

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My sister's son, Jack, is fourteen this month and, although he is a basically a good kid but with low self-esteem, he has absolutely no manners whatsoever. He chews with his mouth wide open and picks up food with his hands (and I'm not talking about an ear of corn here, I'm talking about a piece of steak or a handful of green beans). He licks his fingers and then wipes his mouth on his sleeve. I've never heard him say "please" or "thank you" for anything. When I've sent him a birthday or Christmas gift, I have to call to make sure it arrived since I've never received a thank you note, phone call, or email acknowledgement. His behaviors have been bugging me for years, but I've always been afraid to discuss this with my sister. He's coming to visit me for several weeks over the summer. Do you think I should talk with him or am I just being overly sensitive to his bad manners?

-- Upset Aunt

Dear Aunt,

Manners are more than just uptight rules from an Emily Post finishing school about the proper way to curtsy to the Queen. Good manners need not be pretentious or snooty. They are timeless and reflect the Golden Rule of doing unto others with respect and sensitivity and, as such, they are an important subset of social skills. Opening doors for others, giving up your seat on a bus to an older rider, muting your cell phone during a performance, and saying "please and thank you" are not small matters. They are the foundations of a civil and compassionate society. Unfortunately, our society is experiencing something of a manners melt-down and rudeness is epidemic. In a 2005 Associated Press-Ipsos Poll, nearly 70 percent questioned said people are ruder today than they were 20 or 30 years ago. A whopping 93 percent in this poll faulted parents for failing to teach their children well.

Manners are codes of expected civil behavior that make impressions on others and can leave us feeling good or bad about ourselves. By exhibiting proper etiquette, we are communicating that we care about others' feelings and are asking for respect for ourselves. Although cultures may differ about the finer points of what constitutes politeness, every society has its own set of expected norms. Jack is missing the boat in a lot of areas of common courtesy and his present behaviors will not serve him well as he grows up. In fact, his etiquette crimes are likely to put off his peers and he will certainly be judged poorly in any kind of business or professional environment.

Proper manners are a powerful tool for operating in social situations and a lack of manners definitely makes a terrible impression. The German poet Goethe had it right in the eighteenth-century when he wrote, "A man's manners are a mirror in which he shows his portrait." Consider the portrait painted by Jack's table manners in a society in which

dining together is a cornerstone of social relationships: His rude and piggish behaviors – whether at a family dinner, a holiday gathering, the school lunch room, or burgers at a fast-food restaurant with his friends – are likely to lead to embarrassment and rejection by others. This will not help Jack feel any better about himself and will only add to his low self-esteem. At fourteen, your nephew has a lot of catching up to do. Manners are most easily acquired by modeling good examples from adults and by being taught at a young age.

Ideally, you should talk with your sister and tell her about your concerns. But, even without that conversation, she has placed you in charge of Jack for several weeks over the summer and you will have many “teachable moments” during that time.

First, make certain that your own manners are ones that you want to convey to your nephew. Actions speak louder than words and some research suggests that teenagers are more receptive to etiquette instruction from a non-parental figure. But sometimes – when someone has hit the low point that Jack has -- words are necessary as well. Tell Jack how much you love him and you want him to become a confident person, to be the best he can be. Help him to understand the value of good manners as a way of conveying sensitivity to others and expressing self-respect. Give clear and specific instructions about areas in which he needs some work. Table manners come immediately to mind. Gently remind Jack to close it up, when he chews with his mouth open. Praise him when he places his napkin on his lap. Use “please” and “thank you” with him as appropriate and give him lots of reinforcement when he follows suit. Find lots of ways to praise him, but don’t be hesitant to kindly point out when he’s missing the mark.

I think that a conversation about why manners are important and not just a bunch of outdated rules for high society would help him see his own behavior in the context of how he impresses others. There are lots of good resources online (just Google “good manners”). You can also check out books by Dr. Alex J. Packer’s *How Rude! The Teenagers’ Guide to Good Manners, Proper Behavior, and Not Grossing People Out* or P.M. Forni’s *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*.

If your efforts fail with Jack during his visit to you, consider making your next birthday gift to him to be an enrollment in a weekend workshop about etiquette (www.schoolofprotocol.com/ or Google “manners workshops for teens”). Then, of course, expect a timely and heartfelt “thank you.”

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2006 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.

