

NEWSLETTER

WebParentTip, Volume 3, #6 for 6-5-02

MANNERS

Pleasant surprise at my home recently: Our just 6-year-old twin grandchildren sent a separate thank-you note to me and my husband for the birthday gifts we sent!

Granted the cards were pre-printed with a space to fill in the name of the sender, the gift, and the signature. But printing is laborious when you're only six and to read the words "Grandma", "croquet set" (spelled right) and "Hannah" or "Jeremy" was heartwarming.

There is no mother busier than our daughter who has both a busy profession and twins. But she is taking the time to teach her children something very important: WE MAKE AN EFFORT FOR THE PEOPLE WE LOVE.

Although the world is a more casual place than it once was, people still interact with each other and always will. People will always need to interact kindly--which is one definition of manners.

The dictionary defines manners as polite conventions or polite ways of social behavior. I like to think of manners as the quintessence of human-ness because manners are based on LOVE, CONCERN, and EMPATHY--all very human characteristics.

How can parents best teach a child manners? How early should a parent start? Children learn best through imitation. If they are surrounded by people who love each other, do not wish to hurt each other, and follow the "rules" for courtesy, the child will MODEL THIS MANNERFUL BEHAVIOR.

But children learn in other ways too. They learn by INSTRUCTION and SUGGESTIONS, and REMINDERS. Some parents today seem almost afraid to make a direct suggestion when it comes to a matter of discipline or manners. Not to fear. The gentle suggestion and the quiet reminder are both effective ways to reinforce what the child is learning through imitation.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with reminding a toddler to say "Please" and "Thanks". We hear a lot about four letter words today, but these six letter ones are much more useful. Children learn at a rapid rate, but until they cognitively understand the reasons for courtesy, they will need to be reminded to say "Please." Many times.

What about the advanced course in manners? Important because when you have finished your job of parenting, your child should be able to walk through any door on earth and feel both comfortable and self-confident. The child who has not learned the social conventions will not feel comfortable inside this hypothetical door.

Some of the important conventions include introductions, the firm handshake, table and restaurant manners, telephone manners, and thank-you notes. Obviously you won't begin to teach these graces until the child is developmentally ready.

But start early. Get young children into the habit of thank-you notes. Even preschoolers can draw a picture and print their name on a letter to Grandma. Of course it takes parental time and effort but it models and teaches human kindness. What better way to spend your time?