

# Was Grandma Right About **MANNERS**



by Ari Tuckman, PsyD, MBA; concept inspiration by Jeff Copper, MBA, PCC, PCAC

*Don't talk with your mouth full. Wait your turn.  
Say please and thank you.*

**W**E TRY TO TEACH OUR KIDS good manners so that they can navigate social situations smoothly. As with everything else, some kids pick them up easily, while others struggle. Children with ADHD usually understand what good manners are and probably get why they are important, but may have a hard time applying those manners consistently.

Russell Barkley, PhD, is famously quoted as saying that ADHD is not a disorder of knowing what to do; rather, it's a disorder of doing what you know. I would add to that that people with ADHD actually know what to do far better than everyone else, because they have been told what to do far more often. Unfortunately, all those corrections don't reliably translate into different behavior the next time, which is usually what we hope for.

To explain this disconnect, Dr. Barkley created his response inhibition theory of ADHD, which proposes that ADHD is fundamentally a disorder of holding back a response. People with ADHD respond too quickly, without thinking through enough of the consequences, or they are pulled away by new

thoughts or stimuli when it would be better to keep their attention on the task at hand.

Knowing not to interrupt someone, for example, is the easy part. The challenge is to hold back when you're excited. We all interrupt sometimes, but folks with ADHD interrupt more often because they have a harder time holding back that reflexive response. Just as this affects their ability to pay attention to the teacher in



class, it also affects their ability to follow all those social rules that make up good manners. Therefore, just as parents and teachers provide structure and guidance to help kids stay focused on the right thing in the moment, they also help kids to hold back their first reflexive response and to instead use good manners.

### **What are manners and why do we need them?**

Obviously manners vary by culture, but they tend to involve holding back the first, easiest, and most automatic response. They involve resisting temptations and tend to highlight the effect of our actions on others. For example, when dessert is being served, a child may have trouble waiting and therefore want to quickly grab a plate for herself. This is understandable, but good manners tell us to wait our turn because others may be upset by this impatience and not want to be her friend anymore.

When we teach our kids good manners, we're basically asking them to practice pausing before acting and to consider the effect

of their actions on others. Or, as Dr. Barkley would put it, we're teaching them response inhibition and self-regulation (rather than being regulated by others).

Unfortunately, kids and even adults with ADHD struggle with this pause and too often step on toes or put their foot in their mouth, despite knowing better. Not that anyone is perfect, but people with ADHD use up their free passes too quickly. This can have significant social consequences when others assume that this person with ADHD is self-centered, inconsiderate, or selfish. It's understandable why someone would make those assumptions based on the visible behavior, but that isn't what is actually going on. It's just that the person with ADHD acts too quickly without applying what they know they should do.

### **How to teach and prompt**

So, how do we get our distractible, impulsive kids to use those good manners that we have worked so hard to ingrain? First, prime the pump—remind them what to do, preferably as close to the moment to act as possible (“Remember to say thank you.”) If the child blows through that moment without using their manners, give them a poke and a look to remind them. If necessary, stop the child and verbally prompt him: “Kenny, what do we say?” Prompted good manners are way better than no manners.

Children with ADHD (and also romantic partners) will need more of these reminders. Don't take it personally, don't get mad about it, and don't feel embarrassed. If you are concerned about social appearances when your child misses an opportunity to use good manners, make it clear that you take it seriously and that you're working on it, but that it is a process. For example, you could say something like, “He does know better, but he sometimes gets so excited it's hard for him to wait. We're working on it.” Most parents can relate.

As your children get older, work with them to try to notice things on their own. If they realize too late that they stepped on someone's toes, coach them to fix it by explaining that they now realize what they did and showing that they mean better. This circling back around will smooth over many ruffled feathers.

In a nutshell, teaching your children manners and having them practice them will over time help them mind their manners. But, more importantly, it will help them build self-regulation and inhibitory skills that can positively impact their ability to manage their ADHD. 🗨

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