



So you want to know more about...

# Courtesy

## Pretty please?

*Please. No, thank you. You're welcome!*

Respect and courtesy involve much more than using any "magic" phrase. The **way** we say something can say much more about our intentions than the actual words. Tone of voice and inflection often reveal a speaker's true feelings. "Please!" can become a demand. "Sorry!" can sound anything but apologetic. Insisting on polite words won't teach children respect for others and common courtesy. **Modeling will.**

If we insist children say *please* before we serve them food or give them something they want, they will probably say the word. But if we aren't modeling courteous behavior, the word will be meaningless, just another hoop to jump through. Rather than insisting

on *please*, insist on an appropriate tone of voice. You can say, "That doesn't sound very friendly. Can you try again with a friendly voice?" If the child doesn't get it, model a friendly tone and polite words. "May I have some more milk, please?" **The tone of voice is the most important element for young children.** It conveys respect for others and an appreciation for the action they are requesting. The *pleases* and *thank yous* and *you're welcomes* will come later as children become more aware of social customs and want to participate in them to feel "big."

Apologies are another trouble spot on the courtesy continuum. Too often, adults insist that children apologize for their actions when children feel anything **but** sorry. By insisting children say it when they don't mean it, adults devalue the

word, and in effect, teach kids to lie. Children who are still learning about **cause and effect** may need time to feel sorry and to fully realize the consequences of their actions. They may only be sorry that they got in trouble. But if we require they say the word in order to continue playing or have a turn, they will say it without understanding **why** they should not have behaved that way. A more productive choice is to show children the consequences of their behavior. "When you hit Henry, he doesn't want to play with you anymore." Or, "When you throw toys, they break. You can't use these toys until you show me you can be gentle with them." If adults model appropriate apologies (sincere, with the right tone of voice) for our own mistakes, children will learn context and eventually follow our lead.

## What "Sorry" Looks Like

The next time you find your child in a "sorry" situation, try these techniques instead of demanding an apology.

- **Identify** the feelings of the victim: "She looks really sad that you pushed her."
- **Label** the inappropriate behavior. "Pushing hurts."
- **Provide an alternative** to the unacceptable behavior: "Use your words to ask for a turn."
- **Model empathic behavior:** "I'm sorry he pushed you, are you okay?"

Consequences should be related to the misstep and caregivers should remain calm. By focusing attention on the victim, adults can take away some of the motivation for misbehavior.

Children who appear to feel sorry but are unable to articulate it may need non-verbal alternatives. Ask them to **show** the other child they're sorry (they might offer a hug or toy), or **draw a picture** to help the other child feel better.

### Further reading

- *Time to Say Please*, by Mo Willems
- *This Little Piggy's Book of Manners*, by Kathryn Allen
- *What's the Magic Word, Little Bird?* by Kelly DiPucchio

# How Children Develop Empathy

Children begin to experience *empathy*, an understanding of how others feel in a given situation, some time between three to five years of age.

**Toddlers** may demonstrate empathic behavior by offering a crying baby their favorite toy, for example, but they are still trying to make their own environment more pleasant rather than soothe the younger sibling.

**Three-year-olds** can usually understand the concept of sharing, though their own emotional needs still make it challenging for them. Between the ages of **four and five**, children become more focused on their interactions with their peers rather than adults. They also begin to realize the payback for treating others with kindness and respect, and begin to reinforce those behaviors within their own social group. Other needs and wants may interfere with their ability to act empathically on occasion.

**To help children develop courtesy and respect for others :**

- ▶ Model ideal behaviors. If you lose your temper, own the mistake. Apologize and deal with the problem more appropriately.
- ▶ Give children low-stress opportunities to practice social skills. Lunch at a casual family restaurant is a better learning opportunity than a fancy dinner out because you will be more relaxed about not disturbing others.
- ▶ Demonstrate everyday courtesy in your community – holding the door for others, helping people who need it, resisting road rage. Courtesy is contagious.
- ▶ Problem-solve with your child when she is being selfish or disrespectful. Ask questions such as, “Is there a way to make everybody happy? Can we take turns?” Etc. Resist the temptation to bribe children for good behavior. Positive social interactions are their own reward. Ultimately, you want children to behave respectfully because it feels good, whether or not you are observing.
- ▶ Skip the sarcasm. Sarcastic humor is common among adults but very confusing for children. If you feel like saying, “I wish you hadn’t done that,” say so, instead of saying, “Gee, thanks a lot!”

## Frequently Asked Questions

**I think that if I insist my child say the words, the feelings will follow.** They might, but it’s a lot harder to teach sincerity than it is to teach vocabulary. If your child is in the habit of saying things he doesn’t mean, it can trickle down into other areas of life. How can you teach a five-year-old that lying is wrong if lying about feeling sorry is okay?

**My child’s table manners are atrocious. My wife thinks I’m too hard on him.** Children begin learning table manners in infancy, but the process doesn’t is gradual. Toddlers and young preschoolers are messy eaters because they are still developing hand-eye coordination. They’re also egocentric and don’t care about what they look like. Older preschoolers may belch or pass gas at the table to get a reaction. By age three, children should be using utensils with some success. Let them use a spoon instead of a fork until their fingers are stronger and are coordinated enough to use a fork effectively. Always model appropriate manners yourself. With children ages four and up, establish reasonable ground rules, explain them to your child, and acknowledge polite behavior with praise and privileges such as using a fancy glass or napkin.

**I expect my own kids treat me with respect, but what about their playmates?** If they are guests in your home without a parent, you should have the same standards for their behavior. Consider the fact that their home expectations may be different from yours. You might say, “In this house we don’t say *shut up*.” If the child’s parent is nearby, you may need to tread more lightly. When another parent becomes offended or confrontational, remember that your child is watching you for cues about how to behave respectfully. If you are consistent, your child and his friends will be more comfortable. Children should address adults by the term each adult prefers, so ask if your child should call someone *Mrs. Jones*, *Miss Jenny*, or just plain *Jenny*.

**My child always wants to be first.** As a culture, we often reward people for being faster and stronger than others. Reward kids for other successes: being helpful, thorough, or patient. Reassure your child that everyone will get a turn, and remind her that everyone wants to be first sometime. Children who trample others to be first should go to the end of the line, and children who are lucky enough to always get there first should be encouraged to find other ways to lead.