

Good Manners Lie at the Root of Good Ethics

By Goldwin Emerson, gandjemerson@rogers.com

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When children are very young they often are unable to understand why some ways of behaving are better than others. It is important that parents develop good habits of behaving and develop good manners in children even though they are too young to understand why some behaviours are better than others. Good habits and good manners should be developed early and this paves the way for children to more easily understand later on why good manners are better than bad manners.

Are good manners a sign of good ethics? I think so, because good manners require one to think about other people. To practice good manners it is necessary to think about the people we come in contact with and to be considerate of their wishes and their needs. All of the ethical factors of caring, sharing, and helping others, and being generous, kind, and courteous, come into play. As adults most people, but not all, think about manners and learn the reasons behind good manners.

But practicing good manners is an important component. Philosophers and writers from Aristotle, (“Nicomachean Ethics” 350 B.C. Book II, Chap.2) to more recent times such as those of John Dewey, (“Theory of the Moral Life”-1932) to Miss Manners (Judith Martin, “The Pursuit of Politeness”, 1984) all write about practicing good habits. Aristotle states, “moral virtue comes about as a result of habit”. Both Aristotle, and much later Dewey, recognized that manners are social conventions and one needs social interaction to put good manners into practice. Both Aristotle and Dewey emphasized the need to consider consequences and to reflect on alternatives. Aristotle and Dewey also emphasized the importance of developing good habits even when children are too young to understand the reasons behind mannerly behavior.

Practicing manners does not mean that we simply can learn good manners by rote. In this case, *practicing* is used in a somewhat similar method to the way

medical doctors practice medicine. Doctors need to learn a great deal about the scientific facts of how our bodies work, about physiology, biology, and the structure of the human body. Then they put their knowledge into practice, not by rote, but by careful observation. That is, they put their special knowledge and skills into practice. In a practical way, they form habits associated with good medicine.

But the development of good habits and good manners is somewhat different with children learning to be polite or mannerly. For Aristotle and Dewey, good habits come first and later reasoning about manners follows. For children, it may not be apparent why it is good to say “please and thank you.” But Aristotle and Dewey would say it is important to form the habit of doing so. Learning the habit of behaving courteously reinforces the reasons to do so when a child is old enough to reason clearly. Later, young adults will come to realize why their parents or teachers urged them to get into the habit of practicing good manners.

On one occasion, the etiquette columnist, Miss Manners (Judith Martin) was commenting on the importance of writing thank-you letters. She regretted the fact that for many people it was sufficient simply to feel grateful, but they thought it was not necessary to go the second step and write a thank-you letter to those who gave them a gift or did them a favour. Miss Manners stated wryly, “practicing proper behavior eventually encourages virtuous behavior; if you write enough thank-you letters, you may actually feel a flicker of gratitude.”

Some things have changed since the 1980s when Miss Manners gave this advice. Over the past thirty years or more we communicate with email, cell phones, face book, texting, and other additional technical devices. Probably, on very special occasions such as bereavement, or congratulations for special achievements, hand written letters may still be regarded as the best approach.

Nonetheless, the importance of the development of good habits can hardly be overstated. Parents who neglect to emphasize the habit of good manners may be subjecting their own children to embarrassment later on. As young adults, they may grow up to feel that their parents neglected their proper upbringing because they were not told as children how to behave in a mannerly way.