has proven to be very effective with children.¹⁶ The one skill that was accomplished by all children was that of washing hands before eating. Of course, this healthy procedure should be prevalent in all schools.

At the luncheon, the children received a certificate in recognition of their completion of the etiquette project. The certificates were handed out by a university administrator. As the children received their certificates, they shook the administrator's hand. It was a very impressive sight, and they all appeared to enjoy a modicum of formality.

At the end of the school year, par-

ents were given a survey that included an evaluation of the etiquette project. All parents commented on the effectiveness of projects. In fact, one parent suggested that this unit should be taught throughout all twelve years of public school. Parents responded that the formal luncheon was worthwhile because it gave their children a chance to use all the skills they had been practicing.

Benefits

Learning etiquette skills does not stifle creativity, it increases the availability of opportunities. Children benefit from knowing and using good manners. The manners project was designed to let children have the opportunity to learn good manners in an appropriate way. Children chose to participate in the project because there were many facets of the project that appealed to them. They liked self-charting the skills they mastered. They worked hard on their individual booklets and enjoyed the culminating event of dressing up to go to lunch with their friends. More important, children learned proper etiquette skills that may affect them in a variety of situations. The basic etiquette skills taught in this program can afford children comfort and confidence.

Individuals need character development that embraces kindness and compassion for others. Consideration of others appears to be a long-lost art in our society today. Any way that we can regain civility will help counteract our current declining standards. Δ

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