

“What do you say, Reuben?”

We were on our way from the house to the car, and our neighbor Colesie had just greeted us. But my son Reuben, lost in the inner world of a 7-year-old, neglected to acknowledge her.

“Hello,” Reuben responded absently to my prompting, as if he wasn’t sure who needed greeting.

“No, sweetie, look up at Colesie,” I told Reuben, trying not to sound annoyed. “Say hello in a friendly, loud voice, so she can hear you.”

“Hi, Colesie,” he conceded, as I wondered whether I should make him add “How are you?”

It’s a bit odd to find myself so concerned about instilling good manners in my children. Having grown up in Berkeley, California, during the free-speech era, I would never have imagined that I’d come to see etiquette as such an essential part of a child’s education. For me, the term “well behaved” had always conjured up images of militaristic authority figures and inflexible rules that squelched kids’ self-expression and individuality.

Then I became a mother. There’s nothing like living with kids who whine rather than ask, grab rather than take turns, or hit rather than use words to drive home the reality that kids need manners to function in the world. It’s not so much that I wanted to put courtesy on my child-rearing agenda; it’s just that the



Minding Their Manners

Is it a thankless task to get kids to say thank you? Why one mom nags her sons about observing all those often-overlooked social graces.

alternative seemed irresponsible.

Even so, it’s not always clear when I should insist that Reuben and his 10-year-old brother, Evan, act polite and when I should let them off the hook. Should I force them to say good-bye to their coach after basketball practice, even though the other kids don’t? If Evan says he’s sorry after fighting with Reuben, how much of a stink should I make if the apology seems less than sincere? Should I demand

that my sons say, “Thanks for dinner, Mom!” to ensure that they don’t grow up taking women for granted?

This inner dialogue is complicated by the fact that a lack of courtesy among children is widely tolerated these days. When I nudge my boys publicly about their manners, people are apt to respond with either knee-jerk reassurances (“That’s okay, he

doesn’t need to apologize/thank me/say hello”) or to reprimand me (“Don’t be so hard on him!”). At these times, I am torn between self-doubt—am I being too rigid?—and irritation that the adults at hand assume that my children are incapable of civility.

Incapable they are not. A lot of the time, Evan and Reuben do remember their manners, and on those occasions, they glow with self-respect. “Thank you for having me over,” Reuben may volunteer proudly to his grandfather as we’re leaving a family gathering. Or Evan’s face may light up at dinner when he remembers my injunction to say, “No thanks, I don’t care for any sauce” instead of the more concise “Eeeeww!” (Continued)

By Lisa Braver Moss


But they are just as likely to overlook a special treat I've prepared for them or to complain about having to put away fresh laundry that I've lovingly folded and stacked. When that happens, shouldn't I take a stand, tedious though it may be?

One thing I do know for certain: Childhood is a grace period. Someday, Evan and Reuben will be judged harshly if they wolf down their food

