

Successful Social Situations....with Kids??

Most parents have had the odd embarrassing experience in public with children saying or behaving in unexpected ways. We are usually thrown completely off guard by these displays, wondering how this could have happened! My parents love to tell the story of how I embarrassed them when visiting relatives. When asked if we had eaten yet, my reply was, “Nope, Dad said that we had fed you enough times that you could feed us this time!” Fortunately, this was taken with a great deal of laughter and no apparent hurt feelings. Or how about the child opening a gift from Grandma and then tossing it aside to say, “Didn’t anyone get me anything more fun?”

So, we could talk about embarrassing incidents all day, but how do we prevent them and help our kids to know how to behave in various social situations? We have to remember that children are only acting on what they know, so our job is to help them to **KNOW** what is necessary for the scenario we are taking them into. Here are some proactive ideas that might help.

Communicate Your Expectations

We have expectations about our children and their behavior. It is vital that we communicate these expectations clearly and discuss why it is important to you or your family. This is a great way to minimize conflict and to help your child feel secure and confident in a new situation. An example might be as follows: “We are going to visit Grandma in the nursing home. A lot of older people live there and they love children, but do not like a lot of noise and running around. Mommy and Daddy expect you to be as quiet as you can and to use very good manners with all the people there. When we are finished visiting, we will go somewhere that you can run and play, okay?”

Teach in Advance

Teaching an expected behavior or social skill before a child needs to use it will avoid embarrassing moments (for everyone!) but more importantly will promote healthy social and emotional development. Teaching in advance doesn’t need to be a long process. A quick explanation outside the grocery store, “We’re here today for milk and eggs, and not for treats,” can make for a checkout stand experience that’s free from a tangle of demands and the dreaded whining that often follows, “not today.” Keep in mind that just like reading, some behavior can’t be taught until the child is developmentally ready. For example, a child isn’t usually ready to sit through a long supper in a restaurant until they are at least three years old, and even then may need some extra entertainment.

Prepare and Prompt

Prepare children for situations. For example, letting your child know that there are certain “restaurant” behaviors before you leave to go out to eat, or having a reminder role play before a birthday party can go a long way in helping a child act appropriately. Gently prompt a child to use the behavior you’re working on. A simple, “Remember how we talked about saying thanks,” or “Remember, it’s Carrie’s party, so we get to watch her open the birthday presents,” will usually be all that’s needed for a child to put the behavior into action.

Things to Try

1. Identify

Identify one expectation you have for your child you'd like to teach her. Make sure she is capable of learning it. For this example we'll talk about Abby learning to open birthday gifts at a party.

2. Discuss

Discuss your expectation with your child, and explain why it's important to you. Keeping your list of expectations short (even sticking to one at a time) is part of what will make your teaching successful

3. Model

Break down the behavior into understandable steps: "After you open the gift you can say thanks to the person who gave it to you." Model the steps, "Watch me pretend to get a gift." Then have your child role play the appropriate behavior with you, "Your turn, Abby!"

4. Practice

Games like "thumbs up" for a good example and "thumbs down" for a bad one (letting parents model and children be the judge) can be a fun way to discuss expectations and behavior with young children.

5. Prepare

Prepare your child just before the behavior is needed, or prompt them in the moment. "Remember learning about saying thank you? Now's the time to show what you learned."

6. Praise

Praise your child for what he or she did well. "Abby, you did a wonderful job saying thank you. You said it after opening every single present!" This is what will seal the deal.

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