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## **The Case for Good Manners at School**

***Presented by***  
**Hilda Graham**

*How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these."*

*George Washington Carver*

**Hilda Graham** is an accomplished educator, international trainer, national keynote speaker and published author. She served as the Program Developer and Bullying Prevention/ School Safety Specialist for the National School Safety Center.



## **The Case for Good Manners At School**

As a school safety consultant, author and trainer since the early 90's, it has been my responsibility to help stakeholders improve the security and effectiveness of their schools. In response to serious challenges, I have seen the proverbial education pendulum swing, paradigms shift, and "hot" new programs and curriculums emerge, peak, and wane. In the face of all our nonstop efforts to create secure and effective schools, I have found myself asking more often; *"Do complex problems always need complex answers?"*

In today's schools, a great deal of money, time and energy are being spent in search of programs and strategies that promote safety agendas and academic missions. The requirements and responses of using research-based curriculums, blueprint programs, promising practices and extensive training initiatives are all important, and good. But is it possible that during our search for answers to pressing challenges, that we are overlooking less cumbersome and intricate strategies. Could something as simple as the practice of good manners in our school communities be one such approach? Could the tactics of consideration and kindness be used to build and reinforce the *social side of schooling*, which in turn could be used to support the safety and academic goals of a school community?

### **Can good manners in schools promote safety and effectiveness?**

You might begin to formulate your own answer to this question by testing the value and roles of good manners in your own life. Stop for a moment and ask yourself the following questions about good manners:

- Do I regard the practice of good manners as an advantage in life?
- Do I agree that treating others with good manners can help make them feel welcome, comfortable, and respected?
- Do I use good manners to set the tone for amicable relationships with my students, colleagues, family, friends, neighbors, and strangers alike?
- When I show good manners does it make me feel good?
- What is my reaction when others say *please, thank you, excuse me, may I help you*, offer me a sincere apology or even hold a door open for me?
- Have I ever used good manners to manage tensions or to defuse difficult situations?
- Do I agree that good manners can beget good manners?
- Do I agree that rudeness begets rudeness?
- Would those with whom I am close regard me as a well-mannered person?

If you are like most people, this quick exercise and reflection upon good manners, may have reminded you of how important these tactics of consideration are to negotiating your own life with ease, grace and success. Go on to imagine the power and worth of well-mannered behaviors to an entire school, to a community, and to society. Now come back to imagine your own school's hallways and classrooms filled with well-mannered adults and students, creating a social climate in which every person can thrive.

A good manners approach initiated in the early grades and articulated through later school years could provide a safety and effectiveness strategy that is integrated, holistic, and a preventive measure for various incivilities in our schools. *Please. Thank you. Excuse me. I'm*



*sorry Can I help.* When spoken and acted upon these simple phrases have the power to transform everyday interactions within a school community into meaningful exchanges that reflect care, concern, trust and respect among students and staff. The same words can help promote a peaceful school environment in which students spend less time feeling anxious, angry, frustrated or afraid; and more time on the rigors of studying and learning.

### **What are manners made of?**

While the idea of using social manners to promote safety and effectiveness may seem simplistic, nothing is further from the truth. Take a closer look at the impressive ingredients of manners. Good manners are made up of:

- Positive codes of conduct, courtesies and social agreements;
- Rules that govern respectful communication and actions;
- Protocols of polite deportment and social behaviors;
- Ethics, distinctions of right or wrong;
- Peace-keeping strategies;
- Consideration, tact, discretion, finesse, poise, generosity, charm, elegance and self-discipline;
- Personal responsibility, altruistic inclinations and empathy;
- Diplomacy, inclusion, goodwill, moral strength;
- Dignity, integrity, good character, fairness, justice, trust, kindness;
- Grace, honor and civility;
- Reciprocity and mutual regard.

