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Manners, Manners, Everywhere...



It's not really about tea parties anymore. The what's, why's, and how's of good behavior.

By Corinne Gregory

Kids and manners. We know it's important and we know we need to start early. But, there are still many parents who aren't sure what to teach, how to teach it, or why it's even necessary. If you ask parents these days if they feel teaching their children etiquette is important, most will tell you "not really." Living in a much more informal society these days, parents feel that etiquette isn't really as important today as it has been in the past. But, ask those same parents if they think their children would benefit from being more polite or having better social skills, they'll overwhelmingly respond "yes!" So what's the difference?

Etiquette vs. Manners vs. Social Skills

While people often use these phrases interchangeably, raising a courteous and kind child involves more than just teaching "etiquette" and behavior rules. Really we are teaching our kids the social rules of engagement. Not only how to behave, and in what circumstances, but why.

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Etiquette refers to a strict set of rules for behavior in specific circumstances. Think protocol. Manners, too, are focused primarily on behaviors, but really refer to a commonly accepted norm of behavior given a certain situation. Both of these concepts are about outward actions. Social skills refers to a deeper, more fundamental layer involving not only the actions, but also the fundamental foundations – the motivators – of these actions. For example, when we hold the door open for someone (manners), we do that because of the motivators of respect and courtesy (social skills). Our actions need to start from the motivators so that we are not only acting like a kind, courteous person when it suits us, but that we genuinely are that kind, courteous person all the time.

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The Importance of Social Skills

Why is this important? We are all working hard to make sure our children go to good schools, are getting good grades, have a good balance of extracurricular activities like sports and art while penciling in some play time too. Why work on developing their manners and social skills? Because it literally is the most important thing you can do for their future success!

Repeated studies show that a child's social skills will be the number one factor influencing his or her future success – more than academic achievement, more than family background and socio-economic status, more than the “who you know” factor. In fact, social skills are more important than all of those other factors combined!

If that seems far-fetched, consider this: if you can't get along with people, if you don't know how to behave appropriately in a variety of situations, it really doesn't matter how smart you are or how good you are at what you do, does it? And, the reverse is true: good social skills can make up for a lack in education, financial resources, or connections. If you know how to conduct yourself and how to get along with others, you'll go much farther in this life than those might not.

Not just a “Nice to Have”

The issue of good social skills isn't just a nicety to have in our interpersonal bag of tricks. Treating others with courtesy, kindness, and respect may actually be a survival skill in today's often-abrasive and confrontational world. It really is rough out there, and we need to equip our children with the skills they need to smoothly navigate life's challenges.

You've no doubt heard of “street smarts” — the skills and learned behaviors you need to survive in the urban jungle of our inner-city streets.

Well, we have coined a term for we are teaching kids that gives them social survival skills: “SocialSmarts.™” SocialSmarts provides our children with the ability to be socially adept and confident in any circumstance, even those they may not have encountered before. The increasing rate of violence and aggression school-age children are encountering speaks to the need for a return to attitudes and behaviors that defuse conflicts before they occur, and promote greater civility towards one another. When current statistics show that our children stand a 1 in 4 chance of becoming the victim of some form of school-based violence or harassment, it's clear that we have a major problem overall with the level of social skills and character development in many of our young people. Something has to change.

We Can do Better

The good news about social skills is that these can truly be learned at any age. Certainly the earlier you begin to instill positive behaviors and character lessons in your child, the easier it will come and the more likely the lessons will stick. But it's never too late to start. Babies and toddlers will learn manners and behaviors – good or bad – the way they learn anything else: by observation, experimentation, and repetition.

It's important that parents be aware of the modeling we are doing for our kids when we are trying to teach them good lifeskills and moral lessons. Older children, too, can learn better ways of conduct and behavior when they see why it's important and what's in it for them.

Good social skills help us get more of what we really want, more easily and with less stress, and a whole lot less of what we don't want. And, a terrific by-product is that it will make our entire society a better place – for all of us.

Corinne Gregory is a freelance writer and editor, creator of the SocialSmarts™ program from The PoliteChild®, and a mother of three. She welcomes all comments and can be reached at corinneg@politechild.com. More information can be found on the company's website at www.socialsmarts.com or www.politechild.com.

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