

Raise a Kid Who Gets Invited Back

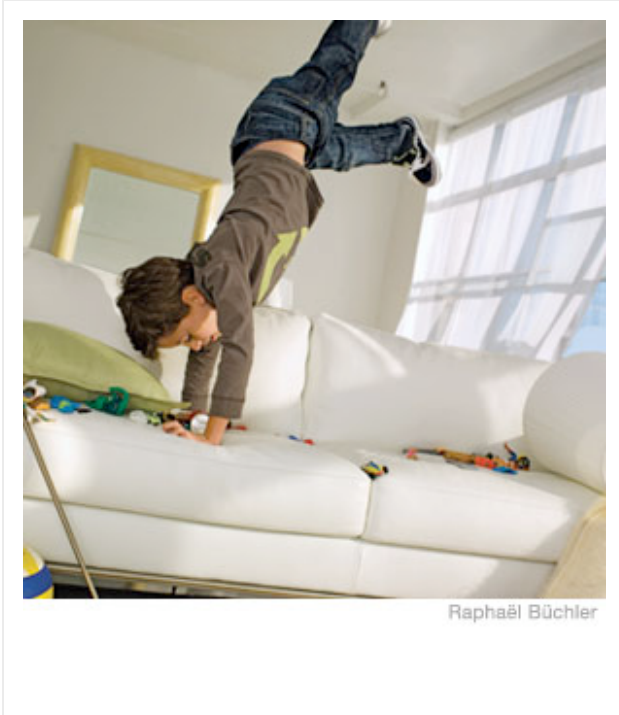
How to teach your child good manners and why being a good guest still matters

By Teri Cettina, *Parenting*

Whenever I send my 7-year-old to a friend's house, I hold my breath a bit. Will she remember that she can't just open the refrigerator and help herself? What if she makes a colossal mess? And please, I plead silently, don't let her burp in front of that nice family.

Sending our kids out into the world -- and into other people's homes -- can be a tricky proposition. If they're reasonably well behaved, it makes us, their parents, look good. But if they boss their buddy around and terrorize the cat...

Raising kids who don't act like cave-children in public is all about encouraging respect. It's not about teaching them to be annoyingly, precociously polite, sitting with folded hands at a party and inquiring after another mom's health. It is about making sure our kids treat other people -- and their things -- nicely, so that other moms will want them in their houses again. "Kids who behave at friends' houses have a better chance of becoming kids who behave with their teachers and, eventually, adults who get on well with their friends, family, and bosses," says Jodi R.R. Smith, a mom and etiquette consultant in Boston. "The bottom line: People with good social skills tend to get further in life. That's reality." The lessons are simple...



Raphaël Büchler

Ages 5 to 6: RESPECT 101

At this age, your child will probably go to playdates and parties without you (hooray!). And it's often the parents -- not the kids -- who choose who'll get invited back, so focus some of your child's skills on pleasing them. Key reminders:

"Mrs. So-and-So is in charge."

Don't assume your kid knows this. You might even say, in front of the other parent, "Remember that Joe's mom is the boss. I'm sure she'll tell you if their family has any special rules."

"Use your inside voice -- and feet."

No matter how laid-back the other parent seems, let's be real: 6-year-olds running through the house screaming? No, thanks. Besides, do you really want to cough up bucks for the other family's china if it gets broken in a game of tag?

Melissa Leonard of Harrison, NY, feels the easiest way to teach her two kids about indoor behavior (and maintain her sanity) is to keep the same rules at her own house, namely: Walk and use a quieter voice inside. If that isn't your style or your kid is extra active, let him burn off some energy at a park right before playdates or parties.

"Remember sharing? Now's the time."

Sounds basic, but kids really like friends who take turns choosing games and willingly switch off with the basketball. You can prep your kid to be a better sharer by playing board games where you have to take turns, or letting sibs trade off choosing a family movie. When your child goes on a playdate, suggest she bring a toy that she's willing to share. That'll get her thinking about taking turns, though

a reminder is smart.

"Pick up three things before you leave."

When I tell my daughters to help clean up at the end of a playdate, the other mom invariably insists, "Don't bother!" But when I polled moms for this article, the number one guest skill they mentioned was: "Please encourage your child to pick up at least a few toys before he leaves, even if I say it's no big deal." Translation: Other moms are just being polite.

"Say the magic words."

Don't underestimate the value of "please" and "thank you." They make every kid's request sound a bit nicer. I love it when my nephew, Nicholas, adds "Please and thank you, Aunt Teri" to everything he requests, just to cover his bases.

Ages 7 to 9: KINDNESS MATTERS

These kids are a little savvy about social interactions and are picking up more on other people's feelings -- all good guest skills. However, they still need concrete reminders:

"Try your hardest not to make gross noises."

Kids love to burp the alphabet, fart on command, and, oh, so much more. However, what's funny at recess isn't always cool at a friend's home. Remind your child to tone it down: "It's rude to belch at the table, but if you do, say 'Excuse me.' "

"Don't be a snack hound."

