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Dear Parents of Young Children – A Young Child Looks At Parents  
Michigan State University Extension Service  
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# Dear Parents of young children



## A Young Child Looks At Parents

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

FIVE-YEAR-OLD Jane, on leaving Dr. Graham's office, suddenly threw her arms around his neck and gave him a big kiss. Janie's feelings at the moment may have been somewhat mixed with relief as she began to see that he was not going to give her a shot. But it is also quite evident that she had a very kindly feeling toward him.

Not all adults are regarded with such open affection as that displayed toward the doctor. Many children warm up to adults very slowly. Some learn to accept adults gradually as they find they are pleasant and trustworthy. Others carry some suspicion and mistrust of people into their adult life.

It would be difficult to say just when your child begins to distinguish between people as "friends" or "enemies." We know, for example, that many babies around the age of 5 or 6 months show fear of strangers, even though they may have accepted them up to this time.

But we can say that the experiences which a child has—with his family, with the people next door, with the doctor in his office and with an ever widening group of persons—play some part in his social growth.

It is in the home that a child first gains ideas of what adults are like. He gains these ideas as he watches mother and father in their roles as parents, in the way they behave toward each other and toward other people.

Every child, of course, will react differently depending upon his own personality and upon his feelings about himself. We discussed the picture that a little child has of himself in Letter No. 10. You may want to

reread this letter since a child's social growth begins with the view that he has of himself.

Beyond this beginning, what are some ways a parent can help a child learn to enjoy and respect adults and be liked by them? What sort of a picture of parents does a little child need? (You may want to check yourself on these points.)

### Parents As Examples

Is he exposed to a warm loving relationship between you? Children reared in an atmosphere of love and affection can more easily bestow love upon others.

Does he see you as parents who, having differences, are able to talk them over so that in the long run harmony results? This does not mean the absence of differences but rather an effort toward handling them.

Does he have before him a model of tolerance and thoughtfulness for others? Example is a powerful influence. It is so easy to forget to say, "Mary, please hand me your boots."

### Looking Ahead to School

What sort of image of a teacher are you giving your children? We may be tempted to say, "If you act like that at school, your teacher will scold." Parents can help prepare children for school by picturing the teacher as a friend. In this way children can more easily bridge the gap between home and school and are more likely to look forward to going to school.

In our hurry it is likely to come out, "Hand me your boots, quick!" In the same way it is so easy to use one tone of voice when talking to the delivery man and a different one when talking to the mayor. This can convey to the child the idea that some people are better than others. Goodness knows, parents can not be perfect in this respect nor need they be. But while children are young many of the social skills and attitudes can best be taught by the example which parents set for their own children and by the image of others which they convey.

### Taking Part

Social skills can also be learned by giving children a part in meeting and greeting guests who come to the home. Let them have some little part in hostessing such as passing the napkins or displaying a new toy. Avoid asking a small child to perform and become the center of the stage. To the shy child this is so devastating that he may dislike having callers. The forward child who enjoys being the main attraction may take advantage of the situation. One way of expressing disapproval with such a child was shown by one mother who said quietly to Sarah, "Please play in your room for a while; Mrs. Brown and I want to visit now. I will call you when she leaves."

For both the shy child and the "not-so-shy" it is important that his parents try to see that opportunities for social experiences are usually pleasant ones.

### "Socially Acceptable"

How much effort should we spend in teaching children to say, "Thank

you," "Please," or "I've had a nice time"? It is true that most social graces are learned most naturally at home. They are learned more easily if "Please" and "Thank you" are a part of a child's daily life.

A child does not learn by himself that you must not pick up a package of gum in the store or pick the neighbor's flowers. Such social rules have to be explained. If a child does pick up something that does not belong to him, it can be returned casually and politely.



Children do need help in learning the basic social requirements of their times. Eventually they must learn courtesy, cooperation, honesty, cleanliness, etc. But learning to be "socially acceptable" takes time. So earnestly we begin too early and too earnestly to teach little children the things we want them to learn. It seems much easier for us to let children grow physically than to wait for them to grow socially. Children learn to walk when they are physically ready. It is the same with social growth; it is gradual and all of it can not be "crammed" into the pre-school years.

#### Other People

Do you take some time to talk about your out-of-the-home experiences so that your child gains an idea of what Dad's work is like and the people mother meets when she goes to the store?

If Dad's work takes him some distance from home, even a four-year-old may have difficulty imagining what his work is all about. It has been said that one reason why children often play fireman, policeman or deliveryman is that these are the only men's jobs that children see.

Another difficulty in our way of life today is that so many of our contacts with people are brief and passing, giving little opportunity to see how others live and work. Children are helped to glimpse more deeply the lives of others if occasionally they can know that the plumber who comes to the house has a son in the navy who lives on a boat or that the milkman has

five grandchildren that he likes to talk about.

Help your child to have friendly contacts with different kinds of people. If you number among your acquaintances those who come from cultures and backgrounds different from yours, a child grows accustomed to these differences. Later he may be able to make his own judgments about people, free of prejudice, because he has known different people and understands them better. Many families today make a point of inviting foreign visitors into their homes and tell of the rich experience that this has provided for the whole family.

#### Looking Ahead to School

Does your pre-school child "talk all the time"? Encourage him to talk and especially give him something to talk about. Children grow in their ability to use words as they retell some interesting experience, such as, a tour of the garden or a trip to the baseball park. Children can more easily talk with the teacher and the children at school if they have had some practice. An "interested audience" at home provides a good beginning.

It is increasingly certain that children of today will have more need to be interested in and to learn how to work with many different kinds of people. Cooperation, as some recent researchers have pointed out, is one social skill that children will have great need of in the future.<sup>1</sup> Pre-

1. The Changing American Parent, Daniel R. Miller and Guy E. Swanson, 1958, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

school children make only a beginning in learning to cooperate. Some signs of this can be seen in their wanting



to help, in their gradual willingness to share and later in their ability to engage in what has been termed cooperative play.

#### Displaying Affection

"How do you display love for a little child?"

- By telling them
- By showing them (a pat, a hug, a kiss)
- By responding to their needs
- By showing interest in what they are doing
- By helping them when they need help
- By answering their questions
- By approving their small successes
- By spending some time with them
- By doing what comes naturally

This letter has suggested that:

An atmosphere in the home that is friendly and kindly is contagious.

*Louise K. Backus*

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Several parents have asked for activities that two pre-school children could enjoy together. In planning such activities, two points should be kept in mind:

1. It is not easy for pre-school children to engage in cooperative play.
2. Since their interest span is short we can not expect them to stay with one activity for very long.

With this in mind we suggest the following:

- ✓ Give each child similar toys to play with at the same time, but not necessarily together.
- ✓ Two children can roll a ball to each other, paint or crayon at the same time.
- ✓ One mother states that she provides cartons and her two cherubs play store for a time using her supply of canned goods.
- ✓ This same mother says the children are delighted when she partly fills the sink with water on which they float pieces of paper, chunks of wood, etc. This activity needs supervision.

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