

FAMILY ETIQUETTE

by Ian Pinto, silb

A smile abroad is often a scowl at home", said Alfred Lord Tennyson. What he meant by that is open-ended. One thing it could mean is that good people outside of home may not always be good within. The smile is a crafty instrument. It can be used for good and also to mask evil. Despite those umpteen quotes that tell you the value and power of a smile, it isn't as easy as that. It's not too difficult to smile at a stranger but it is considerably tougher to smile at someone you know, especially if that person is unpleasant to you or has harmed, shamed or embarrassed you in one way or another. The same is a case with a family member with whom your relationship is tense. Smiles hide as much or perhaps even more than they reveal.

Smiling inspite of the pain is the mark of a strong person. It is one of the many things we are taught or pick up along the way of growth and maturity. The family is the primary place where training of a child takes place. It is there that he/she learns values and etiquette that shape his/her character. Educating a child to proper etiquette is a vital responsibility of parents. Parents can bark orders all day long, but the children rarely hear what is being said if the parents' actions are in direct opposition to the commands. When we tell our kids to be polite, say "please" and "thank you", and take their turn in line, yet forget to perform

those acts at home, the children get a mixed signal that is likely to send them toward a state of misbehavior. If you constantly chatter on your cell phone, they might not pay much attention to you when you tell them to put theirs down during a meal. Parents shouldn't expect anything from their children that they don't do when it's just the kids and them.

WHY IS ETIQUETTE IMPORTANT?

Smita Basu pointedly brought out the relevance of etiquette in an article for the *Readers Digest* a few years back. She wrote, "In the world we live in now, survival is victory. And we're not talking about surviving wars, or earthquakes, or epidemics, but getting through an average day without whatever hair you have left standing completely on end. How long does it take, on any given day, before you're gritting your teeth and reminding yourself not to lose your cool and unleash your inner Genghis Khan? Under the constant onslaught of other people's everyday intrusions, from spam SMSes to intimate strangers on public transport, are we all turning into grumbling misanthropes? Has the world always been like this, or have things been getting steadily worse? And are the people around us as befuddled by us as we are by them? What, in the name of civilization, has happened to people's manners?"

In a world that's constantly changing, shrinking, flattening, and always in a hurry, a world where diverse cultures, regions and generations are being mashed together, and where the omnipresence of technology changes human behaviour regularly, it has become hard to define manners... manners would mean basic civilized behaviour, civic sense, a general empathy and concern for other people, and following very basic rules to make sure we don't ruin the days of people around us."

Manners is a part of etiquette which is a much more formal and comprehensive way of talking, doing and living. While manners are basic and important, etiquette is even more so. Nowadays, not only has "trash-talking" become increasingly common but so has "trash-relating" - where we treat another like a piece of trash. With the advent of smartphones, face-to-face communication has been replaced by face-to-screen or even screen-to-screen communication. The need for etiquette is as great if not greater than it ever was before.

It is extraordinary how unfeeling and uncontrolled the members of some families are to one another. Children answer their parents back with no respect; parents interrupt their children in the middle of a sentence with no apology, criticisms are cruel and unkind; table manners are ignored unless there are visitors. In such families, life could so easily transform into an endless stream of bickerings, naggings, and a 'when-will-it-end- attitude.

It is never too early to teach children good manners. In fact, it is better to start when they are young so that they may grow to practice them. Manners and etiquette in children show that they have been nurtured well in their families. Although, instilling good manners can be difficult with some kids, you should not give up and be particular about following them. Some deliberate teaching and modeling at home by the adults will help inspire them in the children.

An Assumption sister recounts, "I am to a great extent what my parents, especially my mother, made me. We were taught to be grateful for little things, and to do services for others without expecting any recognition or reward. My mother used to tell me that if we had expectations we would get hurt. For sometimes we would not get any gratitude. Nay, there would even be cases where those for whom we did a good turn, might turn against us.

She told us that when we gave, the left hand should not know what the right hand did. My mother used to send me with this or that gift to a neighbour or an aunt. I enjoyed doing it. We children were told never to tell anyone that we did this. She would add, "If you speak it out, you will have no reward in heaven."

We were taught to eat whatever food was prepared at home. My mother used to tell that there were so many who didn't have anything to eat.

We were told never to take revenge. Only God, who knew everything, had the right to judge anyone. We were taught that God is great and that He could

and would do whatever He wanted. So we could count on Him.

