

Manners, Naturally

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BY DONOHUE SHORTRIDGE

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“Being considerate of others will take your children further in life than any college degree.”

This quote, often attributed to children’s rights activist Marian Wright Edelman, came to mind recently. Walking toward my local market, I could hear the jovial banter between a father and son, who were about ten steps behind me—something about a birthday later that day and their mission to get the cake. Listening to his vocabulary and articulation, I estimated the boy to be 4 years old. Just as I reached the front door, the boy rushed past me, yanked the door open, and was halfway into the store when Dad called him back. “Let’s hold the door open for this lady, son.”

I looked at them both as I entered, said “thank you,” and then we were all off, each into our separate worlds—they to the bakery department and I to the produce section.

Dad managed the episode with grace because he didn’t react as though his child should know better; he understood that the boy’s rushing was due to 4-year-old exuberance (it would be different if the boy were 10). At the same time, the father did not let the opportunity pass to demonstrate to his son what to do.

That is the secret. We teach our children manners in the million moments we have with them. The episodes often come up without warning and can catch us off guard. What should we keep in mind so that when an opportunity presents itself to show our child what to do, we too will handle it with grace?

Our children adore us.

They love us with their entire being. Whatever we do, they want to do. They want to be close to us; they want to watch us, hear us, learn from us, and be loved by us. They want to be just like us. So instilling manners, aka “social competence,” is simple and natural in these early years, from the age of 3 or 4 on.

Now is the time.

Young children want to know—actually, crave knowing—the right thing to do. Their bodies and minds have grown beyond the toddler stage. Now that they are sturdy on their feet and language can be employed in meaningful communication, they are ready for the next phase of self-construction: socialization. They encounter the world as if asking, “What am I to do here? And would someone please show me how?”

Correcting is not the same as modeling.

Like the rest of us, children are easily shamed. If the father at the market had said, “Watch out, son, you’re in that lady’s way,” the boy would have felt judgment, rather than learning what he should have done. Thus, even if we are annoyed or embarrassed by our young child’s behavior, our exasperation is not the lesson—there is another way. Trust that the conduct is not malicious but likely stems from the child not knowing what to do. Then demonstrate what we want our child to learn. Dad didn’t need to say anything further to his 4-year-old son; the boy absorbed the lesson. And if Dad does the same thing the next time and the next, the lesson will be reinforced.

Parents are the most potent teachers of social norms. What we show our children, they will do. Even so, for our lessons to adhere, we must be consistent and positive. And most important, we must model the behavior we want to instill in our children.

As Maria Montessori said, “What is social life if not the solving of social problems, behaving properly, and pursuing aims acceptable to all?”

About the Author

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References

Montessori, M. (1995). *The absorbent mind*. New York: Henry Holt, p. 225.

Suggested Reading

Aliki. (1997). *Manners*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

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