

It's More than "Manners":

Helping Children Become Sensitive, Respectful Guests and Hosts

Thanksgiving and the other upcoming holidays are a perfect time to help your children, whatever their ages, learn and practice good manners. And it's more than just going through the motions of saying "please" and "thank you" and knowing which fork to use; good manners are about building empathy and respect, qualities to carry children through countless situations throughout their lives. Here are some practical tips:

I. Underlying issues

- Some people think of manners or etiquette as an old-fashioned concept. But good manners are about understanding and respecting for other people's feelings, and that kind of empathy and sensitivity is always in fashion.
- It's never too early to begin teaching your children good manners and the holidays involve lots of teachable moments, from large family meals to gift-giving and receiving. And, especially with younger children, learning good manners can actually be fun!

II. Tips for parents

- Practice mealtime basics
These may include using silverware, not fingers; using napkins, not sleeves; saying "please" and "thank you"; staying in your seat until everyone has finished eating; turning off electronics during the meal. With young kids, make it fun by pretending you are having lunch with the queen of England or the president of the U.S.
- Teach host and guest behaviors
How do you make a guest feel welcome? What is the best way to share your toys with other children who are at your house? If you are the guest, what do you say when they offer you something to eat or an activity to do? What is the polite way to refuse something you don't like? What should you say when you leave? And how about writing a thank you note the next day?
- Role-play awkward situations
What should you say when you receive a gift that you don't really like? What if you are a picky eater and you don't care for the food the host serves? What if the children of the household are not sharing toys with you or are being rude? What if you need to go to the bathroom and you don't know where it is? Again, playful role-playing can help children learn and practice what to say in those situations. Practice helps those behaviors come automatically when you are in the real situation.
- Emphasize empathy and appreciation
Even if you don't like the food that is served or you don't care for the present you receive, how can you focus on the generosity and kindness of the person for making the effort? How do you think that person would feel if you didn't show appreciation? If another child who's visiting your home is shy and holding back, how can you help make that child feel more comfortable?