

# Kids Don't Say 'Yes, Ma'am' Anymore, but Politeness Is Still in Fashion

Manners help teach tolerance, empathy and appropriate boundaries. Instilling them early, experts say, gives children a “superpower.”

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When I was growing up, I couldn't leave the dinner table without asking my parents' permission. I had to answer our family phone with — I still can't believe this, actually — “Dunn residence, Jancee speaking.” If my Alabama-born mother had a request, my mandatory response was “yes, ma'am.” And I would never have dreamed of addressing my friend's mother as “Lynn” — it was “Mrs. Mays,” then and now.

I grew up in the 1970s, mind you. And I wasn't living below-stairs in “Downton Abbey,” but in a split-level house in a New Jersey suburb. Yet that's how curiously antique some of these behaviors now seem.

It's no secret that we live in a more informal age. Families eat on the go at kitchen islands, kids call teachers and doctors by their first names and the use of “please” and “thank you” often seems optional. Rather than answering landline phones, today's tech-savvy young children bark commands at Amazon's virtual assistant, Alexa; this so irked parents that, last spring, the company rolled out a “Kids Edition” of the device, which rewards a child's “thank you” with either “you're welcome,” or the Millennial-friendly “no worries.”

Is there a baseline of good manners that Kids These Days should be expected to practice? Of course, notions of politeness can vary wildly between cultures — and even between parts of the United States. But using manners is still important, said New York City psychologist Melissa Robinson-Brown, Ph.D., and should not be taught to young children merely because they're rules to be followed. “Manners communicate that you respect another person and acknowledge that the person has feelings, and they can be impacted by your behavior,” she said. “Young children understand way more than we think.”

And research shows that learning manners at an early age can bring long-term benefits. A 20-year study published in 2015 in the *American Journal of Public Health* found a strong association between kids' social skills in kindergarten and their success and wellbeing in adulthood; a 2016 study of more than 9,000 kindergartners by the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing had similar findings.

It's not just about landing a good job later in life. Parents who praise their kids for showing sympathy and courtesy and who regularly talk to them about imagining how others feel are

laying the foundation for empathy to blossom, said Dr. Jennifer Trachtenberg, M.D., an assistant clinical professor of pediatrics at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. “They’re life skills that help so much with our social and emotional I.Q. — things like recognizing social cues and developing good listening skills,” she said.

Research has found that kids as young as 14 months will show “empathic concern” for others. “We’re a very cooperative species,” said Susan Gelman, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and linguistics at the University of Michigan. “And we know that even babies engage in turn-taking — they wait for the other person to stop, and then they’ll vocalize, and then they’ll stop.”

What manners should young children have?

For starters, all verbal kids up to the age of 6 should be able to say “please,” “thank you” and “you’re welcome,” said Elaine Swann, a Los Angeles-based etiquette expert who runs manners classes for children at The Swann School of Protocol. From toddlerhood on, kids can master a simple handshake; know the difference between “inside” and “outside” voices; and be taught to wait for a break in adults’ discussions before interrupting, “rather than just butting in with an ‘excuse me’ and expecting that to be the magic phrase to stop all conversation,” said Swann.

For children with special needs, the age when they can pick up basic manners “depends on their ability levels, particularly with expressive verbal communication, but also the cognitive reasoning to understand why to use those words,” said Dr. Trachtenberg, who has a son with autism.

And when kids are addressing grownups, said Daniel Post Senning of the Emily Post Institute, they should at least try to make eye contact — which he knows can be tough for some children. “You can teach kids to look at the bridge of someone’s nose,” he suggested. “It gives them something specific to do in that moment.”

Swann tells kids that if an adult asks a question, they should try to hold that person’s gaze when they give an answer. “I’ll say, ‘If someone asks how old you are, look at them when you say “5,” and then you can look away,’” she said.

And even the youngest children can have a hand in thank you notes, said Senning. “If your child is very young, involve them by writing a note as they sit with you,” he suggested. “At the end, they can scrawl their name or include a drawing.” He favors handwritten notes, but kids can show appreciation with a phone call or a brief video of the child playing with the new toy Grandpa sent and saying thanks.

And the ability to acknowledge a mistake with “I’m sorry” is also important, Senning said. “Everyone thinks of manners as exemplary behavior, but how we conduct ourselves when things aren’t going well is a bigger test of our people skills.”

Maybe modern-day manners are not as formal as in generations past, but in some ways, they’ve improved — they’re less about what fork to use and more about tolerance and respect for others’ differences. And anyone whose child has undertaken an elementary school “cool to be kind” initiative knows that being kind is a very 21st-century value.

“The way we teach kids under 6 to be considerate is to say that we don’t do, or say, anything to other people that’s going to make them ... mad, sad or embarrassed,” Swann said. “We ask a lot of ‘what if’ questions, like ‘If you did this, how do you think that would make someone else feel?’”

There is also a welcome emphasis on boundaries: Often, kids are no longer expected to hug someone just because they’re asked. This, too, is a positive development, Dr. Brown said: “Otherwise, in some cases, it can set kids up to believe that if adults, especially family, ever make them feel uncomfortable, then the child just has to tolerate that.”

“There could be a variety of reasons why your child doesn’t want to kiss Uncle Jimmy,” Dr. Trachtenberg noted. “Some kids are just very shy, and if you force them, they recoil more, because they haven’t warmed up to the person yet.”

Nowadays, children are even encouraged to use boundaries with each other. A video that made the social media rounds last fall featured a boy who was the enthusiastic “morning greeter” for a preschool class in Lone Tree, Iowa.

Students could choose their greeting: a hug, handshake, high five or fist bump. (There was everything but a “polite nod” option.)

Ultimately, all the experts agreed that teaching your child manners isn’t enough — that parents need to model what they teach. You can’t jabber on the phone while tossing a credit card at the CVS clerk and then expect your child to be courteous. As Senning said, “Be the kind of person that you want your kids to be.”

If you do, the payoff is huge, Swann said. “I tell kids, ‘People will respond to you very favorably when you are polite,’” she said. “Doors will open to you, and you’ll get more of what you want. Think of it as a superpower.”