***How far you go in life depends on your being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life you will have been all of these."***

***George Washington Carver***

### **Are good manners and ethics connected?**

Lawrence Kohlberg, an American psychologist who studied and wrote extensively on the topic of the stages of moral development, found that youth respond to the norms of their peers, families, and society. The degrees of connection and loyalty they have to these groups affects the behaviors they adopt. In support for the case of good manners in schools, it would follow that helping students build their own values by teaching and modeling good manners would be beneficial in the development of a moral norm for the dignified treatment of others—a norm or social code among children and youth that would benefit schools, families, and society in general. One of the most enduring questions that Kohlberg asked regarding the subject of ethics was about what roles they play in living a truly human life. The same question could be asked about the role that good manners play in living a truly human life!

### **What about manners and different cultures?**

The use of manners belongs to cultures that recognize the importance of dignity, trust and respect in relationships. Diverse cultures may not display manners, propriety, or etiquette in the very same fashion, but the motivations behind such well-meaning actions are often very similar, if not the same. A list of character traits valued by most world cultures includes honesty, truthfulness, generosity, helpfulness, kindness, honor,



courage, justice, and tolerance. These character traits valued across many cultures are embodied in the concept of manners.

### **What is the most effective good manners curriculum?**

The most basic and effective curriculum to teach about good manners costs nothing. It is the *human curriculum* of ideas and actions that are written each day with every well-mannered word and interaction that is modeled or shared with others in a school setting. Students must see good manners in action. They must be able to observe, analyze, and evaluate the benefits of good manners. They must experience the feelings of being treated in well-mannered ways and the rewards of using good manners with others.

Good manners can be the rules of the road for busy schools. They can help direct social interactions among the students, staff, and school guests. Teaching, reinforcing, and modeling the daily use of personal manners in our schools can help provide protocols of kindness and consideration, promote acts of grace and selflessness, and help build a sense of connection. Manners can provide a choice of dignified responses while demonstrating respect for others and personal responsibility. Manners are tools for negotiating and peace keeping. At a minimum, well-mannered behaviors can deliver a sense of civility in a school community. Think about all the rules we spend time developing, teaching and enforcing that are caused simply by the lack of good manners.

### **Adults show your manners at school!**

As an educator and leader in the school community you can use your own good manners to help make your schools safe and effective. The following ideas can help:

- **As a role model** demonstrate good manners through expressions of inclusion, diplomacy, integrity, courtesy and good character to help define your school as responsive, well-mannered, and welcoming.
- **As an educator** demonstrate good manners through expressions of inclusion, kindness, generosity and dignity for every student, to establish a responsive and equitable classroom.
- **As a problem solver**, demonstrate good manners through expressions of fairness, justice, honor and civility to help identify, analyze and respond to everyday concerns and threats of harm.
- **As a community liaison**, demonstrate good manners through expressions of mutual regard, trust, respect, reciprocity, integrity and good will to help establish and maintain positive rapport with school community stakeholders.

### **Manners as the memorable tactics of kindness.**

Maya Angelou once said “People will forget what you said, they will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” If this is true then let us all act in ways that will help others think of—and remember us kindly. Let our well-mannered ways help paint that memory.



## **Building Blocks and Indicators of a Well-Mannered School**

The following building blocks and indicators of a well-mannered school can be used to assess your school or to create goals to work toward. Your overall intention is to create a *community of practice* that embraces the benefits of using good manners at school. Your motivation is to use the *social side of schooling* to promote both safety and academic agendas. As you work, you may discover other elements to integrate or tailor your approach to respect the unique culture and needs of your school community.

### **Systemic Equity**

The degree of equity with which school systems operate is an expression of respect, mutual regard and goodwill toward the school community

- Every rule, policy, program and management system throughout the school, serves every student, staff member, parent/guardian or other care taker fairly and consistently.
- There is fair access to all appropriate systems of support for every student, staff member, parent, guardian and care taker.
- Systems are flexible and responsive to the culture and emerging needs of the school community.
- An environment exists, in which every stakeholder can initiate, maintain and benefit from critical school relationships.

### **Expressed Intent:**

Each stakeholder is aware of his/her roles and responsibilities for creating a well-mannered school.

- The school mission statement addresses expectations for high standards of peace, order and conduct, along side the academic agenda.
- The call for good manners is repeatedly marketed through a variety of strategies such as: school improvement and safety plans, student and staff handbooks, classroom presentations, parent back-to-school-nights, school newsletters, hallway poster campaigns, student orientation activities and on school websites.