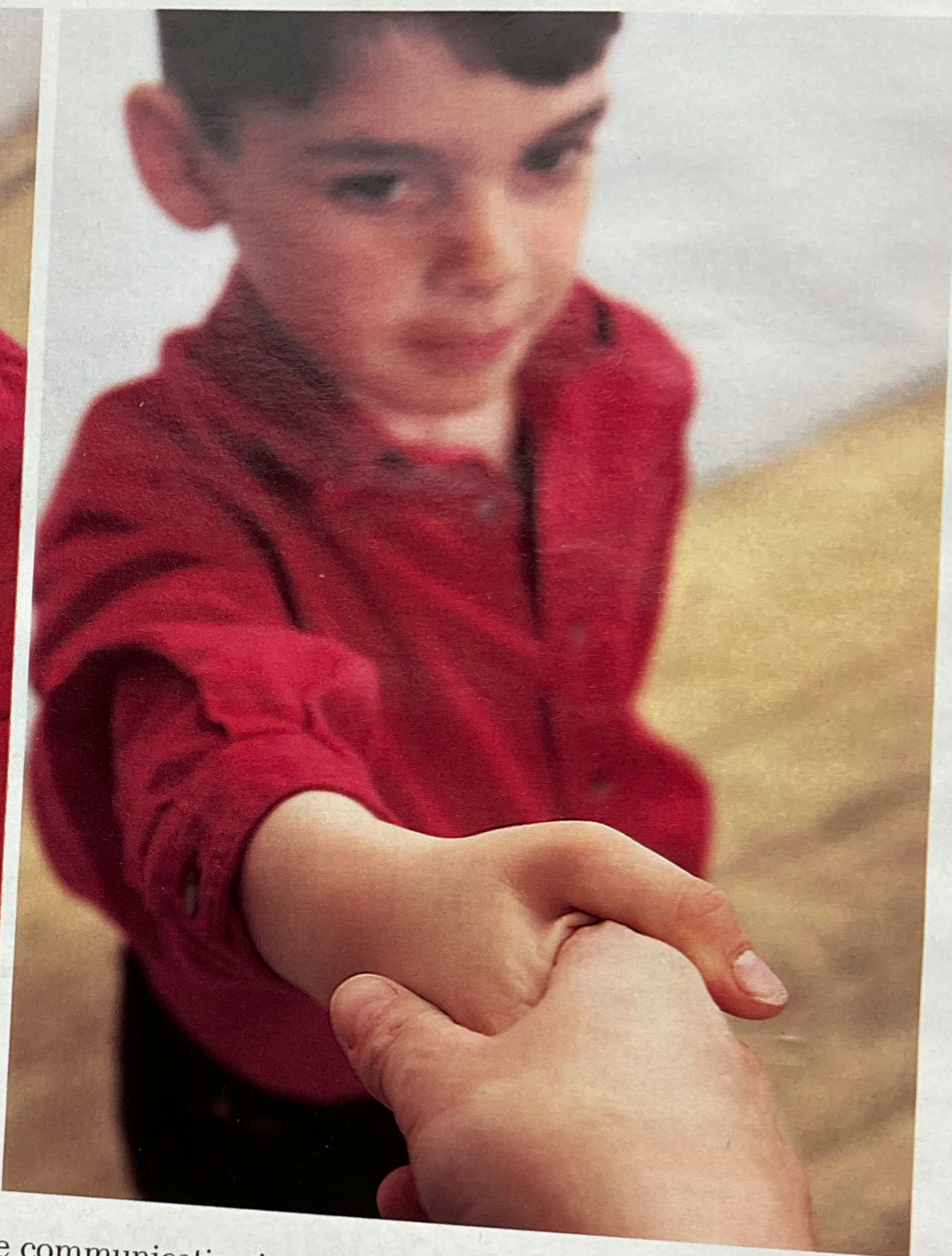
Reuben. I thought back to earlier this year, when the second- and third-graders in my car pool would leave without saying good-bye or thanking me for the ride. I didn't think twice about whether or not to jump in—I knew I deserved a proper good-bye. I began insisting (honking my horn when necessary) that the kids return to the car whenever they forgot. Not only did their manners improve, they

I considered Colesie's choice of words: "It hurts my feelings." She was not merely trying to teach Reuben a lesson; she genuinely wanted to be treated with respect. I thought again of my car-pool kids rushing headlong out the door without acknowledging me. Colesie's point, in fact, was the crux of the whole issue: It feels lousy to be ignored, whether you're 4 or 40.

Too often, perhaps, I've thought of



The reality is, kids need manners to function in the world.



before everyone else has been served or stay seated while an elderly person stands. Why handicap children with the false message that they will always be given the benefit of the doubt?

A few days after the greeting incident, I noticed Colesie outside as Reuben headed out to the backyard to play. "Hi, Rube-Dude," she said, using her affectionate nickname for him. But once again, Reuben failed to return the greeting.

Witnessing this scene from my open dining-room window, I winced and debated whether to intervene. Then I realized that Colesie was in a far better position than I to enlighten

also became more communicative in general during our rides, with one another as well as with me. (Once I raised the bar, it seemed, they rose to meet it.) Clearly, some lessons get through better when they're taught by a non-family member.

Which is what I realized as I watched Colesie and Reuben. I found myself hoping that Colesie wouldn't let my son get away with his inattention, and, sure enough, she came through. "You know, Reuben," she said, "it hurts my feelings when you forget to say hello to me."

"Oh." Reuben seemed surprised. "Hi, Colesie."

politeness as a life skill my boys should cultivate to smooth their way in the world. "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar," the old saying goes. And it's true: Good manners do pay off. But what they are really about—or should be, anyway—is other people's feelings. Being considerate is more than a way to get what you want; it's an indication that you care.

"Mom?" Reuben said as he came back inside. His cheeks were a little flushed, perhaps from the effort of handling an awkward social situation all by himself. "I'm really thirsty. I want . . . I mean, may I please have a glass of water?"