

Minding Our Manners . . . An Early Childhood Approach

by Jerry Parr

• Beginnings Workshop

Manners come in two forms: cosmetic and sincere. Think Eddie Haskell and Joe Friday. After an Eddie encounter a long, hot shower is in order. Eddie typified the smooth operator, donning a cloak of manners as a device, a means to accomplish selfish goals. Joe meant what he said and said what he felt. Yes, its Hollywood, but we've all met examples of both.

In an age when the debate about values education in schools remains unresolved, it is important for all educators to understand the meaning of manners. Manners are a manifestation of respect — not simply respect for those around you but, more importantly, self-respect. We have all agreed that helping young children develop self-esteem and a strong sense of self is a vital component of success in child care and school. In this context it becomes a logical extension to include a manners curriculum. Not teaching roles and rites or learning how to set a table and which fork to use when (that should be a moot point anyway — we have two hands, use both forks at once — with two older brothers I learned that at an early age). Teaching manners that demonstrate respect should not be part of the controversy. There is no downside.

There is a strong cultural component to the development of manners. In other countries it is often built into the language. I recall taking German in elementary school. One of the frequent lessons was using the proper form of address depending upon whom you were speaking to. Anyone senior was addressed using formal pronouns. The more familiar the person, the more informal the language. This had the effect of instilling in young children norms of respect that they could adhere to. It also caused me to flunk German.

In the United States there appears to be a greater sense of manners among less assimilated cultures and in rural communities with large extended families. This is due in

part to the influences of elders in the lives of young children. In the community in which I work, a Tribal community, elders are treated with considerable respect. Elders provide a valuable contribution to the family and to the social, cultural and economic development of the Tribe. Children are taught to respect and care for the elders. The intergenerational dynamics are a critical factor in the children's developing self-respect and ability to respect those around them.

Many Tribal communities introduce the concept of respect and the cyclical nature of life to young children in a very developmentally appropriate fashion. Early childhood, unwittingly, borrows from this curriculum each time best practices are employed. By placing the child at the center of the curriculum and encouraging learning outward from the child, in essence the Piagetian concept of egocentrism is being incorporated into the lesson. Children expand their awareness from self to family to Tribe to the natural world. As the curriculum explores the child's world, it follows the natural rhythms and cycles of life, examining differences and similarities among individuals, families, communities, Tribes, and



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Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

the world shared with nature: trees and flowers; deer and beavers; wind, moon, and stars; rivers and ponds. Each similarity and difference is revered as a strength rather than reviled as an exception.

When learning is circular rather than linear, children have a clear perception of the continuity of events and the connections and relationships in their environment. Respect is borne of understanding and becomes a foundation for further learning. Oftentimes the classroom environment reflects learning style; children and adults form "Talking Circles" with the adults participating as equals and facilitators. Children learn to respect themselves as listeners, as individuals and as members of a group. Frequently, the speaker (child or adult) will hold a sacred symbol; respect is shown to the speaker and to the symbol as children listen to words spoken both from the lips and from the heart. The role of listener is active rather than passive, turns are taken by passing the sacred object into another's possession and the process continues. It is not unusual to see an elder identified as sacred by virtue of having come so far along the circle, by having had many years to learn to listen and speak with respect and to have so many valuable lessons to share.

When I first arrived in the rural south, I was astonished at the manners exhibited by all of the children from toddlers to teens. After several years, I am still aston-

ished but less mystified. Almost everyone is a member of a large extended family, and each family member maintains a tremendous respect for those both younger and older. I continually witness interactions between teens (of both genders) and small children that are the type of engagement that all of us in the child care profession wish we could see every day in our classrooms. Young men and women instinctively play with and nurture the little ones around them, then turn and offer the same respectful attention to their grandmothers and grandfathers. Every conversation is speckled with "sirs" and "ma'ams." Obedience, respect, and a sense that the parents and grandparents are held in veneration characterize the interpersonal interactions. Young children are provided with the role models that help them develop their own understanding of respect and the influential role of manners.

When we first arrived, my wife was very uncomfortable hearing people close to her own age calling her ma'am. To our big city ears, being called sir or ma'am was like being labeled over the hill. Now it has become a natural part of our everyday language and it feels good. It does come with some risk. I was raised in a typical nuclear family (in fact, scientists from Los Alamos got many of their best insights from observing our family gatherings!) where manners were exercised on occasion, but were not a focal point. I do once recall politely asking to be excused from the dinner table to attend to the wounds on my hand received when I attempted to take a pork chop off of my brother's plate. Some things never change. On a recent trip to visit family in New York, I let slip a ma'am to my mother; I learned that even in her seventies she can still handle a wooden spoon!

