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Kids learn to mind their manners

Students of Sacred Heart School learn lesson in social skills

By Jennifer Chen

The Desert Sun

March 6th, 2003

Corinne Gregory got blank stares when she asked the eighth-graders if they'd ever heard of Miss Manners.

"How many people have been introduced to the Queen?" asked the youthful looking 39-year-old brunette. None of the Sacred Heart Catholic School students raised their hands.

Gregory was teaching the Palm Desert school's first Politechild class, an eight-part Teens Basic Skills program for 13-year-olds who will learn everything from the Golden Rule to tipping and how to set a table.

In one hour, the 23 students learned magic words, \$10-terms like credo and protocol, and even a secret code: THOR, which stands for "The Height of Rudeness."

The eighth-graders waved their hands in the air as Gregory asked for examples of good and bad behavior.

One student said a stranger gave him money to buy some candy. "You weren't sitting on the sidewalk with a sign?" Gregory asked.

A new generation

Although cell phones and the Internet have replaced society cotillions and white gloves, the foundations of good behavior remain the same. Gregory founded Politechild because she felt that good moral character is as important as ever.

"If you don't have social skills, you're going to have a harder time," Gregory said. "Think about Mike Tyson."

Children don't have manners and good moral values anymore, she said. "The rudeness is the rule, not the exception."

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Not everyone thinks so.

Dan Bass, director of the Jewish Family Service in Palm Springs and a licensed clinical social worker, disagrees. "Kids are no different than what I was accustomed to growing up with," he said.

But anything that improves children's behavior is a good thing, he added.

Gregory designed the first program for children younger than 5. Although she doesn't have a teaching background, Gregory does have three young daughters, ages 2, 4 and 6.

"I come at this from the perspective of a mom," she said. "The best thing we can do for our kids is to raise them as socially smart, socially adept and socially conscious kids."

How early should a child start? "The minute they're born if you ask me," Gregory said. She offers various programs for 3- to 13-year-olds.

Gregory taught her first class in Woodinville, Wash. After that, she said, the word spread by word of mouth.

Sacred Heart is Politechild's first school outside of Washington state's 12 "member schools." Sacred Heart principal Joan Griffin decided the eighth-graders could use the class to prepare for high school and boost their self-confidence. "Youngsters today need that," she said.

A positive experience

Matthew Grimalda said the class was a good experience. Proper behavior doesn't just happen to children, said the 13-year-old. "They have to be taught it."

Erin Hoy, 13, also thought the class was a good idea. "I'd be happy to learn some new skills for when I go into high school," she said.

Her father, Philip Hoy, said, "We like to think as her parents we're her best models, but anytime she gets to practice those skills, that has to be good."

Word is spreading. Marywood Country Day School in Rancho Mirage starts Politechild classes in March, and Gregory said she is also talking to other schools.

Although Gregory considers herself a specialist in social skills, she is a far cry from etiquette columnist Miss Manners. She's just a mother with young kids, she said. "I'm not one of the old

guard."

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