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Canadian Association of Professional Speakers



Parenting in Public Etiquette 101

Part of the parenting job is to teach children proper socialization and to be considerate of others in public places. These skills will help children get along harmoniously with their future teachers, friends, co-workers, bosses and in-laws. Learning the etiquette of parenting takes practice and noticing what are the norms in North American society. If you are not a parent, it might be helpful to learn a bit about child development which explains why kids do what they do. Here is a quick guide to the nitty gritty of polite public parenting for parents and non-parents.

Babies 0-1 years

- If your baby is crying for more than five minutes in a restaurant, party, or public venue, leave the room and try to calm the baby somewhere privately, so others can still enjoy their activity in the room.
- You can breastfeed your baby anywhere you wish and do not need to wear a "boob burka"
- If the invite says "adult only" please don't bring your children. Decline with thanks or find a sitter. It's rude to the hosts and unfair to the other guests who have paid for a sitter to bring along children to their child-free event.
- Never change your child's diaper in any room other than a bathroom. You need to wash surfaces that come into contact with your child's diaper and you need to wash your hands after with soap and water and that can only be done in a bathroom.

If you are not a parent, you should know that babies are developmentally programmed to cry when they are little. Older babies can shriek which makes

your ears hurt, but parents can't stop either response. They are normal behaviours and help the child grow and thrive. Wear earplugs and smile.

If you don't want children at your social event, be very clear about expectations. Say, "Dinner is at eight. Do you need help finding a sitter?"

Be aware that parenting is an endeavor close to the heart and soul of people. Friendships and relationships can be severed over parenting related issues. When friends become parents, changes have to occur, and you must decide if the friendship is worth continuing. They can still blossom with patience, flexibility, and humour from both parties.

Toddlers 1-3 years

- If your child is making a fuss in an adult venue, leave after the 2nd Shhhhhh or take them to a quieter place to change the situation. This is not a misbehavior issue, because adult venues are not appropriate for the needs of children. Children get bored, tired and don't understand content. This is about development - the venue is not set up for children's enjoyment. You will have plenty of time to enrich their lives with theatre, concerts, dining, and travel later on when they are school-aged and have more patience and attention.
- Your child makes a mess in a store or public place. You should clean it up. You are modeling to your child problem-solving and responsibility.
- When your child is misbehaving, intervene immediately. Apologize to any affected children or their parents and offer to fix things. Deal with your own child later in private. Onlookers expect you to address the situation and the worst thing you can do is ignore it. If your child doesn't volunteer an apology, you do it for him. It teaches him the necessary social skills required for the situation, by watching you model it.
- Don't discipline your own child in public. Take them to a private area to talk to them and help them calm down. This is essential in the case of temper tantrums. Never spank, hit or time-out your child in public. (You shouldn't do it in private either! Teach and repeat.)
- Talk to your child during meals and waiting times. You are teaching them rudeness when you are on your screens and they are bored. Talking to them builds their brain and language skills. If you want discussions with your later teens, start the conversation habit now with your toddler.

If you are not a parent, you should know that toddlerhood is one of the most challenging stages for their parents. Toddlers are fast, ego-centric, emotional and have very little self-control and knowledge of manners or safety. Caregivers need to act fast, and scoop them out of danger, rather than speak commands and hope the child "listens." Toddler tantrums are a normal developmental behaviour and is a good sign of the emotional development of the brain. It is not a sign of bad parenting.

Offer help and empathy for the struggling parent, not judgment. It can be as simple as offering to help steer their grocery cart to their car while they carry their child. Remember that our society is not set up to be child friendly. Children are expected to wait quietly long before they are developmentally ready. We wouldn't punish a person in a wheelchair for not climbing stairs, so why would we punish a two- year-old for exploding while in an endlessly long line-up?

