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What ARE "Good Manners"?

By Susan Dunn

What ARE "Good Manners"? by Susan Dunn, MA, Emotional Intelligence Coach &
Consultant

Interesting question, isn't it? In the Age of Rudeness, we may be losing touch with what etiquette and good manners are all about. In fact there may be those among us who haven't experienced it. According to a recent survey, more than 50% of Americans are concerned about the growing rudeness in the U. S.

We assault each other more all the time with upsetting noises, sights, sounds, smells, and attitude. It's getting to where we need to protect ourselves from one another! Maybe it's getting a little too wild out there.

Good manners are, first of all, civilized behavior. That's as opposed to wild behavior. "He acts like he was raised in a barnyard," my mother would say, about some hapless boy who pulled up in front of my house for a date and just sat in the car and honked.

Whether that was a particular rule in your household, or culture, all cultures have "rules" and they are learned, not innate. In Italy it's good manners for a man to greet another man with an embrace and a kiss on each cheek. Not so in South Texas, where men stand 3 feet apart and at 90 degree angles to converse with one another.

All cultures have rules and if you violate them, you'll be excluded. Excluded from what? Well, what we all want more of now - to be where the polite and pleasant people are. Yes?

Emily Post, the Diva of Etiquette, by virtue of her book of the same name, "Etiquette" (<http://www.bartleby.com/95/7.html>) defined this certain set of people as "Best Society."

"Best Society," she wrote, "is not confined to any one place or group, but might be better described as an unlimited brotherhood which spreads over the entire surface of the globe, the members of which are invariably people

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of cultivation and worldly knowledge, who have not only perfect manners but a perfect manner."

"Cultivated," you see, as opposed to "wild" or "weed-ridden" or "out of control".

"Manners" she says, "are made up of trivialities of deportment which can be easily learned if one does not happen to know them." "Manner," on the other hand, "is personality - the outward manifestation of one's innate character and attitude toward life."

Manners must be really ingrained; a matter of who you are, not how you are. The attitude must be without thinking, but the particulars require great thought. It's always easier to revert to the feral state. Ask the cat!

Miss Post suggests that once we've learned it, etiquette becomes - to those of the Best Society - "a matter of instinct rather than of conscious obedience."

There are those among us who still blurt out "thank you," "you're welcome," "excuse me," and "May I?" But there are a lot more among us who don't!

Good manners and etiquette are based on a concept that's somewhat in disfavor today - being selfless. "Unconsciousness of self," says Miss Post, "is the mental ability to extinguish all thought of one's self - exactly as one turns out the light. Hmmm. You mean put the other fellow first occasionally? Now there's a novel idea.

And so "one" - that would be you and I - one does not burp because it feels good, acting as if no one else was there; or elbow through the queue, because WE are in a hurry and WE matter most; or talk about our sex lives on cell phones in restaurants as if others would find it interesting; or shout profanity and throw tantrums because we're entitled to our anger, to indulge it and to "let it all hang out," as if it didn't stress the listener as much as it stresses us. (Second-hand hostility is as dangerous to our health as second-hand smoke!)

No, in fact manners is about letting it all hang IN. Keeping some things inside, quiet, and to oneself, turning down the volume, slowing down the pace, out of consideration for the other. Allowing the other person some comfort, some space, some peace.

"A bore," says Miss Post, "is said to be `one who talks about himself when you want to talk about yourself!' which is superficially true enough," she adds, "but a bore might more accurately be described as one who is interested in what does not interest you, and insists that you share his enthusiasm, in spite of your disinclination." Boring others, then, is an act of rudeness (and one of my least favorites), because there is no thought given to the interests or comfort of the other.

"Nearly all the faults or mistakes in conversation," says Miss Post, "are caused by not thinking." Ah hah! Or by thinking only of oneself.

"A first rule for behavior in society," she continues, "is: `Try to do and say those things only which will

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be agreeable to others."

How far away from this we have gotten!

So, to have good manners we must learn the actions - the "trivialities of deportment" - and then stop and think when we're with others. Then we can avoid being tactless. "...[Y]ou must not talk about the unattractiveness of old age to the elderly, about the joys of dancing and skating to the lame, or about the advantages of ancestry to the self-made," says Miss Post.

