

My Children Have Manners, Or So I'm Told

By MAREK FUCHS (April 16, 2006)

LIKE most of you, I have remarkably gifted children. But that doesn't seem to keep the three of them from behaving like barn animals.

Only at home, though. It is only their parents who are subjected to their feral side. When they are out of the house, we always hear back how mannerly they are. They say please, we are told. And thank you, it seems. And these three impostors are apparently never lippy; no one else even knows that when they talk about school at the end of the day, they do so while chewing open-mouthed on their bunny pasta.

Nightly at the kitchen table for weeks on end, it seemed, my wife and I found ourselves seething at this sight, pondering the benefits of kiddie charm school. Because the offenses mainly occurred at home, though, we finally decided to invite the charm school over.

Persnickety manners ladies might have some pointers, if not directly for the offenders, then at least on their parents' discipline methods.

After I had made arrangements to carry out the plan, I told my three children about the person I had invited over, and why she was coming. They looked at me as if they had been double-crossed. That never bodes well.

Yet Melissa Leonard, a well-appointed product of Rye Neck who now lives in Harrison, entered our home in a flurry of good will, handing out slap bracelets and other plastic charms.

Mrs. Leonard is an etiquette and protocol consultant, which is just a fancy way of saying persnickety manners lady. She gives seminars and private lessons, to high-ranking business people and unruly children.

Mrs. Leonard, 32, says she feels out of step in our society. She was reared by parents with exacting standards, who did not let her wear jeans or miniskirts (though she sometimes sneaked out in such attire) and otherwise required that she suffer for style. Their strategy was vindicated, Mrs. Leonard said, when she ran into someone years later whom she had barely known in high school.

"You were the classy girl," the person said.

Proper without being in any way prim, Mrs. Leonard ascribed the downfall of good manners to a culture that, since the 1960's, has valued casualness over all else. She also had a warning: In a place like Westchester, where so much importance is placed on how to help one's children get ahead, beastly behavior can undercut everything.

She charged \$200 for what we determined would be a cram-session version of what she usually does, given my children's relative youth (9, almost 5 and 2) and doubtful spirit of cooperation.

To my surprise, though, they got with the program. Told to put their wrists, not their elbows, on the table, or to blot at their mouths with a napkin before sipping a drink, they actually complied. They seemed to find the customs quaint. They listened. They asked questions.

Still, we already knew that they could behave for short periods. How about the long haul? Mrs. Leonard said the key was to have them fear us a little, in a way not often seen in modern society. We needed practice in looking witheringly scornful.

My children later worried about whether Mrs. Leonard was going to come back to make spot checks. We tried to look witheringly scornful. I don't think it worked.

Nancy Stith-Williams, a manners consultant based in New Rochelle, tells well-honed anecdotes about men at the Princeton Club with revolting table manners. She also runs manners-themed birthday parties for little girls. She explained that even if it may seem improbable in the moment, children do eventually abide by the standards that parents set.

Then I decided to check with an even higher authority: the syndicated columnist Judith Martin, who is after all known as Miss Manners. To my surprise, she suggested lightening up on family dinners. In a column from her book "Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior, Freshly Updated"(W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), Miss Manners made a sharp distinction between family table manners and company table manners, suggesting that parents might make a secret pact with children not to tell outsiders about any faux pas committed during family time.

Having created a kind of Crossfire of the Manners Ladies, I found myself confused. So I asked the highest authority of all -- my mother -- for advice on just how far children should be browbeaten into exhibiting good manners at home.

"Feral children inside the house, but polite outside?" Mom asked, treading familiar ground. "To me, that's as close to perfection as you can get."