Teach Manners by Thomas Lickona

Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in great measure, the laws depend. Manners are what vex or smooth, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us . . . . According to their quality, they aid morals, or they destroy them.

Edmund Burke, British Statesman

The people who really know your character are waiters and clerks.

Katherine Pipin

In April 2002 The Public Agenda published a survey that struck a national nerve: Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America (www.publicagenda.org). Based on interviews with 2,013 U.S. adults, the report included these findings:

- Nearly 60% of Americans say they often encounter reckless and aggressive drivers on the road.
- Almost half say they are often subjected to loud and annoying phone conversations.
- Almost half say bad service has driven them out of a store in the past year.
- Three-quarters say they often see customers treating salespeople rudely.
- 79% say that "the lack of respect and courtesy should be regarded as a serious national problem."

Commented Public Agenda’s president, Deborah Wadsworth: "Lack of manners for Americans is not about whether you confuse the salad fork with the dinner fork. It's about the daily assault of selfish, inconsiderate behavior on the highways, in the office, in stores, and in myriad other places . . . ."

"In the long decline of the civilized West," observes one social historian, "there has been nothing so grating as the gradual disappearance of manners." Manners are minor morals. They are the everyday ways we respect other people and facilitate social relations. They make up the moral fabric of our shared lives.

Saying please when we'd like something, thanking people (waitresses and clerks, for example) when they do us a service, holding a door for the person behind us, not talking in movie theaters, turning off our cell phones when we're in a group setting, covering our mouth when we yawn or cough, using language that doesn't offend -- all these are small but meaningful ways of trying to make life a little more pleasant for the people around us.

If we fail to teach these everyday habits of courtesy and consideration to our children, we will not prepare them to be socially competent and likeable people. When society in general fails to teach manners to the young, it coarsens human relations and paves the way for the gross violations of civility that are ever more common. One example of the latter: Funeral directors and police, especially in metropolitan areas, increasingly report blatant disrespect for funeral processions. One Virginia funeral director says drivers regularly cut off his hearse and often give him an obscene gesture as they go by.

What can we do in our classrooms and schools to restore the habits of civilized conduct known as good manners?

1. Get kids to think about why manners matter

One year, Hal Urban put up a sign in his high school classroom: "No one ever went wrong by being polite." He had always enjoyed a good rapport with his students, who were college-bound and typically from affluent families. But he was troubled by what he saw as a decline of basic courtesy. He decided to hit this issue head-on by devoting the first class of the new school year to a discussion of manners.
He began by making two points:
In my experience, most people are capable of courtesy when they know clearly what is expected of them. Moreover, the classroom is a more positive place when everyone treats everyone else with courtesy and consideration.

He then distributed a handout titled, "Whatever Happened to Good Manners?" At the top was a quote from George Bernard Shaw: "Without good manners, human society becomes intolerable." Below that, under the heading "How Things Were Different Not Too Many Years Ago," were ten changes he'd seen in student behavior over his 20-plus years of high school teaching. He walked his class through these observations. For example:

- Students rarely came late to class. When they did, they apologized. Today many come late.
  Only rarely does one apologize.
- Students didn't get up, walk across the room, throw something in the wastebasket, then walk back across the room while the teacher is talking. Today this is done often, and nothing is thought about it.
- Students used to listen when the teacher was talking. Today many students feel they have a right to ignore the teacher and have a private conversation with their friends.
- Students didn't swear in classrooms or the hallways. Today some students can't talk without swearing.
- Students used to say "Please" and "Thank you." Today only a few students use those words.

Under this list of observations were several questions:
- Why is this happening?
- Is society better when people treat each other with respect? If so, why?
- Is a classroom better when both students and teacher show mutual respect?
- Why does Henry Rogers say, "Good manners are one of the most important keys to success in life"?
- What is the "Golden Rule"? If it's so simple, why do more people today have difficulty practicing it?
- Which impresses people more—being "cool" or being courteous?

His instructions to the class: "Please take out a sheet of paper and answer these questions. Don't sign your name. I'll collect your papers and read them aloud to the class."

He then collected students' written responses, read them aloud, and used them as a springboard for a discussion of manners. This took the rest of the period.

Urban comments: "This activity made a noticeable difference in students' behavior. In the weeks that followed, several told me they wished their other teachers would discuss good manners." An exchange student from Germany told him, "I enjoy your class not just because I'm learning a lot of American history but also because of how polite everyone is." At the end of the semester a boy said: "That manners page you handed out really made me think. Sometimes we do rude things and aren't even aware that we're being rude."

What were the features of this lesson that made it an effective character education experience for these high school students?
First, Urban took a whole class period to discuss good manners. That sent an unmistakable message: Manners matter.

He exercised directive leadership. He didn't ask students, as a values clarification approach might, "How many people think manners are important?" Rather, he designed the whole structure of the lesson to guide students to the conclusion that manners are important in school and life.
He started positively by stating his belief that most people are capable of courtesy if they know clearly what's expected.

He involved students actively. He recruited and respected them as thinkers by seeking their input.

He succeeded in getting all of his students to think about this issue by posing good questions and having them write anonymously. Anonymity gave them the freedom to be candid. About the importance of writing, Urban says:

If I want quality thinking and quality discussion, I almost always have students write first. Writing gets everyone involved. I get a much richer range of responses than if I simply posed the questions to the whole group -- in which case only a few students carry the class.

