



with the Behavioral Institute of Atlanta, says that most children can begin learning as soon as they have acquired language. "We kind of naturally start teaching our kids manners as toddlers," says Dorsett. "We encourage them to ask 'please' for things, to say 'thank you,' that you don't hit—just very basic kinds of things that we may not even recognize as manners, but are very important in social skills development for the child."

In addition to "please" and "thank you," as well as playground lessons like sharing and taking turns, very basic table manners can also be introduced to young kids. By letting kids know early what is unacceptable behavior at meals—slurping, squirming, playing with or picking up food with the fingers—

“ [Etiquette] is the earliest training in self-control. It prepares kids for success in their earliest encounters and environments. ”

parents lay the groundwork for more advanced table manners. As children enter school, these lessons can expand to encompass the new and more complex situations they will encounter. According to Charlotte Ford, author of *21st-Century Etiquette*, by the time children reach preteen years, they should be well-versed in the use of cutlery, sitting with their napkins in their laps, politely ordering from wait staff, asking for food items to be passed and able to maintain pleasant table conversation. In addition, she says more refined etiquette lessons can extend to writing thank-you notes for gifts they receive, practically from the time they can write their names.

Muskin is especially insistent on this rule with her children. "In our house," she says, "we put a rule in —continued on page 106

courtesy call

ARE YOU TEACHING YOUR CHILD THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD MANNERS?

Children today circulate in an increasingly casual world, a culture of text messages, the Internet and video games, where it's possible to go days without personal interaction. To some, the term "etiquette" seems to be a dusty relic—relegated to history like white gloves and the horse and buggy—but have good manners gone out of style?

"Manners are the grease by which society flows more smoothly," says Linda Muskin, a Highland Park, Ill., mother of 16-year-old twins, who has been teaching her kids lessons in courtesy since they were 2 years old. "Society is much more casual than it used to be, so people really

notice a more formal set of etiquette standards. When people say to me, 'Oh, your kids have such nice manners,' I think that maybe this isn't the norm. It should be, though. Shifts in social mores may have made etiquette less common, but not less important."

According to a 2002 study by the Public Agenda Research Group, manners are still important to 79 percent of Americans who believe lack of respect and courtesy is a "serious national problem."

In order to become a natural part of a child's personality, manners have to be built over the course of a child's life. Dr. Pamela G. Dorsett, a clinical psychologist

