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Raising Polite Preschoolers

We probably don't have to convince you that manners matter, but what you may not realize is that the preschool years are prime time to emphasize etiquette. Three- and four-year-olds have an insatiable desire to learn, master new skills, and please you. Although your child may seem too young to follow certain rules, the first steps she takes into the world of good manners will eventually translate into the ability to handle social situations with confidence in herself and respect for the needs and feelings of others. Keep in mind that this is a gradual process. You'll have to remind and coax her for years to come. Here are eight ways to get started:

ESTABLISH BASIC STANDARDS

It's important to set clear limits about considerate behavior ("We knock before entering a room when the door is closed"), just like you do for safety issues ("We don't cross the street without holding hands"). Before your child develops his own conscience, he'll learn to regulate his behavior on the basis of the way you discipline.

TALK ABOUT VALUES IN CONCRETE TERMS

Use simple language that your child can understand ("It's good to be quiet when someone else is speaking" or "It's wrong to hit anyone, even when you are angry"). If you consistently demonstrate the link between respect and behavior, your child will think, "That's how I want to act and be treated."

EMPHASIZE EMPATHY

Because they're just starting to be able to identify with other people, preschoolers are not instinctively considerate. To make your child more aware of others' feelings, point out when people do something helpful or thoughtful, and talk about how their actions make you feel. You can also use books to encourage empathy. When you read the story about Cinderella, for example, talk about how sad Cinderella is because her sisters are mean to her.

BELIEVE IN MAGIC WORDS

When it comes to saying "please", "thank you", "you're welcome", and "excuse me", you need to be a good role model at all times. Tell your child that when he wants something, or when a person is nice and helpful to him, it's important to be nice in return. If he forgets to use

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polite phrases, gently remind him ("What's the magic word?" or "What do you say?") or calmly rephrase his demand ("Mommy, get my juice box!") in an acceptable way ("Mommy, may I please have my juice box?")

SET THE STAGE FOR SHARING

Although sharing doesn't come naturally, most preschoolers start to realize that it has benefits. Taking turns helps them make friends and play happily with others. To promote sharing, encourage empathy, but also rely on discipline. If your child grabs a playmate's toy, tell him the behavior is unacceptable ("It's not okay to take a friend's toy without asking"). Help him see the other person's point of view ("How do you think Tommy felt when you took his toy?"), and then help him make things right ("Please give Tommy the toy and tell him you're sorry"). You can also suggest alternative solutions ("Let's ask if you can have the toy when he's done").

FOCUS ON MEETING AND GREETING

Preschoolers are ready to learn more than "hi" and "bye." Your child may be wary of strangers and avert her eyes when introduced to someone new, but you should teach her to look directly at the person and say "hello." Encourage her to greet by name those people she already knows. Also, remind her that she needs to say "good-bye" and "thank you" before leaving a party or a friend's house. Your child can also start practicing shaking hands with relatives or family friends.

EXPLAIN WHY BEING POLITE IS IMPORTANT

Go for the obvious. Good manners make others feel good. Kids want to be liked, so tell your child that people like people who are polite. Similarly, teach her the meaning of words like rude and impolite by explaining that doing something rude or thoughtless makes people feel bad. Rather than use real-life examples, make up ones that appeal to your child's imagination ("What if your teddy bear talked so much that you never got to say a word? Would you feel mad?")

TEACH ABOUT "BIG VOICE" AND "LITTLE VOICE"

Explain to your child that there are places where it's okay for him to be loud and places where he must be quiet. It may be helpful to identify certain voices with familiar situations. His "church voice", for example, might be a whisper, while his "mealtime voice" is moderate in tone. Remember to compliment your child when he uses the right voice at the right time.

DON'T INTERRUPT

It's particularly hard for preschoolers to wait their turn to talk when they're dying to say something. Explain that interrupting makes other people feel angry or upset. When your child does interrupt you, tell her that you will talk to her in a few moments, then return to your conversation. Even if you end your conversation fairly quickly, don't give your child the impression that you are giving in to her demands.

FOUR STEPS TO GOOD PHONE MANNERS

- **Greetings**
Teach your child that whenever she takes the phone from you, she should begin with a simple, clear greeting ("Hello, this is Justine"). She may forget to do this when she's excited to talk, so emphasize how important it is to say her name, even if it's her grandparents on the other end.
- **Volume**
Preschoolers often start off speaking normally but get louder or drop off to a barely audible whisper. You might use simple hand signals to indicate when her voice is too strong or too soft.
- **Duration**
Once your child gets used to the telephone, she may want to stay on for a long time. Don't interrupt her mid-thought, but when you hear the conversation winding down or notice she's repeating herself, signal or tell her that it's time to say good-bye.
- **Closing**
Teach your child never to hang up or give the receiver back to you unless she has said "good-bye" to the caller, and remind her that saying "good-bye" is just as important as "hello".

TABLE MANNERS

Since your child will learn good table manners from watching you, try to have meals together as a family several times a week, instead of always feeding her early. Your preschooler may have fun playing with her food, but it's important for her to gradually learn and practice these basics:

- **Wash hands.** This is a must. At 3, he'll probably need help turning on the faucet, but by 5, he should be able to wash his hands on his own. Inspect his hands before meals and snack time. If he's done a poor job, insist that he wash again.
- **Stay seated – and no wiggling.** Whether your child is using a booster seat or a regular chair, teach her to remain seated while eating – keeping all four legs of the chair on the floor – and to ask to be excused when she's finished. Use a napkin. Even if your preschooler is still wearing a bib, he can learn to use a napkin. Show him how to put his napkin in his lap and to use it to wipe his mouth and hands.

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- **Say "please" when asking for items on the table.** Demonstrate the correct form ("Will you please pass the salt, Emily?"), and be sure to say "thank you" afterward. Point out, however, that she should not talk with her mouth full.
- **Eat with utensils, not fingers.** Don't worry too much about your child's hand position. At this stage, it's just important for him to practice using a spoon and fork, rather than his hands (unless he's eating a sandwich, corn on the cob, or other finger food), and to bring food to his mouth, not his mouth to the plate.
- **Don't make bad comments about the food.** Preschoolers love to let you know when they think a food is yucky. Explain that the food is delicious to other people and that negative comments are hurtful to the person who worked hard to prepare it. Tell your child that she should just say "No thank you" if she's offered a food she doesn't like.

At the table and elsewhere, always keep in mind that your actions speak louder than your word. When you're courteous, patient, generous, and understanding, you'll set an example for your child of how to act and interact. As he gets older, he'll be exposed to countless examples of rude behavior in the media, but you are his most important teacher and role model. Showing your child the nice ways to get what he wants is a gift that will benefit him throughout life.