Preschoolers 3-5 years

- Your child accidentally breaks something in a store or makes it unsalable. Offer to pay for it.
- Your child is rude to someone. Offer apologies from you or your child if he is ready.
- Teach your child to not explore other people's fridge, cupboards, closets, or any other rooms than the bathroom, living-room, playroom or other rooms designated by the host parent. Teach your child not to take anything either.
- Teach your child not to open packages in stores or use the store's display models inappropriately.
- Don't threaten to leave your child there if they don't listen to your commands to come. It destroys trust and security. Scoop them up and carry them with you.
- Teach your children to be responsible for their own garbage. Teach them to clean up their fast food garbage in restaurants, to pick up their wrappings in other people's cars and clean up their lunch leftovers at school.

If you are not the parent, and the child is doing something that wrecks your property, your house, your child, or is going to hurt themselves, speak directly

to the child, if the parent is ignoring the situation. Be polite, respectful, kind and firm. Use your I-Statement by saying, "I'm worried that my white leather sofa might be damaged by your bag of cheese puffs. Let's eat them at the table." If the child still doesn't listen, address their parent. If the parent doesn't listen, rethink future invites.

Never criticize the parent if they are addressing their child in a parenting style that you think is inappropriate. Only offer the parent help and empathy, not advice. Offer the child a hug, smile or kind word.

Power struggles, constant questions, interruptions and whining are normal developmental behaviours for this stage. All kids do it to some degree.

School-Aged 6-13

- Teach your child not to let their friends jump the queue in front of others in line-ups. "Holding the place for a friend," is budging in and not polite.
- Don't take "parent" parking spots unless you are expecting or have a child seat in your car.
- Teach your child that if they eat treats in public, to offer one around the group or share the lot. Otherwise, eat in private.
- Children aged six and over should not run around naked on public beaches, streets, or other venues.
- Children this age should also be using gender assigned change rooms and bathrooms. If you or they are not comfortable, use the family rooms.
- Teach your child to say "Please" and "Thank you" at other peoples' houses and venues, especially during the car pool run, playdates, sleepovers and birthday parties.
- Teach your child not to boast about what they can do, what they own and where they are going. Teach them to ask questions about the friend and really listen to the answers.
- It's okay to ask if the playdate could be at the other person's house as long as the hosting is reciprocated shortly.

- Teach your child that it's okay to say that they are hungry, sick or need to use the bathroom or phone at playdates. Introduce them to the adult in charge so they know who to access for help.
- Parents are responsible for both the drop-off and pick-up at the host playdate's house.
- Parents are responsible for damage caused by their child, wherever it may be: school, playdates, and public venues.
- Teach your child to be respectful of rules in public places. Obey them yourself when you are out with children.
- Teach your child about expectations of their behavior in public without parents – no swearing, bullying, stealing, or vandalism is allowed.
- Teach your child not to talk, eat or use their cellphones in theatres, and other quiet places of public performances. Your children are watching you so model this.
- Teach your child to be respectful and polite to adults, but to assert their needs with "I-statements." EG "I need to use your phone please."
- Make logistic arrangements with your child's friend's parent, as well as your child. Cellphones allow you to hammer out details with your child, but the hosting parent is clueless to what has been arranged. Let the kids work out the original arrangements but because the social plans still involve an adult to drive and supervise, adults need to be consulted. Teens who can drive can arrange their own plans without parent consultation.
- Bring your own bedding for sleepovers unless the parent says not to.
- Children should not be left home alone until age 10
- Children should not babysit other children, including siblings, until age 12.
- Teach your children to cancel activities and relationships over the phone, not in a text or email. Sure, it is a tough thing to do, but future employers will value it.

- Teach your children to be responsible by modeling commitment. If you say that you are going to be somewhere, do your very best to be there. Insist on them keeping agreements also.

If you are not the parent, by all means, step in and speak up to the child if something is bothering you. Say, "I'm thinking that swear words might offend people. Could you please tone it down while my young son is here?" Be respectful, kind and aware that children and their parents have feelings, but may simply not know the expectations. Children this age can handle and understand different ways of doing things.

Teenagers 13-20

By now you should be done teaching and teenagers should have a pretty good idea of the norms of society and what is expected of adult behavior. However, they may need reminding every now and then by parents and everyone else. It takes a village to raise a child.

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