

**Q & A: How can we promote politeness this holiday season?  
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**Question:** This year most of our extended family will be coming to our house for the holidays, and I'm concerned that my three children (ages 8, 11 and 13) will probably not be on their best behavior. We understand that they'll be excited by their grandparents' and cousins' presence (and presents!), as well as annoyed that they can't just go in their bedrooms and ignore their relatives if they become frustrated with the toddlers' antics or their uncle who keeps repeating himself. But come on, it's only for one day, and I think that they should be able to handle the excitement as well as the frustration! In addition, I would like them to be verbally polite—asking instead of demanding and using appropriate language. I don't expect perfection, but what should I expect and what can I do to encourage their politeness?

**Answer:** The holidays can bring out the best in us, but also promote some big-time rudeness and self-absorption. Take a look at the following points, which I believe to be basic for any family gathering:

- **Expect the magic words.** *Please, thank you* and *excuse me* are the basics of a polite vocabulary, but don't fall into the trap of believing that just because you remind your kids to use these words that they will do so automatically. As with any habit it takes consistency to instill a new behavior. Expect your children to need consistent reminders until the magic words become second nature. Discuss with your kids what words you'd like them to use to get your attention—instead of interrupting have them say “excuse me”. It's important for parents to regularly use these respectful words and phrases themselves when interacting with their children—modeling goes a long way toward teaching, reinforcing and maintaining polite verbiage and behavior.
- **Coach your kids to ask, not demand.** Children get into the habit of *insisting* on privileges or your attention, rather than coming across as *requesting* it. Although their intentions may be appropriate (they think that they are asking, not demanding), many don't understand how their language is perceived by others. Teach them that a request is something that usually is in question form, rather than a statement. That's a safe way of assuring that they'll be perceived as asking, rather than as demanding. Most folks become offended when kids *tell* them what's going to happen (“I'm changing the channel to watch the big game”) rather than *asking* for permission (“Can I change the channel now?”). It's really the same process, but put differently, and it appears much more polite and respectful when asking rather than demanding.
- **Focus on tone of voice.** Many children have no clue how they are perceived by others. Little ones can appear to be whiney when they believe that they are just expressing their feelings, and teens often seem argumentative when they're trying to make a point. *Teach your kids that they are responsible for both their intent as well as the way that they come across to others.* That's a life lesson that is invaluable—many adults ruin perfectly good relationships by relating in an

- inappropriate tone of voice, pitch or volume. Better to learn this skill now as a youngster, than to pay the price later as an adult. And, it will certainly help to set the tone in your house during the hectic holiday dinner!
- **Communicating when angry or annoyed.** We all become angry or frustrated by others' behaviors once in a while, and for some kids it's an almost daily occurrence. Instead of allowing them to lash out, teach your children the "I message" technique of describing what is bothering them. Calmly stating to the cousin who just won't leave your daughter alone during the celebration "I get upset when you come into my room and play with my things without permission" is significantly more palatable (and effective) than hollering "Get out of my room; I hate it when you come for a visit!" And, fights occur much less frequently when the annoying party is either ignored or given an "I message" than when they are attacked. Often this is seen as provocation, and retaliation follows. The "I message" should also include what the child would like the other to do. "Please knock before entering" or "Ask to play my Game Boy, don't just take it" are statements that lead to better communication than verbal or physical barbs.
  - **Formal meets and greets.** By now your children already know what to call their cousin, aunt, uncle or grandparent, and hopefully it's appropriate! However, if your holiday meal will include "new" acquaintances as guests, I suggest that the kids should assume that a formal name is preferable. *Mr.* or *Mrs.*, *Coach* or *Doctor* are all appropriate ways for children to speak to adults who are not family members. If the new friend wishes to be called something less formal, "Miss Sally" may be appropriate for little kids, or perhaps the person's first name if it is a very close acquaintance of yours.
  - **Teach the kids to be good hosts.** Let your children know that the purpose of a holiday gathering is the people—not the stuff. Sure, presents and goodies are nice, but they have a responsibility to help to entertain their relatives and to not retreat to their bedrooms. If there are particular toys, video games or other objects that they wish not to be disturbed, have them put these away prior to the party. Odds are that their cousins will want to play with toys or video games that are available and it's your children's responsibility to limit access to items that are not to be touched. This is a sharing, giving time...so please be proactive and discuss this with the kids before the big day!