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We all see kids acting up in public -- running, yelling, pushing and shoving. "They behave as though there was no one in the world except themselves," says Letitia Baldrige, District resident, former social secretary to first lady Jackie Kennedy and author of the forthcoming book "New Manners for New Times."

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"These children don't understand the adult world, with its systems of rules, punishment and rewards," Baldrige says, "and they lack a feeling of empathy to please others or to help people in trouble."

Disrespect and bad manners have risen to new heights. Bad behavior seems to be the rule, rather than the exception. What's with our kids? Why are our children so rude?

According to P.M. Forni, Johns Hopkins professor and author of "Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct," good manners are about self-control and consideration. "As a society, we have done a good job encouraging self-esteem in children, but not as good a job teaching self-control," Forni says.

Pediatrician Cathryn Tobin contends that busy, frazzled parents have no time to teach kids manners when they're always running late. "Today's parenting style places a higher value on love than limits, so when Mom and Dad finally put their foot down, it's done in a knee-jerk fashion. This reactive discipline leads to carried grudges, bad attitudes and pent-up anger, resulting in back talk, bad manners and rudeness," says Tobin, author of "The Parent's Problem Solver."

Many experts partially blame the media. "Television plays a huge role in instructing children how they should act," says Steven C. Atkins, associate professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the

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Dartmouth Medical School. Atkins contends that much of the behavior portrayed on TV is rude.

Michael Toomey, a father of three from Northborough, Mass., has restricted his youngest children from certain programs. "I've seen a lot of children's TV programming," Toomey says. "Even though it's considered children's television, the kids portrayed have such bad attitudes that the shows are offensive."

In the early '90s, Toomey noticed that Nickelodeon started airing cartoons and children's programs that portrayed parents as slobs, stupid and useless. The kids were always the wisest. The children would consistently tell the parents who, what, when, where and why something would or wouldn't get done. The kids always won. "My theory is that disrespect may be getting reinforced by children's programming that most parents don't take the time to scrutinize, let alone try to correct," Toomey says. "The more children's networks I watch, the more prevalent the trend seems to be growing."

Today's children live in a totally different world from the one their parents grew up in. They listen to Eminem, watch Ozzy Osbourne and play violent video games. One parent, Corinne Gregory, decided she wasn't going to take it anymore. In 2001, Gregory, a mother of three young girls, founded PoliteChild, a for-profit program that teaches children strong social skills, good behavior, manners and proper etiquette. "I see it as my mission . . . to put the 'civil' back into civilization," says Gregory, who advocates major social change in the way children conduct

themselves.

Her program, which is based in Woodinville, Wash., is offered in schools and organizations in that state and in California. Kindness, compassion, respect and the Golden Rule -- "these fundamental concepts are the building blocks of good manners and enable children to understand why good manners are important," she says. "When children learn the 'why,' they are better prepared to make good moral decisions when they encounter a situation in which they have not been specifically trained."

Politeness is caring about other people's feelings. Children who are polite are nicer to be around. They do better in every way. When you teach children good manners, you're giving them an important life skill, a veritable leg up.

Studies show that 85 percent of success (more than education level, demographics, and who you know, combined) depends on a person's social skills. By building solid foundations for learning and using proper behavior, young people will feel comfortable and proficient in handling social interactions and situations.

Okay. So you'll censor the TV, but what do you do when the kids go over to a friend's house and watch the show that you don't allow? "Better to watch some of the shows together and comment on what you and your child observe in light of the behavior and moral structure you're trying to develop at home," Gregory says. "What you do will differ, depending on the situation. You must not only provide rules, but a foundation for learning them -- like the Golden Rule. You will likely come out of the situation fine if you think about how you would want to be treated in a similar situation. Children will operate from the right motivations, not just from knowing how to act when it's convenient and necessary."

Among Corinne Gregory's suggestions for parents:

- If taking turns in a conversation seems to be a problem in your family, use a Koosh or other soft-type ball as a tangible training aid. Only the person who "has the ball" may speak, and must pass it on to someone else in the group to keep the conversation going.
- Have your child get used to the process of thank-you notes early. Even a toddler is old enough to "color" a note for Grandma or decorate a piece of paper with stickers. Explain why you're doing it as you're doing it. As children get older, they can take more responsibility for signing their names, adding words, then later writing the full note.
- It's never too early to start teaching your child good manners. You can even ask a baby to "please give Mommy (or Daddy) the toy" and say "thank you" when you've been given the object you requested. If your baby sneezes, don't feel funny about saying "Bless you." "Yes, please," "no, thank you" and "excuse me" are other phrases you can use with a child as early as you please.
- Teach and expect your children to show respect to elders and other people in authority. While many people seem to believe it's okay for children to call adults by their first names, it really is much more respectful of a child to address an adult using a proper title: Mr., Mrs., etc. If the adult in question is a close family friend, you can use the old Southern tradition of calling a friend "Miss Nancy" or "Mr. Jack."
- If a specific social situation is coming up, such as a wedding or get-together, role-play the event with your kids. Tell them as much information as you can -- who will be there, what there will be to eat/drink or to do. Tell your kids what specific expectations you have of them at the event -- that they are to shake hands when they greet the host, or that they are to be quiet when the church music starts, etc. Just telling a child to "be on your best behavior" is too vague. Their idea of "best behavior" may be vastly different than what you had in mind.
- Catch your kids "doing right." Praise positive behavior when you see it and tell them specifically what you approve of and observed. Don't simply say, "Thank you for being nice" but instead say, "I saw how kind you were being to your sister when you helped her with that tough math problem." It's also helpful sometimes to let them "overhear" you talking to another adult about a particular behavior you were proud of. Remember, children want positive praise and recognition just as we all do, but they'll take negative attention over being ignored.

- Conversely, when they do slip up, keep your responses proportionate to the "crime." If you're in a public place, such as a restaurant, perhaps you can quietly ask your son or daughter to chew with his or her mouth closed rather than make a public spectacle of it. You don't like to be reprimanded in front of others; treat your children with the same respect that you would like them to show you.

- Never underestimate the power of a kind word. Just as you can ruin someone's day with one rude remark or gesture, you can make it with a simple kind act or word.

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