Finally, he taught this lesson on day one. Students could reflect on manners without feeling defensive, since they hadn't yet had a chance to commit the kinds of lapses he was describing. One of the hallmarks of character education is that it's proactive: It teaches what's right before something goes wrong.

Things will still go wrong, of course. It takes time to change habits:

By the end of the first month, I'm usually exhausted. It takes me that long to persuade all of my students that I really do expect them to abide by these standards. This past semester I had one kid who thought he could go to sleep in my class because that's what he did in other classes. I just kept walking over to his desk and saying matter-of-factly, "I'm sorry, Dan, but you can't sleep in this class." He eventually got the message.

Character education doesn't eliminate human nature. But by being proactive, the teacher puts a framework of expectations in place. Then the teachable moments -- the inevitable times when students fall short of the expectations -- are more fruitful, because there's an established standard of behavior to refer to and a shared commitment to honor that standard.

2. Teach the hello-goodbye rule

All across the country, teachers say that many students today do not return adults' greetings. "You say hello to a kid in the hall," says one elementary school teacher, "and they don't say anything back."

Returning a greeting, like all manners, must be learned. Gary Robinson made it a point to teach his 4th- and 6th-grade students the courtesy of greeting another person and saying goodbye. After establishing the Golden Rule as his "most important classroom rule," Mr. Robinson said:

My other rule is my Hello-Goodbye Rule. When you come into the classroom, I'd like you to say, "Hello, Mr. Robinson." I will, of course, return your greeting and say hello back to you. And when you leave the classroom, I'd like you to say, "Goodbye, Mr. Robinson."

When you enter somebody's space, it's common courtesy to greet them. You should do the same thing with your parents whenever you come into your house. And when you leave a person's space, you should always say goodbye. That's just the polite thing to do. Besides, when 24 of you guys walk through that door and say, "Hello, Mr. Robinson," it makes me feel great.

3. Teach alphabet manners

Susan Skinner teaches kindergarten in Columbia, South Carolina. She has a bulletin board displaying a different manner for each letter of the alphabet. When she teaches a letter of the alphabet during a given week, she teaches the corresponding manner at the same time.

A -- Accept a compliment graciously.
B -- Be on time.
C -- Clean your hands.
D -- Do chew with your mouth closed.
E -- Elbows off the table.
F -- Friendliness to others.
G -- Good grooming shows self-respect.
H -- Hang up your clothes.
I -- Interrupt only for a very important reason.
J -- Join in and include everybody.
K -- Kindness to all living things.
L -- Lend a helping hand.
M -- Magic words: "Please" and "Thank you."
N -- Never point or laugh at others.
O -- Obey the rules.
P -- Pleasant tone of voice is a plus.
Q -- Quiet when others are working or sleeping.
R -- Remember others on special occasions.
S -- Sit up straight.
T -- Thank the host or hostess.
U -- Use your beautiful smile.
V -- Visit a friend who is lonely or sick.
W -- Watch out for little ones.
X -- "X" out bad habits.
Y -- Yawn if you must but cover your mouth.
Z -- Zip your zipper.

She says: "I've probably gotten more positive parent feedback on my Alphabet Manners than any other thing I do. Parents are very happy that their children are learning these manners in school." And by sending home a copy of the alphabet manners she's teaching in her classroom, she gives parents an unspoken invitation to do the same at home.

4. Implement a manners curriculum

Implementing a formal curriculum on manners is a way to ensure that all students in a school, not just those in a particular teacher's classroom, get instruction in basic courtesies. Jill Rigby is a mother-turned-educator who got drawn into creating such a curriculum. An interior designer by training, she was asked in 1992 to volunteer at her twin sons' school -- St. James Episcopal Day School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She soon found herself in conversations with other parents about students' unruly cafeteria behavior. She said, "Why don't we come into the cafeteria once a week and talk to the children about manners?"

They drafted her for the job. Soon she was doing weekly, often humorous lessons on putting your napkin in your lap, chewing with your mouth closed, and the like.

Other schools began calling the school asking, "Where can we get this program?" In response, Rigby developed her lessons into a K-5 curriculum guide titled Manners of the Heart (www.mannersoftheheart.com), now used by hundreds of schools around the country. There's also a companion guide for parents, Manners of the Heart at Home. The school curriculum has three parts: (1) Everyday Courtesies (such as smiling, saying please and thank you, playing by the rules, and saying I'm sorry); (2) Communication Skills (such as introducing someone, telephone manners, and writing thank you notes); and (3) Table Manners (such as asking for something to be passed, sitting up straight, table talk, and manners for eating out). Rigby comments:
I define manners as an attitude of the heart that is self-giving, not self-serving. The objective of our curriculum is to teach children that manners come from the heart, not from memorizing a set of rules. If respect is the foundation of how we treat each other, manners and etiquette will come easily.

Rigby has had graduates of her curriculum come back to her with stories of how her lessons in manners helped them in high school and even on dates.

When our children act with good manners, they will elicit a positive response from other people. They will be happier themselves -- more secure, confident, and poised -- when they know how to behave. They will be more likely to teach manners to their own children someday if they become parents. By their courteous behavior, they can help to create a more considerate, gracious, and well-mannered society. These are all good reasons to make the teaching of manners part of every character education program.

An excellent resource for getting kids to reflect on manners is George Washington's Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviours in Company and Conversation, 110 guides to good conduct that he wrote out for himself when he was fourteen years old (available from Applewood Books, Box 365, Bedford, MA 01730).