

Certified Etiquette Consultant Melissa Leonard

In a manner of speaking.

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How'd you get into this line of work?

When I was twenty one and working for a mutual fund annuity company, my mom saw an ad in Town & Country for training to be an etiquette consultant and it sounded interesting. When I mentioned it to my boss, he said, 'We could really use our people trained in this.' After I finished the course, I started training my company's personnel. And when I went out on my own, they became my client.

Did you have proper tea parties for your dolls when you were growing up?

Never. My mother was strict and we were raised with very good manners, but I pride myself on being down to earth and not affected, and teaching practical everyday etiquette that people can really use—like how to shake hands, not how to curtsy.

Have we become less polite?

Yes. There's been a slow erosion over time of what is deemed acceptable and what we consider appropriate.

Why do you think that's happened?

It all starts with the kids. They're being bombarded by TV, music, video games...and so we have kids who don't listen, talk back, and have little respect for elders and authority. And in Westchester, especially, both parents may be working for material possessions, not because they have to, but to keep up with what they've accumulated—the cars, the country clubs, the lavish vacations, the best clothes and camps for little Johnny. So they feel guilty spending the little time they do have with their kids disciplining or correcting. God forbid little Johnny hears the word 'no,' he might need therapy for a year.

Why do parents engage your services?

Parents call and say, 'I don't know what to do. My kids are so rude, they embarrass me.'

Has having good manners given you an edge?

Absolutely. When I was seventeen, I was hired as an assistant to a very high-up person. I found out years later that the HR person did not want to hire me because I had no experience. But the president of the company happened to walk by, introduced himself, and we shook hands. I'd been prepped on how to shake hands properly since I was two, and he was so impressed with how I handled myself that I got the job.

What's the most egregious breach of etiquette you've observed among adults dining?

The rudest would be using tech devices at the table—BlackBerries, iPods, answering the phone, texting, or wearing a Bluetooth flashing like a beacon in the air.

Thank-you notes after a job interview: still a good idea?

Always. Email is fine but a handwritten letter is better, because how many people are going to take the time to handwrite a thank-you note?

What point of etiquette could many businesspeople use instruction in?

How to properly shake hands. You should have web—the fleshy part of the hand—to web contact, a firm grip, even if you are a woman, two or three pumps, and a shake from the elbow as opposed to wrist or shoulder. You should smile, make eye contact, and say a nice greeting like, 'Hi, it's great to see you again.' You want to be open and friendly; you never know if that person is going to be your future wife, in-law, or boss.

What should you do or say when your little one yells out, 'Mommy, that lady is fat'?

Don't get flustered and don't try to make too many excuses—simply look at the person and offer a sincere apology such as, 'I am so sorry about that.' Then, in private, turn to your child and say something like, 'It's not nice to point out things about other people; we'll talk more about this when we get home.'

What would you have advised Taylor Swift to do when Kanye West grabbed the mike away and interrupted her at the Video Music Awards?

To do just what she did—nothing. Let him be the wreck. You say one thing and then you're dragged into the muck and mire.

Photo by John Rizzo