Manners can and should be taught. I read a study (or it might have been an episode of "The Twilight Zone," but the point is the same) that discussed research done in ancient Greece to determine the Mother Language. Apparently there was a controversy over which language, Latin or Greek, was the original language. In an effort to conclude the argument, several infants were selected to be cared for in a very controlled environment that included being exposed only to caregivers that had no speech. The idea was that if the language of the adults around them did not influence the children, their language development would be uncontaminated and whichever language they ultimately acquired would be the Original Language.

As we can now predict, the infants' language development was significantly delayed because they had no speech to model, no patterns to incorporate into their

own development. Children's learning cannot occur in a vacuum. Children learn through their experiences, by touching, exploring and problem solving. Children learn from each other and from the resources and people in their immediate environment. Self-esteem, respect, and manners are no different than language. If infants and young children are surrounded by influential caregivers that either lack these characteristics or are reluctant to include them in the curriculum, then the children will grow up without the language of respect and manners.

Concern that including values education in our child care classrooms will open the door to our children being exposed to values different from the family has hamstrung our child care system. Certainly we, as parents, need to be concerned. However, we cannot be short sighted and think that children in the care of others for eight to ten hours a day are not already being influenced. That is what makes parents such a vital component in the partnership that needs to exist between the center and the home. By collaborating, assessing and monitoring we can all rest assured that children in child care are receiving the best of both worlds.

The development of manners and respect can be codified into simple terms and steps to best prepare our children to enter the new millennium. To borrow from (and edit slightly) Superman: Truth, Justice, and the Global Way can be the cornerstones of the development of respect and manners. Children, more than ever, will be exposed to many cultures and many influences as they become young adults. They need a road map to help them. Emphasis on respect for self and others, the ability to accommodate to and accept differences, and knowing when not to use CAPS in a chat room can provide that map.

Early childhood educators can access the many resources available to them to help develop relevant and developmentally appropriate manners lessons. Children's books, tapes, and computer software dealing with the topic have proliferated and can be readily found. The Internet resources are abundant from lesson plans to thematic units. As with all resources, caregivers need to feel comfortable adapting materials to the specific needs of their children. Most importantly though, caregivers can only teach respect when they demonstrate respect. Children are very intuitive and are always observing how the adults in their world treat them and treat each other. They have no difficulty perceiving a false note. When caregivers are consistently polite and respectful, inquisitive and inquiring, nurturing and kind — children will benefit — and follow suit.

To make caregivers' jobs even more difficult, there is a tremendous amount of confusion about the difference between good manners and sexism. We live in an era when being kind and respectful are construed as being sexist and demeaning. We need to help children understand that to live in a global society everyone's role is constantly shifting and being redefined, that any gesture offered with good intent and rooted in respect should be accepted for how it is intended. It should not be offensive to care about each other and to demonstrate that caring by offering a helpful hand or a heartfelt compliment. It is very likely that we will all need that help at some time in our lives, regardless of age or gender.

There is a very important exception to this — when assigned the center seat on an airplane or jet! If seated in the center seat, the only rule to abide by is it's every man or woman for him or herself! No greater battle over territory was ever fought than trying to get space on the armrest. No maneuver can be deemed a flagrant foul, whether it be the subtle yawn/stretch/claim or the spill-the-ice-water-on-the-neighbor's-lap and grab the space when he yelps and jumps. Modern air travel has no room for overhead luggage, bellies under the dining trays — or manners. If you are on either side of me on your next flight, beware. I've got Ben Hur elbow pads equipped with miniature chariot hubs!

So unless you are teaching at thirty thousand feet — make manners and respect a part of your classroom. And remember your "magic words" (it is unlikely that any adult under the age of one zillion has not said to a child "What is the magic word?"). There truly is magic in manners. "Please" and "thank you" are the magic incantations that cause people around us to feel respected and appreciated — the magic that can open closed doors and closed hearts.

It is incumbent upon each of us in the child care world to pass that magic onto the children in our care. To nurture and nourish the culture of manners and respect. All of us have the right and the obligation to challenge our children to become the standard bearers of the next generation of caring, respectful adults. Although they do not believe it now, they will soon become the elders that another generation will look upon to guide them through the miasma of tomorrow. Make certain that they have something valuable to share. Encourage our children to adhere to the belief that life and learning are a "Talking Circle" where each of us is important for both our similarities and our differences and that when we respect ourselves it is easier to respect each other.