Avoiding being rude, has a lot to do with Emotional Intelligence which, like good manners, can be learned. EQ requires self-awareness and empathy - the ability to understand how your behavior affects others (and their feelings). It requires a strong interface between emotions and thinking. Blurting out the first thing on your mind ("What an ugly dress!") is rarely the tactful thing to do. To be considerate of others takes Intentionality - intending to treat others well, and exercising the self-discipline to do it. You might lower your voice, you know, steer the subject away from unpleasant things, cover your mouth when you cough

It's easier to be rude. If you don't believe this, watch two children at play. They will revert to the lowest level. It's easier to scream, stomp, grab, jabber, be messy and disorderly, and scratch where and when it itches, than to stop and think about what you're doing, take others into consideration, and act accordingly.

It's harder to be polite. Of course you'd rather boom your boom box and enjoy your music regardless of others; have a tantrum when you've been angered; turn the lights on when you come to bed though your spouse is sound asleep; ignore the customer because it's all such a chore, you know, working; or perhaps even hit someone who annoys you. These are the easiest things to do, and the most mindlessly satisfying, because you can indulge yourself with no thought for others.

But what happens when everyone behaves that way? Then we have a rudeness epidemic. And how will we change that? One person at a time! As Mother Teresa said, when the house is dirty don't complain or call a committee, pick up a broom and start sweeping.

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Must Manners be Taught?

By Jacquie McTaggart

PLEASE answer the following questions honestly. (Go ahead - you won't be graded.)

Does your child... Greet you with something other than a grunt in the morning? Use the word

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"PLEASE" when he asks you to purchase a \$90 pair of designer jeans? Say "THANKS" when you take his forgotten homework assignment to school? Utter "EXCUSE ME" after he accidentally knocks you down on his way to the phone? Write Grandma a thank-you letter for the DVD she sent in the mail?

Chances are pretty good that a few of you answered, "yes" to some of these questions. Chances are even better that many of you answered, "no" to most of them.

During my lengthy career (forty-two years) in the classroom I observed a drastic decline in what we call "Good Manners." I have no answers (or theories) as to why this has occurred, but it has. I believe that we must make an attempt to correct the situation.

Good manners are the cornerstone of courteous behavior. They provide the impetus to say the words and exhibit the behaviors that distinguish us humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. Good manners show consideration for others.

Good manners demand that intentional sounds of physical relief such as belching and "fluffing" are saved for non-public areas. (You male readers may call "fluffing" by another name, but I'm sure you get the idea.) Good manners encompass all the things that make the people around us feel good. They compel us to eliminate words, sounds, and actions that cause others in our presence to feel uncomfortable. In essence, they enable us to be an accepted member of a civilized society.

Good manners are not automatically caught, they must be taught. A child or adolescent does not magically discover on his own the fact that common decency and politeness help to make him a more socially acceptable person. Neither does he understand that those attributes will ultimately contribute to his success, and help to make him a happier individual. It's up to us to teach our children these concepts.

How do we do that? Good manners, like most values, must be demonstrated and lived in the home if they are to become a permanent part of the child's character. The school should not be expected to bear the primary responsibility for teaching good manners. Seven hours a day for nine months of the year is not an adequate amount of time to instill a lasting principle or a moral value. (In one year, the average kid spends 1,253 hours in school and 7,507 hours out of school.) Teachers can force compliance ("Tell Jimmy you're sorry"), but they can't make good manners and common decency an automatic, knee-jerk response. Parents can.

How? Parents need to demonstrate good manners in the home - day in and day out. Kids hear messages that are delivered by lecture - "You should..." They internalize that which they observe. Parents must "practice what they preach," if they want the value of good manners to become a part of

the child's moral fiber. And they should begin this process when the child is very young.

Politeness and good manners open the door to a successful and happy adult life. We need to give our kids the legs that will enable them to walk through that door.

"Life is not so short but that there is always time enough for courtesy."

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– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Jacque McTaggart is a recently retired 42-year career teacher and author of, "From the Teacher's Desk." She currently travels throughout the country speaking at teacher conferences and symposiums for parents. You can find more of her teaching and parenting tips at

Must Manners be Taught?

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