### **Systems of Support**

The strategy of using good manners is integrated into any student support program or strategies that promote physical safety, social/emotional well-being and academic success including:

- Peer education, peer counselors and peer courts
- Conflict resolution
- Counselor led support groups and classroom presentations
- Home-room and advisory activities
- Mentoring and tutoring relationships
- Character education

### **Instruction and Content**

The use of good manners is connected to relevant curriculums and related lessons taught in such subject areas as:

- Civics (citizenship, tolerance and personal duty)
- History and social studies (rights, roles and responsibilities)



- Student government (leadership skills)
- Health (personal/social skills development)
- Language arts (related literature and creative expression)
- P.E. (sportsmanship)
- Programs addressing bullying, cyber-bullying, gang activity, sexual harassment, hazing, bias and hate (prevention skills)

### **Rules and Policies**

There are clearly communicated and enforced rules and policies addressing violent behaviors or other incivilities at schools for both students and staff. These include

- Codes of conduct
- Classroom and school wide rules
- Extra-curricular activity standards
- Appropriate Use Policy for the use of school computers

### **Adult Responsibilities**

Adult stakeholders display well-mannered behaviors toward students, colleagues, the parent and larger community and engage in the following types of activities.

- Active, line-of-sight supervision
- Enforcement of rules and policies that support a well-mannered, safe and effective school
- Intervention and the reporting of unwanted behaviors
- Identification of emerging concerns
- Problem solving activities
- Parents, guardians and other caretakers support and participate in good manners campaigns
- School law enforcement officers integrate the good manners approach into their work with the school community



### **Round Table Discussion Topic: The Practice of Good Manners**

**Directions:** Create a discussion trio. Select and discuss the following questions in any order. Be ready to share your thoughts on the importance of manners in your own life and their potential value to creating a civil, safe and effective school.

- Do you regard the practice of good manners as an advantage in life? Explain
- Do you believe that rudeness begets rudeness? Why?
- Does treating students with good manners help make them better students? Explain how.
- Do you use good manners to set the tone for amicable relationships?
- What motivates you to treat a complete stranger with good manners?
- How would it affect your school if using good manners became a common practice?
- Have you ever intervened on the ill-mannered behavior of a colleague?
- When you show good manners how does it make you feel?
- What is your reaction when others say *please, thank you, excuse me, may I help you*, offer you a sincere apology or even hold a door open for you?
- Have you ever used good manners to manage tensions or to defuse a difficult situation? Give an example.
- Who is responsible for teaching you your good manners?
- Do you consider your school community to be well-mannered?
- Can you recall *memorable* instances when you observed any of the following people show good manners at your school: a co-worker, an administrator, a student, a parent? Share your observations.
- Do you believe that good manners can beget good manners? Why?
- Would those with whom you are close regard you as a well-mannered person?
- If you were asked to grade current society's manners, what grade would give?



**Aggravating Circumstances:  
A Status Report on Rudeness in America  
Public Agenda  
[www.publicagenda](http://www.publicagenda)**

*Excepted from School Safety Update  
The National School Safety Center Newsletter*

**Read part 1:**

Americans are intensely frustrated by the lack of respect they encounter in their daily lives. But what counts as rudeness today? Do Americans have a shared definition of what is rude and what is someone just doing his own thing? In a recent survey, *Aggravating Circumstances*, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, Public Agenda takes a detailed look at what Americans are thinking about courtesy, manners, rudeness and respect. The survey found:

- Eight in 10 Americans say a lack of respect and courtesy is a serious problem;
- Six in 10 say things have become worse in recent years; and
- About 41 percent admit that they're part of the problem and sometimes behave badly themselves.

***Discuss: Share your reactions to the statistics  
shared in the article***

**Read part 2**

Does rudeness beget rudeness?

This survey, as well as others, discusses the lack of social graces among today's young people. Those surveyed now as in the past have made it clear that they hold parents responsible for the epidemic of rude behaviors among today's children and youth. The lack of manners, respect, and courtesy among children should be directly linked to parents and care-givers who behave in many of the same ways, according to those surveyed. While it may seem unfair to blame parents for everything their children think, say and do (or don't do), many surveyed believe that social forces like television, music, movies, videos and other rude trends in pop culture serve to exacerbate the problem.

