

# village view

by Andrea Leonard

A task most parents view as almost unending and always onerous is teaching their children common courtesies.

The day a child remembers without being prodded to say please and thank you comes as a milestone; parents hail it as so great an achievement that further insistence upon the so-called amenities often goes by the board.

Since the process takes years, parental patience is stretched thin to reach this level of success, and children are enough relieved of the constant reminders, they often aren't aware there may be additional expectations of them.

As they reach adolescence, however, and move further from the central family, most encounter situations in which they'd like to participate verbally and acceptably in social conversations. It seems many youngsters today don't know how.

One reason they don't know how is they don't learn to use words and phrases that enable all of us to participate and communicate. Learning these techniques sooner would serve to establish adolescents as young people with something pleasant and interesting to contribute.

It's a difficult time of life, at best; we who've been through it know (when we let ourselves remember how we felt) it's an age of awkwardness, of feeling too tall, too fat, too noisy or too shy. It's an age when we want to be noticed and recognized, but notice and recognition make us self-conscious and uncertain.

Without knowing why we feel that way, we know something's missing in our preparation for entering the adult world. Here we stand on the threshold, inadequately equipped.

Often what's missing is the same training that taught us to say please and thank you; the process of drilling into youngsters the appropriate remarks to be used at the right time.

For the most part, children don't learn these things by osmosis. We wish they did; for the benefit of the child the lessons should continue.

Good example helps but doesn't, in itself, fill the bill. At adolescence children who have hitherto always been polite suddenly are fresh, saucy, and in some cases, rude.

They choose the worst possible things to say at the worst possible times. Their judgement about which remarks are appropriate and which are not seems gravely impaired. In order not to embarrass them at a time in their lives when they're over-sensitive to criticism, opportunities to correct this are allowed to slip past.

With a little more determination, these situations can be eliminated or held to a minimum.

It does take continued training on a daily basis; it does take good example; it does take more patience, more patience perhaps than many parents can muster. For children fortunate enough to have fathers and mothers who keep on teaching good manners and who explain that certain ways of expressing things are expected and acceptable, adolescence can be shortened and made pleasanter for everyone.

It helps a child deal with his peers just as it helps him handle situations with adults.

A few examples might be useful. When a child's friend comes to visit, has he learned to say "Nice to see you"? If so, later on, he will greet a guest with "I'm so glad you could come."

When someone compliments him, does he know he can express appreciation by saying, "How great of you to tell me. You make me feel so good when you say that."

This way of saying thank you gives the other person credit for his thoughtfulness. It gives both the complimenter and the complimentee a happy feeling.

That is, after all, what good manners are all about. That's what all of us want from one another: happy feelings. Everyone likes to be liked and to feel appreciated.

Saying to someone who's welcomed you into his home, "It's been really fun this afternoon," comes across with more happy feeling than a mumbled, "Thanks for the nice time."

If the telephone rings, you answer; if there's a sudden silence on the other end of the line, and then a click, it leaves you with an unsettled feeling. If a child has misdialed and reached a wrong number, he won't feel embarrassed if he's learned to say, "Excuse me, I must have dialed wrong." And you don't feel uneasy.

After all, we all make mistakes.

Teaching children to shake hands, especially with older people, when they are introduced helps everyone through the first few moments of anxiety even some grown people experience. The haunting concerns about "Will they like me, do I look all right, what are they thinking about me?" slip quickly away when words and action are used to allay these fears.

Often the person bringing two strangers together will offer a few words of explanation by saying, "Helen, this is my boss, Mr. Robbins; Mrs. Hand is from New York and a friend of long standing." This gives the two people meeting for the first time a foothold, a place to stand while they begin talking together.

"I've heard so many good things about you," may be a cliché, but it gives the boss a happy and comfortable glow. Once again, that's what manners are all about.

He can counter with "How nice for Jane you could come for a visit; I hope you'll be around for a while?"

Already they are launched. The visitor responds with an explanation of why she must leave soon, or can assure him she's planning to stay and "is looking forward to knowing you better."

Expressing a compliment is another way of saying "I like you and want to give you a verbal gift to make you happy." If you meet a person at a party and you've both been in the same room for several minutes before being introduced, there's an excellent opportunity to give a compliment.

"How do you do? I've been admiring your dress (suit, bag, shoes, scarf, tie) and thinking how nice it looks on you." Again, that response makes the other person feel comfortable. "Aren't you nice to tell me!" says thank you and returns the compliment.

Sometimes people disagree and an argument looms. There are ways to avoid the hypocrisy of pretending to agree and still avoid getting more deeply embroiled in an altercation.

"You may be right," makes an opponent feel less threatened even though you haven't changed your position. In expressing opinions you know may meet strong opposition, it often helps to preface your remark with "May I say this?" or "let me ask your opinion about..." This calls to the other person's attention the fact you feel you're not communicating well, and shows you respect his ideas even though you don't share his conclusions. It works better than raising your voice.

If parents teach children how to approach others gently, how to make them feel good during give-and-take conversations, how to reinforce basic please-and-thank-yous with courtesy, the generation gap could prove less an abyss and adolescence could be a considerably easier period of life.