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How do children learn good manners?

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Ensuring kids have manners is a perennial preoccupation for parents and caregivers.

How, then, do you teach good manners to children?

Modelling good manners around the home and in your own interaction with others is obviously crucial.

But there's a clear uniting theme when it comes to manners in Australia: in Australian English, good manners centre on honouring personal autonomy, egalitarianism and not appearing to tell people what to do.

Which manners matter most in Australia?

Some of the most important manners in Australian English are behavioural edicts that focus on particular speech acts: greeting, requesting, thanking and apologising.

These speech acts have a set of words associated with them:

- hello
- hi
- may I please…?
- could I please…?
- thank you
- ta
- sorry
- excuse me.

Good manners make people feel comfortable in social situations by adding predictability and reassurance.

They can act as signposts in interactions. Anglo cultures place a lot of weight on egalitarianism, personal autonomy and ensuring we don't tell people what to do.

If you want to get someone to do something for you – pass you a pen, for example – you frame the request as a question to signal that you're not telling them what to do.

You'll also add one of the main characters in Anglo politeness: the magic word, "please".

This framing recognises you don't expect or demand compliance. You're acknowledging the other person as an autonomous individual who can do what they want.

If the person does the thing you've asked, the next step is to say "thank you" to recognise the other person's autonomy. You're acknowledging they didn't have to help just because you asked.



'Say ta!' DGLimages/Shutterstock

The heavy hitters

The words "please" and "thank you" are such heavy hitters in Australian English good manners, they're two of the words that language learners and migrants learn first.

They can help soften the impact of your words. Think, for example, of the difference between “no” and “no, thank you”.

Of course, there are times when “no” is a full sentence. But what if someone offered you a cup of tea and you replied “no” without its concomitant “thank you” to soften your rejection and acknowledge this offer didn’t have to be made? Don’t be surprised if they think you sound a bit rude.

The other big players in Australian English good manners are “sorry” and “excuse me”. Much like in British English, the Australian “sorry” means many things.



These can preface an intrusion on someone's personal space, like before squeezing past someone in the cinema, or on someone's speaking turn.

Interrupting or talking over someone else is often heavily frowned on in Australian English because it is often interpreted as disregarding what the other person has to say.

But in some cultures, such as French, this conversational style is actively encouraged. And some languages and cultures have different conventions around what good manners look like around strangers versus with family.

Good manners involve saying certain words in predictable contexts.

But knowing what these are and when to use them demonstrates a deeper cultural awareness of what behaviours are valued.



Talking over someone else is often heavily frowned on in Australian English. MDV Edwards/Shutterstock

How do children learn manners?

As part of my research, I've analysed parenting forum posts about "good manners". Some believe good manners should be effortless; one parent said:

> *Good manners shouldn't be something that a child has to think about [...] teach them correctly at home from day one, manners become an integral part of the way they view things.*

Another forum user posited good modelling was the key, saying:

> *the parent has to lead by example, rather than forcing a child to say one or the other.*

One study, which involved analysis of more than 20 hours of videorecorded family dinner interactions collected in Italy, found mealtimes are also sites where parents control their children's conduct "through the micro-politics of good manners."

> *By participating in mealtime interactions, children witness and have the chance to acquire the specific cultural principles governing bodily conduct at the table, such as 'sitting properly', 'eating with cutlery', and 'chewing with mouth closed'.*
>
> *Yet, they are also socialised to a foundational principle of human sociality: one's own behavior must be self-monitored according to the perspective of the generalised Other.*

In Australian English, that means regulating your behaviour to make sure you don't do something that could be seen as "rude". As I argued in a 2012 paper:

> *While child socialisation in Anglo culture involves heavy discouragement of rudeness, French does not have a direct equivalent feature [...] French children are taught ça ne se fait pas, 'that is not done'. Where the French proscribe the behaviours outright, the Anglos [...] appeal to the image one has of oneself in interpersonal interactions.*

In Anglo English, the penalties for breaches could be other people's disapproval and hurting their feelings.



Good manners form part of the bedrock for human sociality. Shutterstock

Why are good manners important?