My parents were very generous. They used to help people even unasked. My father used to tell us: "Stand for truth. Then no one will be able to trample you underfoot." My mother taught us to forgive. We were told not even to ask for an explanation. We were corrected for our mistakes. But before we were corrected we were asked to say what we had to say. After that we were told why such and such behaviour was wrong. Then alone were we corrected or scolded."

Clarence Thomas has rightly said that "Good manners will open doors that the best education cannot." The most brilliant intellectual would be worth very little without a healthy etiquette. Sometimes I wonder when I see parents and their kids spending so much of time and money on trying to score the highest marks whether they spend even a quarter of the amount on shaping character. It is awfully simple to lose sight of the importance of etiquette in the blind pursuit of success, wealth or happiness. Intelligence can take you far in life but only character can take you all the way. It has benefits not only here on earth but even in the world to come.

ETIQUETTE SCHOOLING

The family is a group of individuals who are not only biologically connected, but who love, cherish and are willing to do anything for one another. How we interact with strangers begins with how we interact with our family at home.

It is important to understand

that even though you may be in the comfort of your own home around people who have seen you at your very worst, etiquette does not disappear. Instituting good manners and proper etiquette at home is an important piece of the family unit and helps children grow into poised adults. The Bible exhorts, "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (Prov 22:6).

Since children are maturing daily and spend much of their childhood at home, it is important to teach them proper etiquette so that when they are out on their own, they continue to use the tools learnt at home. As a parent, one should highlight situations when you are engaging in proper etiquette and good manners so the children are not only being told what is right, but also witnessing it. It is important that parents think about how their actions are influencing the children and teaching them proper behaviours.

Here are few things that must be held in mind before a child is schooled in etiquette:

1) Good manners are a good habit. "Behaving politely is a way of life, not just something you pull out when you're at a wedding or fancy restaurant," says Robin Thompson, founder of etiquette-network.com and the Robin Thompson Charm School in Illinois, USA. "It's important to start as early as you can so manners become something a child does automatically, whether she is at home or away."

2) Polite behavior will help the child's social development. Kids who aren't taught social

graces from an early age are at a distinct disadvantage, say experts. An ill-mannered child is a turn-off to adults and kids alike; while children aren't likely to be offended by a playmate who neglects to say "excuse me," they don't relish the company of a child who doesn't know how to share or take turns. "You wouldn't send a child off to preschool without a healthy snack," says Sheryl Eberly, author of 365 Manners Kids Should Know. "Sending her into the world without knowing social graces is equally problematic."

3) Learning manners is a life-long education. "It won't happen overnight, and you need to take it slowly," says Eberly. Introducing one new social skill a month – teaching your 2-year-old to say "hello" when another person addresses him, for example, and rewarding him with praise when he does so – makes the process manageable for everyone.

Equally important is keeping your expectations in check. "There's only so much a small child can do," reminds Eberly. That same 2-year-old is not going to curtsy when ancient Aunt Dorothy comes over for Sunday dinner. But she can greet her at the door and sit happily at the table for a limited period of time.

4) Your behavior counts. "That means that when you ask your partner to pass the salt, you do it with a 'please' and a 'thank you,'" says Eberly. But it goes beyond that. Think about it this way: How would you feel if your child gave a fellow tricyclist the finger when he cut her off on the sidewalk? If the thought doesn't

thrill you, keep your hands and fingers on the wheel while driving. Inappropriate expressions of anger are rude, too.

5) Consistency is important. Acquiring good manners takes lots of practice and reinforcement, so make sure that you, your partner, and your caregiver are encouraging (and discouraging) the same behaviors. If your husband lets your kid fling food during meals and you don't, your child won't know what's expected of him.

Some of the basic etiquettes that every child ought to know are: Greeting family members, knocking on closed doors before entering as a sign of respect for the other person's privacy, asking before you borrow things and not assuming that everything belongs to everybody, resisting the temptation to riffle through other's things be it a diary or drawer, learning to use inclusive language and replacing "I" or "me" as far as possible with "we", eating meals together and interacting transparently with one another.

One of the most important things that parents ought to keep in mind while teaching etiquette is to be a role model and display the behaviour you want kids to exhibit. I think in this regard the words of Jesus must be taken very seriously, "Do whatever they (Pharisees and scribes) teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" (Mt 23: 3-4). □