***Discuss: Are schools as well as parents truly  
the helpless victims of pop culture?***





### Read part 3

What will it take to change us?

The response to this question might be "something big!" - and something big did happen. The shock and loss of September 11 changed the behavior of Americans for the better, most people believe. It was a day that pushed many of us to reexamine our values and priorities, to extend heartfelt appreciation and sympathy, to count our personal blessings, and to reexamine our behaviors and attitudes towards others. Among all our reactions, one response was to become more caring and thoughtful toward one another. This change in attitude seemed to many, the silver lining on a very dark cloud.

***Discuss: Have our responses to Katrina, Haiti, and Chile felt the same?***

### Read part 4

More rude times ahead?

According to the survey, however, many expect that we will soon return to business as usual, if we haven't already done so. Many people are now noticing a departure from the thoughtful and respectful ways that characterized the days and months following September 11. Is this just skepticism or are we destined to return to these individualistic, self-absorbed behaviors? In our relationships, will respect and dignity for others always come second more often than not?

Perhaps those small lessons about manners and polite words still taught by caring adults in classrooms, homes, and communities across this nation will indeed prevail in the end.

**Discuss: In view of the number of years that have past since 9/11 what has happened to our sense of connection and social intentions toward one another?**

**Discuss: What is your reaction to the article's reference to the role of schools in preserving caring and thoughtful behaviors for the benefit of society.**



**Our School Good Manners and Our Students Sample Text for a Parent Letter**

**(Use the following sample text to create an appropriate letter for your school.)**

*Dear parents, guardians and caretakers,*

*We are pleased to have you and your child as part of our school community. The learning and social time your child spends with us, is all about preparing him/her to be successful in the future.*

*To help make our school, a community of kind, caring and helpful people, we are modeling and teaching about good manners. Our school has been declared “a good manners zone.” In our classrooms, hallways, cafeteria, playgrounds, athletic fields and our on our buses we are busy sharing our expectations for hearing; “Please, thank you, excuse me, I’m sorry, and may I help?” We believe that these simple words and the actions that go along with them can help build a sense of value and respect for every one of our students. These same words can also help keep our students safe. As adults, we are not only teaching our students about good manners, we are dedicating ourselves to using our own good manners.*

*It is much easier to build on the good manners that our students are learning and practicing at home. We are asking you to join our efforts to teach the practice of good manners. We are offering some simple suggestion for what you can do to help.*

**(Tailor these to be developmentally appropriate.)**

- *Establish a code of manners for your family and home.*
- *Demonstrate your own good manners at the mall or grocery store, while driving your car, using a cell phone, dealing with strangers or your own friends.*
- *Take a stand against the use of foul language. Don’t use it yourself.*
- *Discuss behaviors that result from the lack of respect for the dignity and safety of others such as bullying, cyber-bullying, name calling, spreading hurtful gossip/rumors or any other act of casual cruelty.*
- *.Compliment you child when he/she uses good manners.*
- *Review good manners before important celebrations.(birthday parties, awards ceremonies, prom, graduation)*
- *Discuss the importance first impressions, especially during scholarship interviews, job interviews, dating situations.*
- *Talk about sportsmanship, address trash talk about other teams and schools.*
- *Discuss ethics related to membership in clubs and youth activities.*
- *Connect the discussion of kindness and manners to your family’s spiritual life.*

*While learning to use good manners seems like such a simple idea, it is important to recognize that good manners are the foundation of many great behaviors that are valued in our neighborhoods, schools, communities, workplaces and society in general.*

*Thank you for your consideration and support.*



Hilda Graham Consulting work products, tools, training, technical assistance, and consultation services, are designed to support the safe school planning activities of school communities. Each community must make unique choices to meet school safety needs reflected by their local circumstances and culture.

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**Please...**  
**Thank you...**  
**Excuse me...**  
**I'm sorry...**  
**May I help**  
**you?**



**You're in a good**  
**manners zone!**