

Find Your Manners

An Etiquette Expert Helps Kids (and Grown-Ups)

Boost Their Social Skills | BY SARAH LAVENDER SMITH



OUR FAMILY'S DINNER CONVERSATION OFTEN DEVOLVES INTO AN ASSAULT OF REMINDERS aimed at our 7-year-old son's behavior. If we tell him to use a fork or to ask to be excused before bolting from his chair, he might flop like a fish or screech like a chimp—and that's if he's in a good mood.

So, imagine my surprise on the night he willingly set the table—telling me that bread plates go on the left, drinks on the right—and after a peaceful dinner asked,

“May I clear?” When I answered yes and thanked him, he said in all seriousness, “You should pretend your plate is a clock and lay your utensils between the 4 and the 5 when you're done.”

I looked at him as though he had quoted Homer of Ancient Greece instead of Homer Simpson. Who had transformed my son from cave boy to young prince?

The credit goes to the Miss Manners of the East Bay, Sharyn Kennedy Amoroso, who teaches etiquette for all ages at Oakland-area

schools and recreation departments, and at college campuses such as Mills College and Cal's Haas School of Business. Her classes cover essential do's and don'ts for dining, dating, meeting, greeting, hosting and toasting.

“Etiquette is about people skills—your ability to interact with others—and the underlying theme is respect for your clients, family and friends,” Amoroso says. Her after-school classes throughout Alameda and Contra Costa counties are filling up ▶▶



not only with little kids whose parents seek to give them social graces, but also with text-addicted teens whose parents desperately want them to look up from their phones and carry on a polite conversation.

"Etiquette training" may strike some as a fussy or outdated—relevant to few beyond the pumps-and-pearls set—but Amoroso contends that manners matter more than ever, given the heightened hostility and manic multitasking in today's stressed-out society, not to mention the competitive job market.

"Good manners can open more doors than a good education because now, more than ever, a good resume is a dime a dozen," Amoroso says. "When you go through the weaning process, what will open the next door? It's those people skills."

Many child development experts echo her message. They extol the virtues of old-fashioned manners and advocate recasting the whole concept under "social skills," a term that's hot with parents these days, according to Perri Klass, M.D., a pediatrician and columnist for the *New York Times*. It turns out that teaching manners boils down to promoting empathy, gratitude, respect and structure—the very things children need to become emotionally intelligent, highly functioning adults.

"One of the long-term consequences of being a rude child is being a rude

adult," Klass wrote in a column earlier this year. "For a child, as for an adult, manners represent a strategy for getting along in life."

In my son's class at the Piedmont Recreation Department, Amoroso helped the kids learn that etiquette is linked to feelings, such as when she reviewed what to say (and what not to say) if they receive a gift they don't like.

"Say, 'Thank you!' That's all," Amoroso told them, "because you don't want the giver of the gift to feel badly at all." To motivate the kids to spend at least a few minutes writing a thank-you note, she walked them through a brief exercise that involved adding up the minutes it likely took the giver to purchase and wrap the present. With greater appreciation for the effort behind the gift, each child then carefully practiced writing a note and learned the proper way to fold it into an envelope.

Amoroso, who lives in Walnut Creek, developed an interest in teaching etiquette nearly two decades ago while parenting her two young boys and working as a regional sales manager for a major corporation.

"I got a phone call once from a top client who told me never to send one of my sales people to take him out to lunch again because he was so mortified by my sales rep's manners," she recalled. She began teaching workshops on business

and dining etiquette while also teaching her sons the manners that her parents instilled in her. These days, companies such as Quaker Oats and Chevron invite Amoroso to lead workshops on how employees can present themselves well when meeting with others.

TO RAISE WELL-MANNERED KIDS, Amoroso says parents need to be role models and practice good manners and speak to children respectfully. For example, don't dig in to eat before others have been served, and don't chew your food while barking orders and answering your cell phone. More specifically, she encourages parents to consistently do the following:

Make it a habit to use the phrases "May I please ... ?" and "thank you." "These courtesy words are the building blocks of civility," she says.

Try to have at least one special family meal a week. Set the table nicely, light some candles and slow down the family's pace. "There are so many studies that show children who have that structure and are raised with family mealtimes do better. It's not just about consuming food; it's about conversation."

Turn phones off completely at mealtimes and don't allow texting under the table. "These days, we have kids whose cell phone is like an appendage from a very early age. For some, there's almost an inability to have face-to-face conversation that involves eye contact and listening skills."

At work, practice what you preach: Put away your phone and laptop when someone speaks at meetings so that you can actively listen. ■

FINER POINTS

Need help learning the finer points? Amoroso developed a product line called *Eti-Kits* (www.eti-kits.com) that includes four pocket-sized guides—one each for dining, weddings, dating/proms and business—called "25 Simple Rules to Make Your Manners Shine." The guides are available through her Web site and information on Amoroso's upcoming classes is available through www.sharynkennedy.com.