Take it from me: Feeding kids with bottomless stomachs (like my youngest daughter) right before parties and playdates is futile. They still beg constantly for food. Most host moms are willing to give one snack, but pint-size guests who want to munch continuously can be annoying.

Bridget Melson, a mom and family therapist in Pleasanton, CA, tells her kids that they shouldn't take more than they're offered. "Then I say, 'If you follow the rule, I'll give you a surprise,' " she says. This assumes your child will fess up -- but it never hurts to offer reminders in a positive way.

"If you can't think of anything to do, keep thinking."

Most host parents don't expect to be entertainment directors, and your child's friend may not want to choose every activity. Leonard has a great way to develop her kids' "creative thinking skills": If they utter the dreaded phrase "I'm bored!" they get a chore -- from dusting the baseboards to reorganizing a toy shelf. "Now when they're at a friend's house and their host says, 'I'm bored, there's nothing to do,' I can guarantee my girls will think of something!" she says.

"Be ready to go when I come to pick you up."

It's probably happened to you: The other parent finally arrives for pickup, and the guest kid hides his shoes or runs upstairs. "I especially hate it when the other parent looks at me as if to say 'Can't they just play a little longer?' " says Chris Shaw, a mom of two boys in Wilmington, NC. Don't put other parents in this awkward situation: Consider rewarding your child with some video-game or TV time at home when he leaves a friend's house quickly, or take away a privilege when he opts for that last-minute game of hide-and-seek.

Ages 10 and up: MAKING YOU PROUD

Most parents expect more self-control and manners from older kids, says preteen and family psychologist Susan Bartell of Port Washington, NY. Practical reminders:

"Respect the rules, even ones different from ours."

Particularly at sleepovers, hosts appreciate it when your kid adheres to some sort of "bedtime," even if that doesn't mean actual sleeping (e.g., no loud video games or goofing around after midnight), and doesn't initiate no-no's like sneaking outside. And remember, says Bartell: "If your kid is wild at someone's house, the mom grapevine will know, and your child will stop getting invitations."

"Work it out."

When arguments occur -- which they will -- it's great if your kid can help figure out solutions. As with most skills, this one starts at home. "It may seem easiest to jump in and resolve conflicts between your own kids, but it's important that they figure out how to do so themselves. They'll really put these skills into practice away from home," says Smith.

"Turn down food politely."

Your child will score major guest points by saying just "No, thank you" if the mom offers a food he

doesn't like.

By this age, kids who openly fuss about what they eat or make special requests are considered high-maintenance -- by parents and tweens. Encourage politeness at your own dinner table first, suggests Seattle parenting educator Elizabeth Pantley, author of *The No-Cry Discipline Solution*. "When your child says, 'Yuck! I hate this green stuff,' remind her: 'What I'd like you to say is, 'I'm not a fan of spinach, so no, thank you.' "

"Say hi and bye -- at least -- to your friend's parents."

"Your tween will be perceived as a really nice kid if she makes an effort to thank her friend's parents for having her over, and looks adults in the eye," says Bartell. If you're not sure, you might also ask the other parents what your child should call them, because there's no hard-and-fast rule these days.

As I was finishing this article, my 7-year-old, Flora, came back from a neighbor's house whining that the babysitter -- an adult with kids of her own -- wouldn't let her leave until she helped clean up the toys she and her friend had scattered around.

To everyone's shock, I called and thanked her. I don't want my daughter to think it's okay to leave a mess behind. I want her to be the kind of person who thinks about others -- and yes, I want her to leave her friends' homes with the parents (or the sitters) thinking, "Now, there's a nice kid."

If I could just get her to stop hounding her playmates' parents for Popsicles...and sandwiches...and chips....

ETIQUETTE TIPS FOR YOU

Good guest skills don't stop with your kids. Some things to remember:

Time your arrival. It's best to show up about five minutes after you've agreed to come. If you're early, you run the risk of the family not being ready. If you're more than ten minutes late, the other child will be anxiously watching the clock.

Don't bring siblings. Unless they were specifically invited, of course.

Have cash ready. If the other family plans to take your child to a movie or other outing, at least offer a few bucks for snacks or parking.

Reciprocate already! It's an unwritten rule that when your child is invited to a playdate, sleepover, or other outing, you'll try to invite the friend to your house next time. After all, the other parents don't want to feel like their house is your daycare center.

Pick up promptly. Calling at the designated pickup time to say you're running late -- even by just 20 minutes -- won't earn points from the tired host parent. Get this: Shannon Duffy of Palm Springs, CA, hosted a five-hour playdate that was supposed to end after two hours. "The mom had left a cell-phone number, and I called it, but her phone was turned off. When she finally did call to say she was on her way, she didn't even acknowledge how late she was or explain why!"

Ask how it went. A quick recap of the get-together gives the other parent a chance to tell you what went well -- and what didn't.

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