

1 to 2

# Mind your manners

Can you teach your toddler manners?

BY CAMILLA RANKIN

It is true: manners are a human invention and for every cultural group there are differing views on ways to behave and ways not to behave. For some looking an adult straight in the eye while greeting them is polite, for others it is polite for a child to avoid eye contact completely. Again, some cultural groups believe children are an intrinsic part of life and encourage them to be loud and boisterous, for others children should be seen and not heard. The bottom line is that



manners are about showing respect or humanity towards others: it is ubuntu, and most parents, regardless of their cultural leanings, agree that teaching your child to be polite and respect others is an essential skill.

The question is how. As parents we are often told to pick our battles and with a two-year-old, those battles can be plentiful. When it comes to teaching your tot manners, choose which behaviours you feel are important at this stage, and as your child gets the hang of them you can add others to the repertoire. For example, you are never going to get a two-year-old to chew with her mouth closed, but you can get her to sit at a table for a meal. Once she's mastered that skill you can teach her that it's also polite to chew in a certain way, as she'll be able to understand the convention of manners.

### Set a good example

Sabaa Watson, a mother of two boys and a primary school teacher, explains, "We decided that if we were polite ourselves, especially with our boys, that they would learn manners from us. They did. By about 18 months, Benjie was happily saying 'ta' when given something, without needing to be prompted."

The easiest way to have polite children is to be polite yourself, especially as at age two, most children want to be just like Mom and Dad. You can also prime your child before a situation, such as, "We are going to see Auntie Linda today, remember to say 'Hello, how are you?'" At times it may feel put on, but stick with it and your child will get the message.

### Start simple

For most parents, saying or gesturing a please and thank you is a simple starting block. You can even start when your child is a baby by asking her permission to change a nappy or pick her up. This may seem silly at first, but if you start off your relationship by showing her respect, she will reward you later by doing the same with you.

By the time your child says her first words, you can encourage her to use appropriate wording or gestures and you'll probably find yourself automatically reminding her: parents have been doing this for centuries, "What do you say?" or, "What is the magic word?"

### Praise, praise, praise...

But don't overdo it. If your toddler has managed to sit at the table for ten minutes during dinner, tell her you are proud of her. When she says "Ta" after you give her something, encourage her: it is well known that praising appropriate behaviours encourages them, but not so much that she feels she's doing something above and beyond what's normal and expected. Be specific with your praise too, "That was nice of you to share your truck with Sam," and respond to bad behaviour with a clear warning. You can also point out other children's appropriate behaviour and talk about it with your child, "It was so nice of Zindzi to come and say goodbye, it made me feel special and happy." ●



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**My baby crawls on her bum, froggy-style. She has never crawled on her hands and knees and shows no inclination of ever doing so. What long-term effects will this have on her development?**

**Kerry Wallace answers:** There are essential building blocks in a baby's development that pave the way for higher-level functions. For example, research has shown that tummy time is important for developing back muscles, rolling is important for balance reactions, and bearing weight on the hips and shoulders in the crawling position is important for being able to sit upright at a table and for later fine motor development. Crawling is also a way for your baby to explore her environment, which is vital for thinking and motor planning as it develops an awareness of the body in space. But there is a wide diversity in the range of ways to move. How your baby figures out to get from the end of the room to the other requires intentionality, problem solving, and using motor capacities at her disposal ranges from leopard crawling, bear walking, crawling with one leg out, reciprocal (or traditional) crawling and shuffling on the bottom.

A baby who skips the crawling stage completely needs to be watched for other signs of developmental issues. If your placid eight-month-old contentedly sits on her play mat and doesn't show any inclination to explore there could be a problem. If she resists tummy time, preferring the safety and comfort of her car-seat for most of the day (which then prevents her from exercising her back, neck and tummy muscles), you can get on the floor with her at eye level up on to straight arms, and entice her to reach for your face, roll towards you or pull with her arms. The walking ring, although convenient, needs to be used sparingly because it robs babies of the opportunity to explore the world with their bodies.

Difficulty orchestrating basic motor planning sequences such as moving from crawling to standing and walking have been reported in some children later diagnosed with developmental issues. Bum-shuffling runs in families and shufflers do often walk late. If you are concerned ask your paediatrician or clinic sister to refer you to a physiotherapist trained in neurodevelopmental therapy. The chances are that you will be reassured that your bum shuffler is just exploring different ways of moving but if your baby needs intervention she will be given it.

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