

KIDS WITHOUT MANNERS —

or parents who don't know the difference?

"When I see a parent struggling with a 7-year-old's social behavior ... it's too late! The parent has dropped the ball."

Samantha von Sperling, NY etiquette/image consultant

By Alison Hogan

It's there in the fellow subway traveler a few inches away who coughs in your direction without covering his mouth, in the woman on the bus speaking loudly into her cell phone for the entire ride uptown, and in the group of high school girls laughing and gossiping loudly and making everyone's heads turn. It's there in the guy who breezes through the heavy door, leaving it to swing back in your direction, and in the woman who says nothing in recognition as you politely hold the door open for her. Then there's the bar mitzvah you're planning; the caterer is calling, and you're still waiting for 20 people to RSVP. Or the birthday gift you've sent to your husband's cousin in Arizona; you never do find out if it arrived because no thank-you note has appeared in your mailbox.

We all encounter such bad behavior in our daily lives. Indeed, common courtesy doesn't seem to be so common anymore - because the perpetrators are missing the vital link: They never learned the proper ways to behave at the most important time - when they were children.

Behavior lacking in manners continues to erode. Witness the recent trend in restaurants, where waiters clear away plates even though one diner in the group might still be eating. Witness, too, the excuses being made for manner-less behavior. When a 12-year-old recently stuck a wad of gum on a Helen Frankenthaler painting, worth \$1.5 million, hanging at the Detroit Institute of Arts, the gum left a chemical residue the size of a quarter. The excuse made to the Associated Press by the director of the boy's school: "He is only 12 and I don't think he understood the ramifications of what he did..."

During a recent brief delay at the airport in Denver while an oxygen tank arrived for one of the passengers, another traveler "began screaming he would miss his connection, and asking why this lady was so important," reported The New York Times. The reporter acknowledged similar bad travel behavior but put it down to post 9/11 long lines and intrusive security checks causing increased traveler stress. What about simply a lack of consideration?

Why the lack of manners?

Why have modern manners taken such a noted

nosedive? "It's the result of TV, videogames, and two parents working," believes Westchester mom Melissa Leonard, who is also a professional etiquette expert. "Our society puts more emphasis on making kids happy than on giving them the skills they will need later on in life."



Manhattan-based etiquette expert and image consultant Samantha von Sperling, director of Polished [Social Image Consultants], agrees with most of this. Many parents are at work, she says, and their children are being cared for by someone else, a caregiver who might be lacking a degree of "polish" (including a teen sitter who, similar to her charges, has not been schooled in manners). Those children are not, by and large, being prepared to function well in the grownup world that, like it or not, does require certain levels of social skills. But von Sperling believes the decline has been happening since the 1950s, when American society changed, and that today's kids are not learning correct behavior

because their primary teachers - their parents - are of the generation that did not learn good manners from their parents. "If parents don't have the skills, they can't teach their children. And you cannot possibly blame this on MTV videos," she maintains.

What's the big deal?

So what if your kid doesn't say 'please' or 'thank you' every time? Isn't it more important to get her on an academic track early, to encourage hard work and education in order for her to emerge ready to compete in an increasingly global world?

Not according to a recent national survey of preschool teachers, 80 percent of whom believe parents are overemphasizing scholastic skills over social development. Says family therapist and parent educator Sheri Glucoft Wong: "The survey demonstrates that parents can have a more important influence on their young children's eventual school success by supporting basic social and character development, and by providing them with opportunities to play and learn in cooperation with others."

Dr. Pier Massimo Forni, professor and co-founder of the Civility Project at Johns Hopkins, and author of *Choosing Civility: The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct*, is in agreement. "It's crucial that children learn to connect civility with strength and determination rather than weakness. It is up to the adults in their lives to show them the competitive advantages of being known as trustworthy, considerate and kind," he believes, adding: "Nice guys finish first if they are also smart and poised. We are attracted by this kind of person. We are attracted by someone who is a good listener. We trust this person and we want to associate with this person."

Who's responsible?

While Polished's von Sperling believes "it is the responsibility of every single adult in contact with a young person" to pass on good manners and civil behavior, today's teachers report they cannot make this kind of education a priority.

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Ironically, Jon Goldman, an English teacher at Beacon High School, and father of a 5-year-old, points out that it is often parents, who should be teaching manners to their children, who are themselves out of line. "I have seen parents threaten kids in front of us during conferences, and I've had to keep a few parents from whacking their kids," he reports.

"Our culture has always been one of independence and free speech, and as that evolved, we lost our authoritarian approach to parenting," believes Manhattan psychologist Dr. Anne M. Donnelly. "That's not necessarily bad; we want to raise independent thinkers. But the pendulum has swung pretty far, and now, being independent sometimes translates into not respecting your elders or any authority.

"Many of us have tried to teach our children manners, but not in an authoritative way. So manners today do not have the same meaning. We have lost - or given up - the concept of 'lady' and 'gentleman'. We don't define people that way. Instead, today's kids present themselves through brands. What you wear says more about you than how you behave."

Courtesy begins at home

"Manners have to start in the home. And you have to start early," stresses etiquette expert Leonard, who believes that by a certain age, it might actually be too late. "A kid of 8 or 9 who doesn't have basic manners or skills will lose out to kids who have manners and know how to show respect."

Starting early in the manners department is the only way to assure your child will be respectful during those difficult "do-for-me" teen years, believes Leonard.

