

**A**s parents, good manners is both one of the easiest and most difficult things to teach your child. While being polite is something you can drill into your child if you remind him often enough to say “Thank you”, it’s a different matter to make him understand the concept of gratitude.

Experts stress that it’s important for parents to model behaviour. After all, children learn how to respond appropriately by watching and imitating those around them.

Explains Eunice Tan, founder of Image Flair, which offers etiquette courses for preschoolers, “Children follow their mum’s and dad’s lead. If parents are rude to one another, children will probably be rude to their siblings, friends and maids. The most effective way to get children to act respectfully is to treat them with respect and to also let them see you act respectfully towards other people.”

Being consistent in showing good behaviour also helps children to pick it up easily and quickly. Besides saying “Thank you” and “Please” when communicating with family members, Desiree Ng, programme director at Bibinogs Play Learning Centre, notes that parents can encourage their preschoolers to model good manners by turning down the TV volume when someone is using the telephone and knocking on the door before entering a room.

### **Build me up**

A well-mannered child is likely to grow up to be a more successful person. Tan notes, “He will be better liked and will be more prepared to graciously handle the things that life has to offer. He will be liked by his teachers, as well as by other children.”

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Building a strong relationship between your child and his teacher is one of the best ways to ensure that he is on the path to a solid education. Similarly, fostering good relationships between your child and his peers is also important in developing a strong sense of self-confidence and esteem, she adds.

As young children don’t develop manners and social graces the same way they do physical skills like crawling, you should teach manners as soon as your child understands what you are saying. Do this in stages, as his comprehension

skills develop. For example, asking a 2-year-old to stop chewing with his mouth open is useless since he probably lacks the understanding and physical coordination to do so at that age. But by age 4 or 5, your child should be able to grasp the reasoning behind this rule.

### **Right start**

As a kind, polite and considerate child doesn’t develop overnight, you’ll need to prompt and remind him regularly about what to do and say. Tan points out, “Manners are learned a little bit at a time. The basics become the building blocks of more complex and sophisticated rules as children grow up.”

Offer positive reinforcement and praise your child when he does something right. But when your child does something wrong, try not to be negative about it. Instead, gently tell him how it is best done and why.

Ng highlights the importance of correcting, “Highlight their bad manners instantly to them, and be specific about the corrections. For example, if your preschooler likes to throw

things at people, correct him quickly on the spot, so that the impression is fresh in his mind."

Don't mete out punishment immediately. First, explain to your child that it is inappropriate to throw things at people as this can cause hurt. If this behaviour persists after several rounds of explanations to your child, Ng suggests that it may be time

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to punish him. Be consistent when you punish. If you give him a time-out for throwing things at people, make sure to punish him every time he does it. This way, your preschooler will be able to link the effect to the cause, and help him understand and remember what bad manners is.

### **Oh, behave!**

Sometimes, your usually well-behaved child just acts up, so ask yourself these questions:

- Have you taught him the appropriate behaviour in that particular situation? If we don't prepare our children, we can't be surprised at their behaviour.
- Is your child angry about something? Parents should find out why their children are angry, so that they can help them to control their anger and frustration without hurting others.
- Could they have picked up their behaviour from you or a family member?
- Did they pick up this behaviour from television or a video game?
- Are they hungry or tired? Children often misbehave when they are hungry or need sleep.

### **Code of conduct**

Instead of constant reminders (or nagging!), make learning about manners fun, since children learn best through play. Ng suggests the following games:

**WORD PLAY** Help your child learn the key words of good manners, such as "Please", "Thank you", "You're welcome", "Excuse me", "May I...", etc. Then, play a card game — using picture or any play cards, go around a circle of players, the player who says a polite word gets to throw out a card. Whoever finishes his cards first is the winner.

**FIGURE IT OUT** Teach your child how to exercise good manners in specific situations. For example, during meals, tell him that good manners means not talking with your mouth full. Also, grabbing food with bare hands or resting elbows on the dining table are no-no's. Whoever commits such etiquette breaches more than 10 times during a meal loses the game, while the winner is the person with the fewest "violations".

**NAMING RIGHTS** Let your child give his toys good- and bad-manner names. For example, "Thank You" is the dog's name, "Please" is the name of his toy soldier, the bird is called "Selfish", and "Angry" is the princess doll. Use these toys to engage in imaginary role-play with your preschooler. Play to a storyline where the toys with the bad-manner names are unkind to those with the good-manner names. Eventually, the toys with bad-manner names are left without any friends to play with because they have been mean to the other toys. Ask your child to think of other good-manner names for the "bad" toys, so that all the other toys will want to play with the now pleasantly-named toys again.

**GOAL ORIENTED** Before you bring junior out on an outing, prompt him about the importance of good conduct. Give him a goal to achieve by asking him to show good manners

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during the trip — holding the lift door for someone else counts as one instance of good manners. Not interrupting Mummy when she’s having a conversation with someone counts as another point, and so on. Then, promise him an ice-cream treat if he can chalk up 10 points for good manners. This way, your child should consciously keep in mind how to be consistent in his manners.

When teaching manners, remember that preschoolers need a lot of reminding. Good manners are built over time, while bad manners take time to overcome as well, Ng notes. Therefore, parents need to be patient with the progress of their children’s behaviour.

She advises, “Don’t be overly anxious in seeing speedy progress after you have corrected a misdeed in your child. Adopt a positive mindset at all times. This will help your child gain confidence in making the change from bad to good manners over time.” 🍌

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