Good manners affect our interactions with others and help us build positive relationships.

Fourteenth century English bishop and educator, William of Wykeham, declared that "manners maketh the man".

John Hopkins University Professor Pier Forni called them a "precious life-improvement tool."

The "Good Manners" chart, based on a set of rules devised by the Children's National guild of Courtesy in UK primary schools in 1889, was issued to Queensland primary schools until the 1960s.



THE A.L. SERIES

"GOOD MANNERS"

BASED UPON RULES OF THE

Children's National Guild of Courtesy

COURTESY, Politeness, or Good Manners, means kindly and thoughtful consideration for others. A Celebrated writer has said that a Boy who is Courteous and Pure is an honour to his country. Brave and Noble men and women are always Courteous. Three of the bravest and greatest men who ever lived—the Duke of Wellington, General Gordon and General Washington—were distinguished for their courteous behaviour.

Courteous Boys and Girls will always be careful to observe the following RULES :—

AS TO THEMSELVES	Be Honest, Truthful, and Pure. Do not use Bad Language. Keep out of Bad Company. Keep your Face and Hands clean, and your Clothes and Boots brushed and neat.
AT HOME	Help your Parents as much as you can, and do your best to please them. Be kind to your Brothers and Sisters. Do not be Selfish, but share all your Good Things.
AT SCHOOL	Be Respectful to your Teachers, and help them as much as you can; their work is very difficult and trying. Observe the School Rules. Do not "Copy," nor Cheat in any way. Do not Cut the Desks, nor Write in the Reading Books, etc. Never let another be Punished in mistake for yourself; this is Cowardly and Mean.
AT PLAY	Do not Cheat at Games. Do not Bully; only Cowards do this. Be Pleasant and not Quarrelsome. Do not Jeer at your Schoolmates, or call them by Names which they do not like.
IN THE STREET	Salute your Ministers, Teachers, and Acquaintances when you meet them; they will Salute you in return. Do not Push nor run against people. Do not Chalk on doors, walls, nor gates. Do not Throw Stones, nor destroy Property. Do not Annoy Shopkeepers by Loitering at their shop doors and windows. Do not make Slides on the pavement, nor throw Orange Peel or Banana Skins there; *dangerous accidents* often result from these practices. Do not make Fun of Old nor Crippled People, but be particularly polite to them, as well as to Strangers and Foreigners.
AT TABLE	Always Wash your Hands and Face before coming to the Table. Do not put your Knife to your Mouth. Look after Other People; do not Help yourself only. Do not be greedy. Do not Speak nor Drink with Food in your Mouth. Turn your head away from the Table and put your Hand or Handkerchief before your Mouth when you Sneeze or Cough. Do not sit with your Elbows on the Table.
EVERYWHERE	Never be Rude to *anybody*, whether older or younger, richer or poorer, than yourself. Remember to say "Please" or "Thank You"; "Yes, Sir," or "Yes, Ma'am"; "No, Sir," or "No, Ma'am." Before entering a room it is often courteous to Knock at the Door. Do not forget to close the door *quietly* after you. Always show attention to Older People and Strangers by opening the door for them, bringing what they require (hat, chair, etc.), giving up your seat to them if necessary, and in every possible way Saving them trouble. Never Interrupt when a person is speaking. Always Mind your own Business. Be Punctual. Be Tidy
REMEMBER	All these rules respecting your conduct towards others are included in the one GOLDEN RULE, *"Always do to others as you would wish them to do to you if you were in their place."* Whenever, therefore, you are in doubt as to how you should act toward others ask yourself this question, "How should I like them to act towards me if I were in their place?" and then *Do what your conscience tells you is right.*

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This 'Good Manners' chart was first issued to Queensland schools in 1898 by the Department of Public Instruction as part of the systematic teaching of conduct and manners. Queensland Department of Education, Author provided (no reuse)

It tells kids to remember the golden rule to "always do to others as you would wish them to do to you if you were in their place."

Good manners form part of the bedrock for human sociality. Childhood is when we give kids foundational training on interacting with others and help them learn how to be a culturally competent member of a society.