Von Sperling agrees. "Parents often wait too long," she says. "I'll have parents calling me, saying, 'My children have no manners. I don't know what to do. They don't listen to me!' "Children should be taught during those formative years when they're listening and learning to form speech. Infancy is not too early. If the parents are speaking politely all the time at home, the child will grow up with that standard.

"By age 3, a child should be totally capable - and expected - to say 'please' and 'thank you'. When I see a parent struggling with a 7-year-old's social behavior - it's too late! The parent has dropped the ball."

Lyss Stern, founder of the New York City socializing and networking organization, Divalyssconscious Moms, says that, as a former teacher, she knows how important it is to teach manners at a very young age. She insists that her 2-year-old son, Jackson, says 'please' and 'thank you'. Stern reports seeing a 5-year-old in a restaurant recently, spitting juice through a straw at his mother. The mother, who was on her cell phone, "did not bat an eye." Stern says that if her son misbehaves at a restaurant, she immediately takes him outside. As she notes, "Children can never learn manners early enough!"

Kim D'Amato, owner of Priti, an organic spa in the East Village, is shocked by the bad language she overhears from kids on the street. D'Amato, who grew up in Australia, has noticed that kids as young as 12 curse loudly here, and adds that, "It is only in America that you hear kids being so rude."

Setting examples

"Parents have to set a good example," stresses Melissa Leonard. "When kids are very young, make sure they say 'please' and 'thank you' for everything you give them." Even if they can't speak yet, Leonard suggests they make some sort of grunt to indicate thanks. "And if they don't, don't give the thing to them until they do," she says.

Thank-you notes serve as a good model, even for the very young. In Leonard's family, her daughters, ages 4 and 5, participate in the process: "I write the note, but I have them sign their names and draw a picture," she says.

It helps to surround yourself with people who have similar values and to set rules when your kids go to play dates, Leonard advises, saying, "I tell other parents or caregivers: 'My kids are not allowed to watch X, Y and Z.'" Afterwards, ask the adults if your kids behaved.

"Once you've established a firm foundation with young children," she concludes, "you just add on more guidelines as they get older."

SOME EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

Samantha von Sperling (SvS) teaches both one-on-one and group classes and seminars. We posed some common situations to the director of Polished Social Image Consultants, NYC:

Writing a thank-you note for something you don't like

SvS: It's the same as writing a thank-you for something you do like! You include some detail about the gift; you find some redeeming quality. If grandmother sends a sweater the child doesn't like, he or she can still say something like: "Thank you for the blue sweater - blue is my favorite color!" If it's a toy that the child is not interested in, he or she can still say: "Thank you so much for the thoughtful gift. It was so kind of you to send me something for my birthday." Up till around age 13, parents really need to be involved in the writing of thank-you notes. After that, the child should be responsible for writing on their own.

Pre-teens or teens who don't want to attend family events

SvS: This is an education in diplomacy. We all have to do things in this world that we don't like. But kids need to know that family is important, whether we like them or not. Now, if you have a busy, overscheduled 17-year-old who is otherwise polite and needs the weekend to work on an important school assignment, that's when the parent may be able to say okay. But to say, "No, I'm not going to my cousin's wedding because I don't like her" - that's not acceptable.

Kissing forceful relative

SvS: Again, this is part of life - with family. Tell your child to stand there and take it.

Refusing a playdate

SvS: There are two ways to handle this. You can always make another arrangement for you child at that time. Or, you have to sometimes be kind. Explain to your child that it's important to find something you like in everyone, that what might not be important to us could very well be important to the other child. There is value in learning to broaden one's social horizons. Plan the playdate so it doesn't involve too much interaction.

If your child breaks something in someone's home

SvS: The parent should offer to replace the item, because the parent is responsible for their child's actions. What worries me is this kind of thing happening in the first place. Of course, there are accidents - and some people don't understand that they need to put away the Ming vase when a child visits!

If your child says something indiscreet or hurtful to someone

SvS: Children need to learn not to do this. Even a small child of 4 or 5 can understand certain nuances of what is acceptable, what is social and what is anti-social - if it's explained to them. We underestimate both the intellect and sensitivity level of small children, I think.

When kids stare at people with a disability or deformity

SvS: It needs to be explained to a child that it's impolite to stare at people, period - before they come across a disabled person. Of course, it could still happen, as children are curious. In that case, the parent needs to explain that people are the same, despite disabilities.

When kids try to interrupt while you're on the phone

SvS: A parent has to instill in a child: "I will listen to you, but not if you interrupt me." Then you can't give in! (Unless it's a real emergency, of course!)

Dealing with difficult moms

SvS: If there's a mother you just can't get along with, you could volunteer to take both the children on an outing or playdate. Or, if you have to socialize with the other mother, try and make the time spent together less taxing. Suggest going to a children's play, or the library, or to a Disney movie - an activity where the time is not spent just talking. Try to find a common ground for the sake of your children. Can you talk to the mom about her hobbies or interests, so you can try and connect and the children will be able to maintain their friendship?

Teens who keep adults waiting

SvS: You can leave without them, once. They have to know that you mean what you say.

We overprotect our children in this country. If you want to create a capable adult, you have to let them cross the street by themselves at some point. You have to let them learn to handle themselves in the world. Remember: If you hold a child to high expectations, that's what you'll get!

Judy Antell contributed to this article