**How to improve your child’s behaviour**

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Within the parent community, there is a very high regard for the well-behaved child. This child will stand out for his politeness, his use of ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, his ability to wait for his turn, to share his toys, to be kind, to follow instructions and his general ability to behave appropriately in a given environment. The majority of us enviously look at the parents of the child, thinking to ourselves, that they are so lucky. Their child is so well behaved and easy to manage. Look at how he is sitting quietly, waiting for the food to arrive while my child is running around the restaurant in a frenzy, nearly knocking down every waiter who passes by. While, in some cases, the child’s inherent personality does play a role, luck rarely ever debuts in such situations. We often fail to see the behind-the-scenes effort put in by the child’s parent.

Babies are never born well-mannered. As they grow, they watch and observe the adults in their life. They learn to imitate the behaviour of the people in their immediate environment. As their world expands and they begin to interact with more people in varied situations, they start to use what they know in their interactions. Some children are naturally able to figure it out on their own while others need a little more help. So, how can we as parents help them understand the appropriate behaviour required for different situations?

Be a role model. It’s not enough to constantly tell your child to say please and thank you. They must hear you say it as well. Be conscious of how often and to whom you are polite. Culturally, as Indians we tend to be only polite to those we consider equal to us in social standing or authority figures. We don’t treat everyone we meet with similar courtesy or respect. Children are like sponges. They watch us and absorb the different nuances in our interactions. As a result, you will see a difference between the way they treat their family or friends and their household help.

Observe your own interactions with your family members and children. Do you tend to issue orders or do you ask politely? As the children grew older, I encouraged them to remind me every time I forgot to say please or thank you when asking for something. They loved catching me out every time. It helped to make me more conscious while reinforcing the concept in their minds.

Sometimes, it’s not what we say but how we say it. Our tone and body language can often come across as rude if we are not careful. Even the best of us, lose our tempers with our children or at the end of a long day, feel irritable and snappy. Do not hesitate to apologise to them. They will learn that it’s important to be conscious of how you made someone else feel. When children speak, they can unintentionally hurt feelings without even realising that they were being rude. Encourage them to be conscious of their tone and body language in their interactions. Role playing of different ways of saying the same thing can help them understand how changing your tone or body language can help a situation.

Teach them simple, social conventions like making eye contact when speaking with someone, a firm handshake, avoiding monosyllabic answers, greeting visitors when they come home. When children start to interact with the external world, they need to learn that there are different modes of behaviour for different occasions. While running around and screaming with their friends is appropriate in a park setting, it is not appropriate in a restaurant. At home, we have established indoor and outdoor rules. If indoors, we have softer indoor voices and play indoor games. If we want to be loud and run around, we then need to go down to play.

Set behavioural expectations with them. Be clear and consistent in your expectations. Focus on telling them what you want them to do versus what you don’t want them to do. Take the time to explain why different settings require different behaviour. If you run around in a restaurant, you might bump into a waiter carrying hot food. If you shout in a restaurant, you are ruining the experience for the other diners. When children know what is expected of them, it is easier for them to model positive behaviour.

Make sure that your expectations are age appropriate. Expecting a two year old to sit quietly for half an hour is an unrealistic expectation. Choose age appropriate environments for your children. Maybe a 10 pm reservation at a fine dining restaurant isn’t the best place for your sleepy four year old.

As adults, we often make the mistake of assuming that children should automatically know how to behave. Before you step out of the house, take a few minutes to explain where you are going and what the child may expect there. Will there be enough to keep him occupied or will he have to entertain himself? Would he like to take a book or some crayons along? Preparing him for what’s in store makes it easier for everybody to have an enjoyable outing.

Sometimes, despite setting expectations, children may get excited or distracted and forget to behave in an appropriate way. Take them aside gently and remind them of the appropriate behaviour required in this setting. On the way back, ensure that you praise them for positive behaviour displayed. Acknowledge how hard it must have been for them to behave appropriately while others were doing just the opposite.

When behaviour expectations are clearly defined and consistently followed through, you can then set consequences connected to inappropriate behaviours. Discuss the consequences in advance with your child. If he knows what to expect, he will be far more willing to accept consequences of inappropriate behaviour.

As always, consistency is the key. Children will push the boundaries. But if you are clear and consistent while setting behavioural expectations, that’s where half the battle is won.