The Power of “Please”

Edward Fidellow

Fred Astaire quipped, “The hardest job kids face today is learning good manners without seeing any.”

Please and thank you are usually the first two lessons of grace and courtesy that we teach our children. These are the words our children hear from us as we try to train them in the world of good manners. How many times do we remember our parents coaching us, “Say Thank You?”

It seemed to take an extraordinary amount of time for the groove of “Thank You” to make its way into our unconscious brain where it would become the default response to any act of generosity or service. As children, we live in the cocoon of our own world where everything does revolve around us because we have not consciously entered into a realm of “others.” Sure, our parents are the controlling factor of our life but they seem to exist to serve us. They give us food. They give us clothes. They entertain us. We are sheltered and served. There is no natural springing up of the concept of “thank you.” One year I asked my teen-aged students what they were expecting for Christmas and there was excited chatter. I next asked what they were giving their parents for Christmas. The silence was profound.

Thank you embodies an attitude of gratitude which is a hard-won virtue – even in adults. Gratitude stands outside of my ego and may well be the first step of maturity. The delight of teen-age love – where someone outside of my own ego receives my whole attention is embodied by the rock and roll mantra of, “Baby, baby you make me feel so good.” The intensity of this new experience is dramatic but is still me-centered. Yet to come is the glaring reality that love puts someone else’s well-being before your own. Grace and courtesy – you before me - is the first step in learning how to love.

So, if “thank you” is gratitude where does the power of please come in? “Get me a drink,” (a command) is softened to a request by the addition of please – “Get me a drink please.” I was sharing this with a group of teachers and one of them (correctly) shared that if you put the please at the beginning of the sentence you change the whole atmosphere of the conversation. ”Please” becomes a marker of grace (and courtesy.) It also indicates an attitude of “non-entitlement.” In so much of life we deal with people who demonstrate a superior attitude of “I am better than you. I am more important than you. I am richer, better looking, smarter etc. … than you. Therefore, I am entitled.” This type of attitude in children gets them labeled as brats. Good manners is a great equalizer – there are not servants and masters but just human beings who appreciate the respect that comes from manners.

The power of please does more than change and soften external social relations. It becomes central in its ability to change the practitioner of grace and courtesy. The world does not revolve around me, no matter how much I wish it did. Grace and courtesy softens the edges of my personality, it softens the way I look at the world and how I react to that world and in the end how I look at myself.

A Montessori program that emphasizes grace and courtesy is giving your child, not only advantages in life but an internal gyroscope to keep them in balance as they navigate the world. Remember, grace and courtesy is the first step in learning how to love – and to be loved in return.