

courtesy call

ARE YOU TEACHING YOUR CHILD THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD MANNERS?

hildren today circulate in an increasingly casual world, a culture of text messages, the Internet and video games, where it's possible to go days without personal interaction. To some, the term "etiquette" seems to be a dusty relic-relegated to history like white gloves and the horse and buggy-but have good manners gone out of style?

"Manners are the grease by which society flows more smoothly," says Linda Muskin, a Highland Park, Ill., mother of 16-year-old twins, who has been teaching her kids lessons in courtesy since they were 2 years old. "Society is much more casual than it used to be, so people really

notice a more formal set of etiquette standards. When people say to me, 'Oh, your kids have such nice manners.' I think that maybe this isn't the norm. It should be, though. Shifts in social mores may have made etiquette less common, but not less important."

According to a 2002 study by the Public Agenda Research Group, manners are still important to 79 percent of Americans who believe lack of respect and courtesy is a "serious national problem."

In order to become a natural part of a child's personality, manners have to be built over the course of a child's life. Dr. Pamela G. Dorsett, a clinical psychologist

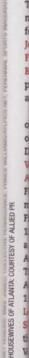
with the Behavioral Institute of Atlanta, says that most children can begin learning as soon as they have acquired language. "We kind of naturally start teaching our kids manners as toddlers," says Dorsett. "We encourage them to ask 'please' for things, to say 'thank you,' that you don't hit-just very basic kinds of things that we may not even recognize as manners, but are very important in social skills development for the child."

In addition to "please" and "thank you," as well as playground lessons like sharing and taking turns, very basic table manners can also be introduced to young kids. By letting kids know early what is unacceptable behavior at mealsslurping, squirming, playing with or picking up food with the fingers-

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parents lay the groundwork for more advanced table manners. As children enter school, these lessons can expand to encompass the new and more complex situations they will encounter. According to Charlotte Ford, author of 21st-Century Etiquette, by the time children reach preteen years, they should be wellversed in the use of cutlery, sitting with their napkins in their laps, politely ordering from wait staff, asking for food items to be passed and able to maintain pleasant table conversation. In addition, she says more refined etiquette lessons can extend to writing thank-you notes for gifts they receive, practically from the time they can write their names.

Muskin is especially insistent on this rule with her children. "In our house," she says, "we put a rule in —continued on page 106





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When a family tragedy rattled their foundation, Shana suggested couples therapy immediately and Donald refused, citing his mistrust for medical professionals. Shana read several books on rebuilding a marriage and tried small and large ways to bring Donald to her side.

"I put little notes in his lunchbox. I arranged a sitter so that we could have a standing, weekly date night. I sent him occasional no-reason 'I love you' text messages. And I made sure that I asked him about his day."

Donald remained unresponsive. And after a year, Shana was done.

"If a car breaks down once or twice, you get it fixed," Shana says. "But eventually, there may be a point when a mechanic will tell you it's a lost cause."

It was only after Shana left her husband that he became receptive to her quest to communicate.

"I was living at home with my parents and Donald was sending me letters, telling me how much he loved me. I would get random e-mails and voicemails at work, too. All the things I'd tried when we were still together."

Shana is still living with her parents but neither she nor Donald has filed for divorce. She is holding out some hope that they can reconcile now that Donald seems to have discovered the value of the tune-up.

"What's sad is that it took a complete breakdown for Donald to come around. Maybe he needed to do things in his own time. But I'm disappointed that we couldn't have worked it out earlier. It will be definitely much harder now to repair the relationship than it would have been eighteen months ago."

Waugh agrees that it will be difficult but not impossible. With hard work and a dedication to a common cause, Shana and Donald can reunite successfully. Waugh cautions that as they move forward, they remember what it will take to stay the course.

"Shana and Donald don't have to agree on everything or see life the same way to have a successful relationship. They just need to be accepting, celebratory and even excited about their differences," says Waugh. "Sometimes that intelligence comes along before you hit a major bump in the road. Sometimes it doesn't click until after a crash. But as long as it happens—that's what's important." "U"

—Additional reporting by Shydel James

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place that you couldn't play with it, wear it or spend it until you wrote the thank-you note."

As their world opens up and leads into dating, Ford points out that teenagers should be further taught more polished social skills, such as learning to issue and decline invitations politely, and learning to give and receive both compliments and criticism with grace. In addition, Leslie McBee, executive director of North Atlanta Cotillion, an etiquette training program for children, stresses the importance of teenagers developing good interpersonal skills and poise.

"Being able to engage in appropriate conversation with anyone—not just their peers—is a crucial skill," she says. "How to stand with presence, make eye contact—these are things that really have to be taught. These help develop real confidence in kids, not bravado."

McBee says well-mannered children not only fare better in their play-date and teen dating years, where other parents tend to exclude the rude and unruly children from social circles, but in the career circuit.

"Bad manners are generally not a good way to make friends and influence people," says Dr. Aaron Cooper, psychologist and author of I Just Ward My Kids To Be Happy: Why You Shouldn't Say It. "[Etiquette] is the earliest training in self-control. It prepares kids for success in their earliest encounters and environments."

Even in adulthood, poor manners can influence career success—a poll by job search site theladders.com reveals that 70 percent of employers would release an employee for disregarding office etiquette.

"Professional firms who have dealing with clients are going to care a lot about a candidate's social skills," says McBee "People with abysmal manners are going to have a hard time getting hired matter how talented they may be."

Ultimately, investing the time and energy required to ensure your child learns the many rules of social behavior is more than worth it. By actively and consistently leading your children behave well, you give them the tools to negotiate comfortably and confidently in any situation.

"It's not complicated," says Muskin.
"Your kids go out into the world with the manners you give them. Are they perfect about it? No. But it's a step in the right direction."

—Jaymi Curley